Blood Butterfly

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by Black_D0g

Summary

Everyone has the potential to become a monster, but Izuku never imagined that to be literal before he became a vampire. Desperately clinging to his slipping sense of self, he hopes that his dream to become a hero is enough to keep him human. Luckily, it's not a task he'll have to face alone, thanks to Kyoka Jiro. Originally published on Fanfiction.net
It's a story we're all familiar with by this point. A boy, born into a world filled to the brim with super powers with none of his own. Bullied and ignored by his peers and betters, all save for his mother; who did little to ease his lingering and incessant doubts that he could ever live his dream. Be that as it may, there he lay, flecks of his skin and hair smoldering, on the wood chips of the playground.

The other children laughed at him, Bakugo especially -being the one who'd reduced him to such a state- rubbing salt in his already tender wounds, non physical as most of them were. As they walked away, snickering amongst their four-year-old selves, an utterance of his mockingly bequeathed moniker was issued, passed between them for the cheap laugh its mention usually produced.

Deku, a shortening of the famous idiom Dekunobou: Useless Person. Perhaps there was some truth to the unfavorable label he possessed. In lending aid to the child of Bakugo's initial outburst all he'd really succeeded in accomplishing was adding another injured child to the scenario. A bitter pill to swallow, for one so young as Izuku 'Deku' Midoriya.

He needn't have, perhaps, and so Deku did no such thing. Years went by, just one over a decade for those who count such things as relevant, and little had changed. He and his classmates at the various schools he'd attended had remained stuck, such as they always had -as youths often do- affixed to their convictions and driving forward with the unshakable bravado of their lack of years.

So too had the child Deku, yearning to be a hero despite his handicap. Despite the bickering persistence of those around him, he clung to his dream. When a dream is all one has in total, save for their families, it is not a thing so lightly relinquished as some may wish; whether for their own desires or the wellbeing of the dreamer.

Yet, for as familiar as we are with this tale, there exist many versions. Many branches along the pathway of one child's life. Born with a 'quirk', these cherished superpowers, left broken a by foul deed of the aforementioned bully Bakugo, bitten by a spider only to inherit its miraculous gifts. Influential chance meetings denied he and those such meetings affected and some laughing at reality altogether. The fever dreams of those with only the only most base and -as some would argue- pointless of wishes to be fulfilled; usually involving nights loudly spent with many a
differing soul.

Alternate realities. Like the pebble that begins an avalanche, subtle changes and variations in this path can lead to destinations not before spoken of or much less imagined. "It has been said that something as small as the flutter of butterfly's wing can ultimately cause a typhoon halfway around the world." - Chaos theory, a quote about the phenomenon known simply as the Butterfly Effect. So when, may it be known, did the fabled flutter occur? Near the closing of his tenure at middle school.

Their teacher had dared to ask a question most obvious: who among his students wanted to go into the hero course of the various high schools soon to be attended. Not one student, even defenseless little Deku, had failed to raise their hand.

"As expected," jovially said he, "you all want to be heroes." An outburst of every student in the room brazenly displaying their quirks erupted midway through his first sentence. "yes, yes," scolded he musingly, "you all have wonderful quirks, but you know it's against the rules to use them at school."

"Sensei, don't lump me in with these losers!" Roared the ever boisterous Bakugo, laughing mockingly at his fellow teenagers. "As if I have anything like their crappy quirks!"

"Get over yourself, Katsuki!" screamed a very offended student.

Bakugo merely howled back in laughter. "Shut up! Extras should act like extras!"

As always the teacher shook his head in bemusement, rather than apply any sort of discipline to the rowdy teen. "Ah yes..." he started slowly, "Bakugo. You must be aiming for UA High School."

Pandemonium ensued in the form clamoring, students exclaiming about the schools incredibly high standards and low acceptance rate. You had to be among the most promising students in the country with a powerful and versatile quirk to match. Academically, Deku was one such student. This was however his only boon, and only ticket in.

"Ah," Bakugo bellowed, stomping on his desk after jumping upon it, "the stupid chattering of extras! I aced the mock exam! I'm the only one here with the stuff for UA!" He struck a dynamic pose, palms flexing outstretched and fingers curling upward. "I'll even surpass All Might and become the best hero out there!"

"Oh," A timid voice said, "you're also going for UA aren't you Midoriya?" A declaration that left Bakugo in a state of furious shock and Deku hiding underneath his own, scrawny arms.

He'd never wished for an invisibility quirk before that moment... Compounding his embarrassment and fear was the turn of every head in the room toward him. The laughter that followed only served to intensify his humiliation at it all. Someone across the room shouted something about good grades not being enough to get anyone into UA. "Th-" he spoke with a stutter, "that's not necessarily true! Sure, there's no precedent, but-

"Come on, Deku!" Following Bakugo's shouting was an explosion that sent Deku reeling to the floor and his desk clattering off in pieces. As Deku, that scrawny, trembling child with messy, green hair, scrambled backwards Bakugo kept right on berating him. "Forget the crappy quirks," he grinned maliciously, "you're totally quirk-less!" He guffawed, "and you think you can rub shoulders with me!"

As his back collided with the wall Deku was shaking on the point of jittering. "I wasn't saying I
would compete with you, not at all!" Pleased he, voice cracking with nearly every syllable. "I mean it!" Bakugo scoffed, Deku lowered his head, staring timidly at the floor. "It's just... been my dream since I was little. And well..." he gulped, quite audibly. "There's no harm in trying."
muttered the quirk-less teen, downtrodden as could be.

"Try!?" Bakugo's palms exploded as his voice rocketed in volume. "Try at what, the entrance exam?!" Figures of other students loomed behind the explosive teenager, laughing at the display. "You're taking the exam just to try?!" The other students cast shadows Deku's fragile form, the entire room, enveloped in darkness, threatened to swallow him up.

"What," demanded Bakugo, "can you even, do?" No answer was forthcoming. Gaze cast to the shadowed floor Deku remained silent, beaten both in mind and body. It was difficult to produce an argument when he couldn't even protest such treatment.

It took only a few minutes for order to be restored. Desks replaced, to their original positions or entirely, and things gathered up before the ringing of that last bell. Students nearby, as class closed for the final time, murmured amongst themselves about Karaoke. While Deku had his eyes on his phone, scrolling through the local news, Bakugo had approached him yet again. As his fingers clung to the edges of his notebook - filled with drawings, diagrams and notes on various heroes and their quirks- the explosive one snatched it from him.

As a gasp resembling protest squeaked past his lips Bakugo growled. "We aint done here, Deku."
He turned a scrutinizing eye to the notebook in his hand. "What is this?" he drolled, "For my future? Really, Midoriya?" his smirk lined with contempt, an eyebrow raised.

"Come on!" Deku pleaded, "give it back!" Bakugo's smile disappeared completely, replaced with a disdainful scowl.

Clapping his hands together, notebook sandwiched between them, he unleashed a focused blast from his palms, nearly incinerating the volume betwixt his palms. While Deku looked on in helplessness, hopes crushed as he squawked out one word, begging the question why Bakugo would do such a thing, the other teen merely scoffed.

"The best heroes out there, well..." and he flung the book out the classroom window, "they showed signs of greatness even as students."

Hand reaching for the singed book even as it fell, Deku could only watch as it plummeted.

"I'll be the first and only hero to come out of this crappy public middle school!" Bakugo snapped, grabbing Deku by the shoulder and pulling him close.

His breath reeked of his lunch, blowing over Deku's freckled face in a cold wave. A sadistic smile bared his teeth as his voice dripped with venom, "in other words: don't you dare get into UA, nerd!" Even as he spewed such bile, terrorizing the smaller teen, he unleashed his quirk just enough to singe the joint in his vice-like grip.

With a harsh shove, Bakugo had moved him aside and joined his friends as they left the building, leaving Deku to try in vain to hold back tears.

"You wanna be a hero so bad? Here's some advice," berated he, over his shoulder, "take a swan dive off the roof! Maybe you'll have a quirk in your next life."

The words bit into Deku's fragile ego more than he could take. That was saying something after over a decade of such treatment. He spun on his heels, glaring with wide eyes even as he trembled...
with tears threatening to burst fourth.

Bakugo met that look with one of cold confidence, daring him to attack with a raised hand popping with small explosions. "Yeah? What?"

Reduced to nothing but the lone figure left in the classroom, he stood there shaking with fear and numerous other feelings, as they all abandoned him there with his wounded heart.

Standing up to one bully was a task akin to climbing a mountain for the green haired, freckled boy. What hope did one such as he hold to become something so towering and strong as All Might? His greatest aspiration, forever out of his reach. *Idiot!* He thought, *Saying that kind of thing without thinking... if he'd said that to someone else and they had jumped what would he do then?*

He'd made his way outside, eyes tracing the ground ahead of him. Eventually he found the spot where his notebook had landed: in the school's koi-fish pond. To make matters worse for the piece of driftwood, the fish were nibbling on it. It seemed the groundskeepers had neglected to feed the captive animals yet again. *Hey, thought he, that's not fish-food, give it back.*

His fingers found the edges of the book, plucking it from the water. From the feather light touch of his digits, the fish barely noticed until the book was removed entirely and ripples were sent across the surface of the water. With the edge of his shirt he dried the battered container of his thoughts. The vessel of his dream and repository of all knowledge he'd no doubt need going up against quirks like Bakugo's.

Idle fingers gripped at his notebook as he walked, sullen and eyes downcast. He seemed to shrink into the crowds, among the more fortunate members of his species, as he made way to his home. Perhaps that dream being so unattainable was what made it so appealing. If one were to live such a thing in their waking moments, could it truly be called a dream? Deluding himself may have been his only solace, growing up friendless as he had, afraid of human contact even at his best.

Without his dream, begged an unspoken question, 'what had he?' An anxiety disorder, no friends, an extra joint in his little toe and -naturally- no quirk. The new minority, such as it was. Shuffling, dragging footsteps kicked up stray pebbles and trace amounts of concrete-dust. What of a pep-talk he managed to give himself did remarkably little to bolster his spirits. But it was enough, enough for the end of the day before turning in.

It is here, as one might note, that the flutter of the butterfly's wings may be observed. For in his distraught, though climbing, state of mind Deku had failed to take his usual route home. Avoiding walking beneath a certain cobbled bridge with a manhole cover laid beneath it. As he shuffled along, some distance from the local, his Idol All Might did battle with a being made of slime. The herculean figure of a man lost track of the thing, leaving it to escape him in the sewer system. When it reached the exit by the bridge, it found itself alone. Oozing its way back into the more crowded streets of the city: Musutafu.

Whispers of a breeze, carrying into the wind, rolling in tune with other small breaths along a shared path, this is one such beginning for a hurricane. Where the storm truly began was in a crowded street, three now graduated students from Deku's school had been wandering in an alley when the slime-man had happened upon them. Several professional heroes had gathered, attempting fruitlessly to approach and rescue someone held captive within it. Even from the distance he was presently at, the commotion roused his attention. Curiously, he crept toward the source of the disturbance. Watching him from shadows were a pair of glowing, blue eyes. Hungriely, the owner thereof stalked behind him, looming just beyond the periphery of his awareness.
While Deku drew closer to the violent spectacle a long tongue slithered across ruby colored lips adorned on a slender face of pale skin, flashing glistening white teeth peeking from within the maw of this predator. It had been so long... control was a concept nearly beyond what it now knew. It was by chance that the hunter's senses were returned and her hand stayed. When the boy reached the source, the slime thing struggling to control another teen, enveloped at its core, while buildings burned around it and the one trapped within. 

*Hmmmm... curious...* she thought as the green haired child wandered forward. Fingers snaked into the pocket of her long, black dress -earning a few jealous stares from women with time enough to notice- and produced a pair of sunglasses that soon perched on her nose. *Drawn in by the chaos?* She quirked an eyebrow, tossing her flowing dark hair over her shoulder as the wind picked it up, watching the teenager with now rapt attention. *What manner of child would willingly approach such danger?*

Standing on tip-toes, trying to get a glimpse of what was going on, Deku readied his battered notebook. For now, this was all he could do. Take notes, learn, strategize and... who was he kidding. Shoulders shrinking down toward the ground, the pages of the notebook fluttered to a close soon followed by the cover. Corners of his mouth lowering as his eyelids drooped and gaze dipped to the ground. Reluctantly, he had to concede to Bakugo's point made earlier that day. Without a quirk... what chance did someone like him stand against a man like-

"Hey, I can see who's in there! It looks like a middle school student!"

...*Huh?* Deku returned his eyes to the spectacle of chaos unfolding before he and the crowd. As had been pointed out earlier, there was indeed someone at the center of the oozing mass. Someone with red eyes, a uniform matching that of his middle school, a piercingly gravelly voice, spiky, ash blond hair- Notebook dropped, flapping like a wounded bird as it hit the street, his feet hit the pavement rapidly as his form sprinted toward the mass of slime. 

A pair of glowing blue eyes crept wide open as the quirk-less teenager charged at the villain. Backpack dropping from his shoulder, strap in hand he hurled it at the face of the thing, spilling its contents across the burning alley. Smoke bit at his lungs and eyes as his breath became quick and sharp. The heat scalding at his skin like the quirk of the one within this slime thing had so many times. His body had moved of its own accord and even still did it move so. Fingers clawing at the teeming mass of sludge Deku dug desperately, trying to free his classmate from this thing even as it taunted him. 

Bakugo's eyes flashed, a question screaming behind those red mirrors of his. A question left unspoken as his next barrage of explosions reduced more of the alleyway to rubble. Ringing in Deku's ears clouded his hearing as the flashing of the explosions put white spots in his vision, blinding and disorienting him. Whatever sort of commentary the slime monster made it went beyond his observation. As did the monster's next move.

From the vantage point the predator had, her keen eyes saw much that the others failed to. The first round of explosions ignited much of what remained of the loose trash in the alley. Additionally, the green haired one was knocked off balance. Footing of the evidently quirk-less teen now unsure, the slime monster made its move. As the buildings burned and crumbled around them, it let loose a guttural snarl. Forcing the captive child to raise his hand, in time with blasting of explosions. 

The predator's eyes went wide for a moment: the green haired one had been flung into the air. Soaring, leaving a trail of smoke in his wake as he flew far, far away. Murmuring of the crowd focused on much, but not that detail amidst the chaos. She was the only one who'd noticed...

*Why?* Again, the thought persisted as she strode, elegantly against the burning wind from the
alley. *Was he trying to die?* Her gaze remained fixed on the boy's trajectory, though he was long out of sight. *Surely there must have been some logic behind his-* Something crumpled beneath her foot. Shifting her weight to her other leg she removed her shoe from the object she'd trodden upon.

*A notebook?* Gingerly, she lifted the soggy kindling with the tips of her thumb and index finger. *'For the Future?' What future?* He just threw that all away... As it unfurled her question was answered. Even as the other people in the crowd fled, wind billowing through their clothes, embers biting at their heels, she remained. *That boy...* It was an old pull, a heartstring she'd thought long atrophied, made all the more pronounced for the fact she knew that she was the only one who'd witnessed his fate.

"It's all right now..." A wave of relief was so tangible in the air she tasted it on her breath, "because *I am here!*" A battle cry that had suaded many a persistent fear to relent to calm.

The battle cry of the world's greatest hero: All Might.

"Stand back, civilian!" His booming voice urged, "allow me to handle this cretin!"

With a single bound he'd put himself right next to the now terrified slime being.

With a mighty roar, announcing the name of his attack as his fist sent a torrent of wind into his enemy, stripping the slime from the teenager it had swallowed up. She let a short exhalation escape her. This sort of bravado... she'd lost her taste for it so many years ago. Tasteless, flashy, showboating self indulgence. So long as it got the job done it didn't seem to matter how obnoxiously flamboyant someone was.

"Alright there, youngster?" All Might pulled the stunned blond to his feet.

The teen gawked, utterly unsure what to say while the hero laughed. As the fires were extinguished by a hero dressed almost like a firefighter a few others tended to the crowd. Another exhalation, eyes drifting back to the sky, she found the path the boy had followed and made chase. Walking quickly, notebook still in hand, she ventured to where the other boy had been thrown to.

"Again?! Izuku, I think you're responsible for tens of thousands of this video's views." While her son threatened to rattle his head free from his body in anticipation, Inko Midoriya hovered over him and the computer chair setting up a certain video he loved to pieces. "It's a little too scary for mommy to watch."

As she backed away, making her way to the door, the four year old Deku watched with rapt attention. It was an old clip, a big disaster from a while back had left a city block looking like Armageddon had taken place there. But in the aftermath a certain hero made his debut. Newscasters spoke in tones that screamed of awe and wonder. In the wake of such catastrophe one man had save a hundred people in under ten minutes, carrying them to safety as a shepherd to the strays his flock. All the while a bright and determined smile had been engraved onto his imposing features.

"Fear not!" said the booming voice of the herculean man, "Why you ask? Cuz..." whether the dramatic pause was strictly necessary was a matter of debate, but there wasn't a hero alive who hadn't camera-nerves on their debut. *I am here!*

Ever since the first time he'd seen this clip it had been the child's dream to be just like him. Just like All Might. Longing for the day his surely amazing quirk would surface and his ascension would begin. That was until one day when he'd been taken to the doctor's office.
"It's not gonna happen." the pediatrician had stated clear as day.

While his mother had gone on, discussing the how and why with the man, Deku sat there, expression frozen, unable to do anything but sit there lifelessly. At such a simple phrase so thoroughly had his spirit been shattered that he failed to recognize the world around him. Amplified, was this, by the ensuing foul treatment of his peers and the invisibility he seemed to posses to all adults in the world but his own mother.

So it was in such a state that he watched the video again, late at night, trying desperately to feel as though his dream were not doomed to forever linger beyond his waking hours. Sniffling, watching with but embers of his resolve remaining.

"Mom..." Deku let the tears run down his cheeks as the video played. "No matter what kind of trouble you're in..." murmured the wavering voice of the child, "he'll save you with a smile." The chair swiveled round at a crawl, tears overflowing in his eyes and a smile born of quivering lips; a sight to pitiful not to cry at the sight of, and so Ms Midoriya did. "Do you think," strained the voice of this near sobbing child, "I could be a hero like that?"

Her arms were around him in seconds, cradling her child closely as her own tears ran into his hair. "I'm sorry, Izuku!" sobbed she in utter hysterics, "I'm so sorry!" Blaming herself for everything her son was sure to endure from the nature of his birth. What else was a mother to do, with a child so inherently disadvantaged?

No... no mom...

back then...

That was the exact opposite of what I needed you to say...

A faint beeping tickled at his ears, probing into his skull with throbbing pain. Never had he known the feeling of a migraine before this moment. With a sedated flutter his eyes peeled open. Where...? Deku's senses took what felt like a millennium to crawl back to a state of functioning. He was... still alive? In a hospital, warm and safe. No shortage of pain in his chest but he felt almost normal. What happened?

Vague images of an abandoned house, broken legs and some grievous injury to his chest plagued his mind. But it was all so hazy, so unfocused he may as well have forgotten it entirely. Musing of that sort held at the forefront of his mind as his strength seeped back to him. With a numb hand he tossed the blankets off himself. Legs in the correct shape, no sign they were ever damaged. Pulling his hospital gown up he saw bandages on his chest. Though there was an IV in his arm, blood trailing into the vein, as he'd lost enough blood to need a transfusion he was otherwise intact. I Guess it wasn't as bad as it feels like, smirked he, I almost feel fine, actually. And he sighed in relief. Still alive, his scrawny, quirk-less self. Speaking of such miracles, his movements as he recovered himself, had roused a certain woman by his bed.

"Izuku!" his mother cried, springing to his side, arms flung around his neck and shoulders. His shoulder was soon drenched with her tears as she sobbed against his neck and side of his head. "My baby..." she sniffled, a hand trailing up to tangle itself in his hair. A task that required no effort whatsoever, rats-nest as it perpetually was. "Why did you run into danger like that?" She gently demanded, holding him by the shoulders at arms length. "What were you thinking, child?"

An answer seemed as though it ought to have been forthcoming, but none was produced. It hadn't truly been a decision on his part... "I... wasn't," plainly said he, "when I started running," his fingers
tightly at the hem of the blankets, "it was like my feet had just taken over my body. I

couldn't not run in like that." What truly worried him though was another matter. "What happened?

How did I end up here?"

The answer to his question was issued by the doctor at the door, just entering in on the scene. "That

last explosion sent you flying into a nearby house," said he, "you wound up with a chunk of wood

in you." lightly jabbing the boy's side with the eraser of his pencil. "You're lucky it wasn't worse.

By the time we found you, you'd nearly bled out. Hell, you've been unconscious for three days."

"Three days?!" He blurted out.

"Mm-hmm," nodded the doctor, "worrying your poor mom sick the whole while." at the mention of

her, her hand squeezed his. "Next time your legs 'start runnin on their own' you make sure they

take you someplace safe, alright?"

After a numb, cursory nod the doctor's voice seemed to disappear. Echoing like stones in a cave as

he discussed his outpatient treatment with his mother. Those memory fragments of what he'd seen

before his eyes had been true after all. Perhaps the latter portion thereof had been a product of

delirium due to his state of severe exsanguination. It had to have been. All the same, he was in

much a better condition than he'd have expected. Appetite slow to return it took some effort to

down his lunch. Hospital food, forever the bane of taste buds. Staving off the nausea he felt from

ingesting food so foul he and his mother left the place of healing behind them.

It was a short drive home but felt longer after all that had happened just moments prior, from his

perspective at least. It was much for a teenager to handle, as he'd been trying to, so alone, and that

was speaking merely of the memories he'd been subjected to reliving. Coupling that with some hint

of a near death experience in his memory left the young one feeling hazy in the subsidence of such

a high. Car pulling into the driveway of their humble home, Deku and his mother were soon inside,

attempting to relax as best they could after such a thing's occurrence.

Dinner that night had come and gone without conversation but with worried and apologetic looks

shared between the family members present. Going to bed that night, after washing the dishes

despite his mother's protests, he noted he didn't feel quite full. So he snacked on some loose fruit,

brushed his teeth and turned in, saying goodnight to his mother. So it was, with a clear imagination

and quiet stomach, that he ventured off into a deep and peaceful slumber. What dreams that came

were of strange shapes, shifting about in cloaks of darkness and shimmering lights dazzling his

imagination. Shapeless, amorphous and dancing with an elegance that entranced, it slowly came

into focus.

Though he knew not what or where this was, it dared to feel familiar. Architecture of makes long

erased from the annals of history, trees old and bent with barren, black branches. Howling of

wolves coloring his ears, but they produced not fear in him. Their distance was great enough that it

was but foolishness to be thusly apprehensive at their song. So along he trod, alone on a winding

road through this blackened wood. It comforted him, in some strange way. A night sky so visible

and bright with stars it hardly seemed black at all. A moon so bright and full it lit the heavens blue

around it. Subtly did a smirk make purchase upon one corner of his lips.

Hands to his pockets, humming as he strode, it was indeed a peaceful night; a peaceful dream. Such

a strange place he had never visited in hours waking but now that such a thought occurred, he

supposed he wouldn't mind one day finding such a place. Provided the wolves kept to themselves,

of course. It rather brought out the poet in him, not that he'd ever dabbled with such musings. It

was only as he reached his destination, an old, oaken door with iron hinges on a shadowed

dwelling, and his knuckles rapped upon the door that he felt the world fading again.
Daylight tickling his eyes had roused him from that realm. So with a yawn and stretch of his limbs and back did he swing his legs over yonder side of his bed and into some socks. The day passed uneventfully, without anything said of real note. His announcement to participate in the UA entrance exams was met with a nervous nod from his mother. While she knew talking him out of it was pointless the thought remained, as always, that she should.

Some days passed in the interim between his hospitalization and the start of the next school year. It would only be just a few short weeks until the entrance exams began in earnest. All the while Deku felt himself growing uneasy. Studying for the written test was a full time endeavor all its own and his nerves were thus adversely affected. With the prolonged time spent on his studies, couped inside for days at a time, tension rose in his core as surely as his appetite. It was on the fourth day of his studies that he could take it no more.

With gusto he rose to his feet, grabbed his notebook and ventured out for a walk. Grabbing a few granola bars on his way out he winced at the scant sunlight encroaching on his retinas. For his isolation the sensitivity of his eyes greatly increased, having spent so long away from the touch of the yellow star. For all his time indoors he felt none the worse for it, his joints as free as though freshly stretched. Brisk was his pace even as he was forced to squint in the brightening light. Perhaps he'd spent a bit too long inside, staring at those books. Around the neighborhood and back again in time for lunch with his mother.

"Out for a walk?" She asked in a chipper tone.

His reply was a subtle nod, rubbing at weary eyes. "It was a bit bright out," he confessed, "thought I'd try again later if it gets a little darker outside."

Eyebrows raised, expression mildly curious Ms Midoriya chanced a look out the window, up at the sky. "It doesn't seem that sunny out." commented she, in an offhanded sort of way. "You might need to spend some more time outside to readjust your eyes."

Again the teenager nodded, a fraction slower this time. "I have been inside for a while..."

She gave him an encouraging smile. "Tell you what, if you don't get up to it today I might have an errand you can run in town." He gave her a questioning glance as he took a bite of food. "It's just some shopping, one or two things we're almost out of. It's really just an excuse to get you out of the house if you need one." Figuring he'd cross that bridge when he reached it Deku acknowledged the suggestion silently. After lunch it was straight back to his books, pouring over them as diligently as he could. Even one so used to social isolation as he was prone to go stir crazy reading through books so bland as those he'd been. In time the fall of the sun had declared his studies done, after dinner he gathered the dishes and started the water, preparing to scrub them clean, when he yelped in pain. "Sweetie?" His mother's ears perked up. "What's wrong?" Her head poked around the corner.

Shaking the offending water from his hand, "I just burned my hand in the water," Deku explained, "it's fine mom, nothing to worry about."

An eyebrow quirked as she stepped toward the sink. "Strange..." she said, running the water over her finger with no adverse reaction, "the water doesn't usually run hot enough for that."

Deku shrugged, unsure precisely what had happened. "Well it's fine now." He stepped back over, grabbing the sponge and pouring some dish soap onto it. "I've got it, mom."

Nodding she walked back to where she had been, relaxing with a book. Eye the faucet cautiously Deku started running the water again. After scrubbing a plate and sudsing it up he put it under the
running water and winced, yanking his hand back and clutching it as he hissed in pain. When it finally subsided, as it took its sweet time to do, he glared at the faucet with an angry pout. Not wanting to repeat the experience he filled the sinks with water, one with soap and one without, washing them in one and then rinsing them off in the next. At least it hadn't hurt to wash them in this way. He rolled his eyes. Moody plumbing, as problematic as the day they'd moved into this house. Not worth much though. If it happened again he had a solution at least. Dishes cleaned he walked to couch, towel off his hands and clicked the remote. There was a nature documentary on, featuring his least favorite creature in the animal kingdom: Spiders.

Shuddering at the sight of the things his hand went for the remote to change the channel when a realization stayed it still. Facing things far more deadly than arachnids was required for those in the profession he sought after. So with a gulp he pulled back his hand and hugged his knees to his chin, watching the documentary with wide, fearful eyes. From the sticky, steel-strong, tensile webs they spun to their long, numerous legs and overcast midnight-black-eyes there was nothing about them that didn't make him shudder.

Worse than their appearance was the way they fed.

Waiting for an unsuspecting creature -larger spiders could eat things as sizable as rats- to stumble into their web and then bear down on them, immobilizing them with a venomous bite only to then cocoon them; saving them to be drained dry at the arachnid's leisure. The venom of some spiders was so horrid it could liquefy the insides of small mammals. Thinking of such a creature sinking its teeth into his flesh made his skin crawl. A poorly phrased metaphor as the thought made him shudder violently.

That nature could produce a predator so venomous and unnerving as the spider mad his stomach churn, going queasy. As soon as it was over his hand darted for the remote and turned off the TV. It was with shaking hands that he brushed his teeth and clawed into his Pajamas. It was only after reading one of his All Might Comics that he was able to calm down enough for sleep.

It was a fitful sleep, fraught with tossing and turning, his mind frantic with images of spiderwebs and their sinister makers antagonizing him as he slept. Drenched in a cold sweat and with a loudly beating heart he awoke the following morn. Shaking as he pulled his socks over his feet and clothes over his limbs he left his room for breakfast. Perhaps it was the mood his nightmares left him in but he found himself nauseous when it was done. Carrying the dishes to the sink he heard the voice of his mother, "Oh, Izuku," she chirped, "did you want to run that errand for me?"

In his fear addled state the poor boy had all but forgotten about that. "Uh, sure." he attempted a smirk but, like his nerves often dictated, it was hardly convincing. "What do you need me to get?"

Reaching for a pen and a scrap of paper she wrote down a small list. It was only three things, some toothpaste and such. "Don't stay out too late, okay?" She smirked. Nodding quickly he took the list and put on his silly, square, red shoes. As he opened the door, and the light of the rising sun found his eyes, Deku winced with sharp pain. It took several moments for him to get used to how bright it was. Maybe it was something wrong with his eyes... A concussion might have gone unnoticed by the doctors, leaving his eyes unable to dilate properly, thus making them so painfully sensitive.

It was no matter as soon he'd gotten used enough to it that he was able to proceed. It was no small walk to his destination but he found himself arrived with energy to spare. A quick jaunt to the convenience store and to the grocer from there and he'd collected the items of his quest. As he was about to venture outward his eyes all but screamed at the light contacting them. With another pained yelp he stumbled back from the door, recoiling into a backpedal.

"You alright, kid?"
He couldn't see the source of the voice, his eyes refused to open as tears streamed out of them. "M-my eyes hurt." He admitted.

"Well that won't do," said the gruff sounding woman, "lemme see." A hand on his chin perked up his face as his eyes strained to open. "Oooh..." she said, "those look painful alright." looking over to a nearby display stand she grabbed a pair of sunglasses. "here, you might want to use these." As he took hold of them, uncertainly, he noticed she had glasses and long purple hair. "Don't worry about buying them," she placed a bill in the shopkeeper's hand, "you just take care of your eyes. Can't have your senses not working on you, right?" she offered him a friendly smile.

Smiling appreciatively Deku nodded. "Thank you, Ma'am."

"Oh, don't you Ma'am me," she batted that sentiment right out of the air, "I'm not that old."

"S-sorry," he stammered, waving timidly, "thanks again." at her farewell he ventured out into the afternoon sun.

From behind the tinted lenses of his newly gifted sunglasses the sun didn't gnaw quite so sharply on his retinas. After a few minutes time he didn't even need them any more. Removing them tentatively he pocketed the darkened frames as he boarded a train. Every so often he winced at the light, and made a mental note to stop by a free clinic if the problem persisted. Although if it was a concussion chances were he could only ignore it for so much longer. Medical bills notwithstanding, even if he didn't have a vested interest in maintaining his health, his mother would go back into hysterics if his health took another dip like it had days ago.

He sighed, head slumping back against his seat while he frowned. The price you pay for reckless behavior, but if he had his way... Maybe he'd best see the doctor now. If he was that seriously injured it was best to just deal with it now. As soon as the train stopped he exited and found his way to a familiar place. From there he extrapolated where to go to find the nearest clinic. After seating himself in the lobby he tried his best not to feel awkward around so many strangers. A task that became more difficult when his stomach started growling.

"I know your pain, man," said a rather scruffy man with graying hair, earning a very curious look from the teenager, "if goin hungry was a sport..." the old man let his voice trail off with a laugh, the unspoken words becoming obvious as his stomach started protesting too.

Adjusting his ratty clothes scattered flecks of moldy fabric to the wind the elder's laugh turned to a raspy cough. Feeling somewhat over his karmic limit for the sunglasses Deku fished some spare pocket money from his own clothes along with the granola bars he had and offered the goods to the man. At the sight of the offering, the dusty old man's eyes flashed with gratitude.

"Mighty kind'a you, man." He accepted the gift carefully, "thanks."

Deku just nodded with a smirk. Better the old man have it than him, he had more than enough to tide him over waiting at home; something Deku suspected this guy hadn't known the comfort of in some time. It was just then that the old man was summoned to meet with a doctor. Giving Deku a final appreciative smile he walked unsteadily to whoever would be helping him, and Deku's stomach growled again.

Curious that it was so vocal, he'd had a decent breakfast. Assuming it to be another growth spurt he stood up and walked to the nearby vending machine. Not much aside from junk food... Trail mix would have to do. Punching in the code he stopped moments before entering the final key. Another item had caught his attention. Jerky. At the sight of it his stomach growled. Confused at the odd craving, as he'd never cared much for the stuff, he decided to embrace it.
The bag was empty before he reached his seat, his appetite only slightly appeased.

Before a chance to mull this over could be taken he'd been summoned by the doctor. Problem dictated, questions answered he was subjected to a numerous tests, all indicating he had not only no concussion but perfect vision. The best the doctor could offer was that his eyes were simply becoming more sensitive to light as he got older. After being subjected to increasingly brighter lights he was given a prescription for sunglasses. Unusual as there had been no precedent in his family history for anyone needing such a thing. Not quite sure what to make of this he resolved just to use them whenever his eyes hurt.

Laughter was not far off from the thought So... just what everyone else does then.

Bag of items in hand he ventured home, only just making it aboard the next train heading for his neighborhood. Sitting in a secluded spot he rubbed at his stomach, for the chorus of growls it insisted on producing was beginning to become quite painful. Must be some growth spurt... mused the teenager as his brow furrowed with the growing discomfort.

Finally, some guy on the train got sick of listening to his stomach growl and handed him a sandwich. "Take it," said the stranger, "you need it more than me."

"I- I'm almost home." Insisted he, even while the growling persisted.

"Come on, listen to that! You can hear it halfway across the compartment."

Deku opened his mouth to deny the offer once again but his stomach gurgled at a volume he'd never heard it reach prior. With a blush he nodded and meekly accepted. "Th-thank you."

The stranger nodded, "Just make sure you're eating right." As the train pulled to a stop the stranger left.

Mere seconds later the sandwich had vanished down Deku's throat. What was going on with him? It was like swallowing spongy dust for all it did to alleviate his hunger. Gulping back some nasty acid reflux he felt as though he might be sick. It was just an egg salad sandwich for crying out loud. Store bought if the wrapper was to be believed. In fact it was in perfect order, not expired even labeled as having been prepared earlier that day. Nothing suspicious about it save for his innards reaction to it.

Ceasing this train of thought was the stop of the literal train. A flicker of the lights, the sound of a mechanism breaking and sparking and the machine had crawled to a halt. An apology from the conductor was issued over the intercom as passengers began to groan and shuffle toward the door. Deku could be counted among those who'd made such protests, as his journey home had just lengthened by an hour. Phone from his pocket and thumbs dancing on the screen to inform his mother of his impending lateness was met with no reply.

Of course, she'd only ask for him to run errands when she had a late night at the office. Exhaling through a corner of his lips blew hair away from that same corner of his forehead. If nothing else this extended voyage afforded him time to ponder, and now that he did, some things occurred: first and foremost was that, even at his worst, growth spurts had never left him so ravenous. Hell, even Bakugo, for all his testosterone, hadn't complained of hunger this severe. More suspicious than this was the realization that he hadn't felt quite right since leaving the hospital. Nothing he ate seemed to quite satiate his only growing hunger. The sudden onset of his eyes extreme sensitivity to light was also something quite concerning.

Try for the life of himself though he did, there was no answer he could conjure. Far too famished to
think, supposed his slowing mind. Gripping his gut his other hand trailed to the side and caught the wall, supporting his unsteady weight. Audibly swallowing back more acid reflux he groaned and winced. Hands clutching, one at his stomach through his clothes, the other-

A loud cracking sound erupted from his left, loose sandy dust glided across the sides of his fingers.

Slowly, he turned to see what some part of him already knew had transpired: His hand, his scrawny fingers, had crushed their way through the brick wall he'd been leaning against. Startled by this discovery he recoiled, gawking wide eyed at what he'd involuntarily done.

"Hey!" Shouted someone across the street, "easy on the architecture, kid! It's illegal to use your quirk like that!" After some thought they added, "It's also vandalism or arson! ... One of those!" Before walking on their way.

But- His mind stammered as he felt a cold sweat coming on. But I don't have a quirk...Catching his attention was a faint sound. Instinctively focusing on it he soon found his legs scurrying toward the source. Wind ripped through his hair, clothes, dragging at his eyes. Someone was screaming. Screaming about someone trying to kill them. What am I doing?

Something illegal, was the guess of the piece of his mind yet rational. The reason no one but heroes used their quirks to fight criminals or defend themselves was because it was illegal to do so. A loophole for Deku was that he didn't have a quirk, but that didn't make fighting crime in place of the police any less an act of vigilantism. Before he could think better of this decision he'd arrived at the source, skidding to a stop, near the wall to his right, as the plastic bag swayed on his wrist. The sight befalling his eyes was that of a woman, beaten unconscious, by a man in black. Blades protruding from his forearms pointed back toward his elbows. Not something the teenager was prepared to handle...

"Who the hell are- doesn't matter!" and the thug ran right for him, "You've already seen too much!" A bladed arm swung for Deku's jaw, leaning to the side, his feet pedaling in the same direction, he soon came crashing -unharmed- against the opposite wall. His eyes went wide at one realization: he'd just lounged twenty feet to the side.

"What the hell!?" Demanded the delinquent man, something Deku very much wanted to do for an answer himself. "Quit screwin around and die!"

At his second charge Deku hadn't reacted fast enough to leap to the side, too caught up in his own thoughts, so he was forced to duck. As the thug's arms arced over his head, blades scraping the wall, Deku lurched a hand forward toward the man's gut, something he only narrowly avoided. "You're fast," said he, kneeing the teenager's nose and cracking the back of his skull against the wall, "but not fast enough!"

Rolling deftly to the side Deku avoided being rended open by the blades on the man's arm. Managing to get back to his feet he lounged to a standing position just in time to dodge another attempt to lacerate his flesh. The last swing left the thug off balance, and Deku took his chance. Swinging again, his knuckles caught on the man's sleeve and threw off the teenager's balance entirely. As the two of them spun around in a comically circular motion the thug was flung aside as the teenager's fist crashed into a steel dumpster. A more shocking sight he could not have imagined as, with the strength of his swing alone, he'd smashed the metal to pieces. Large hunks of metal scattered across the ground, clanging loudly in a cacophony that sounded like someone knocked over a shelf of gongs.

"Wh-..." he stammered, eyes wide in horrified awe, "Wh-at the... hell?"
His voice barely a murmur, shaking with fear he could only marvel at the feat of his newfound power. Somewhere off to his left he heard a groan. The thug was straining to regain consciousness. Deku was about to go and check on the unconscious woman when a scent enraptured his attention. A smell so sweet, so utterly delicious it may as well have been cooked in heaven.

Ravenously, with barely a grasp on his own mind, he spun toward the source of it. The... thug? Blinking, sentience somewhat returned, he took a cautiously inquisitive step forward. Looking him over, there was no obvious stain on him or bulge in his pockets denoting the presence of food. So what was that sme-

And then he'd noticed.

Flowing freely from the side of the man's neck was a cherry red fluid that captured his attention so thoroughly it seemed to radiate crimson light. Like a man possessed Deku stepped forward. Hands on the man's shoulders he wrenched his throat to his mouth. Growing from his canines were a pair of long, sharp, glistening white fangs as he bit down into the wound and drank.

It was then, as the most delicious thing he'd ever tasted ran down his throat, that it all came flooding back: what had happened that put him in the hospital...

Discerning in which direction 'up' currently lay couldn't have been a task more demanding. A shaky breath kicked up what dust his landing hadn't. His tongue tasted of iron, mouth warm and sticky. Chest throbbing in sharp pangs as he felt his ribs were soaked in what must have been in his mouth. Eyes peeling open, he saw little but darkness. Old wooden floors and walls, furniture laden with dust and sagging inward. A spectacle of decrepitude, someone's home left to rot. Like lifting stone, his emerald eyes strained, shifted to behold where he'd come from.

The wall, torn asunder by his body, was a jagged mess. Splintered wood, adorned with tattered strips of bloody cloth, a hole torn large enough for three of him to leap through. With great exertion he pulled his arms to his front and pushed against the ground, trying to raise himself from where he lay. A strangled yelp sounded from his throat and he went crashing back to the rotting floor. Fingers clutching for his ribs, the objects of his pained outburst, he found something where it shouldn't have been. Wide with horror he dared to shift his eyes toward the source of his agony: A chunk of a wooden plank that had pierced his flesh, bone and the lung behind it all. Worse than that was the state of his legs. Twisted and mangled like the necks of mice caught in traps. Tears blurred his vision, reality made a home in his mind.

He, Izuku Midoriya, was no one knew where, bleeding out and broken. He was dying, cold and alone in an abandoned house. Gurgling in his throat, blood spattering the floor in front of his face, replaced all sounds of crying. It was only after his lungs and throat had cleared that he was able to vocalize at all. He was frustrated, bereaved and filled to the brim with horror. Tears splattered the floor, mixing with the blood that pooled out to meet them. Fingers and toes going cold, the icy sensation of death spread up his limbs as he went pale and weak. Breath reduced to nothing, voice too beneath the state of whimpers, he begged silently for a savior, a second chance, and promised that no matter the form he would take it. By some twist of fate, or the hand of a god he'd never dared to believe in, he heard footsteps coming up the rickety stairs.

"H..." his voice rasped, "help..." Sneaking into view was a pair of shoes, caped by a flowing silk dress darker than any black. Grace was in the footsteps, the kind that seemed to be of another world. Whoever she was, she'd stopped at the sight of him. "Please..." he managed, "I... don't... wanna die..." not like this.

Two final footsteps and she knelt beside him, palms on his side and shoulder she pushed him onto
his back. "Child," her voice was like cold velvet, "what is your name?"

As the fear of the inevitable settled in, fresh tears trailed down his face. "Izuku..." he squawked, "Midoriya..."

Her ruby colored lips shifted to a sad smile. "You want to be a hero when you grow up, even though you don't have a quirk, don't you?"

He only had enough strength left for the ghost of a nod. Her hand cupped his cheek, holding his gaze affixed to her eyes, hidden behind her sunglasses, was somehow colder than him. "I can promise you this," she said soothingly, "you will have your chance to be a hero," his heart fluttered, her other hand reached for the sunglasses perched on her nose and removed them, revealing eyes that glowed like sapphires in moonlight. "with powers only very few remain to claim," peeking from behind her lips... glimmering white fangs. "But it comes with a price."

Edges of his vision stated fading closer to the center as she kept whispering. "It comes with a hunger unlike any you've ever known..."

He'd made a promise...

"a life devoid of companionship..."

No matter what the form... "and most harrowing of all, child" that his salvation took... "you're going to die."

He would take it.

"But it won't be the end." her gaze was soft, contrary to everything his instincts screamed she was in that moment, as she peered into his eyes. "Do you accept my gift?" With the barest remnants of his strength Deku nodded and she smiled, "close your eyes, little Midoriya."

He did as was commanded of him, his body raised from its place on the floor, lips then teeth on his neck, a sharp pain as her fangs sank into his flesh and she began to drink. As the last of the sensation left his body, he felt her press a wrist to his lips. A warm fluid spilled into his mouth, the flavor so sweet it bordered on ambrosial, and down his throat. With that final kiss of warmth, gracing his fading form, he felt the world vanish and time disappeared entirely. His end had come... Izuku Midoriya had died.

But he hadn't stayed that way...

Teeth still digging deep into the thug's throat, eyes wide with horror Deku employed every fiber of his self control to release him.

But he was still hungry.

Trembling, eyes threatening to run with tears, he whimpered as though he might cry even as he involuntarily drank. After a few agonizing seconds longer he wrenched himself away, crying out in horrified disgust. Spitting the liquid from his mouth, dragging fingers across his tongue he tried to erase the evidence of his sin from his mouth. The way his throat gulped at the remainder of it made him gag. Inhaling and exhaling simultaneously his muscles strained and shook as he fell to his knees. Hands clutching at the cold pavement he tried his best to vomit and found he could not.

His face scrunched up in a sorrowful grimace as he did, he stated to silently cry. You wanna be a hero so bad? The words of Bakugo echoed in his mind, Here's some advice: take a swan dive off the roof! Maybe you'll have a quirk in your next life. Arching his back, arms half curled and hands
clutching at nothing Deku faced the heavens and let loose an agonized, frustrated and helpless screaming, wail. Those words had essentially come true: he’d died and come back as this hideous thing he now was.

If the change in Izuku's path home that day -which had placed him in such a position to meet the woman who'd graced him with this gift- was the flutter of the butterfly's wings... then all that would follow in its wake was a hurricane beyond anything he could have predicted.

聖者たち

...
The Metamorphasis

When the door to the house swung inward it was a miracle that it didn't leave cracks in the wall. Stumbling in, out of his shoes, he practically tripped over the silly, red high-tops as he fumbled into the bathroom. Running the water in the sink into his mouth soon reduced him to a screaming, blubbering mess. Hands over his boiling maw, he slammed into the wall behind himself, crumpling to the floor like an old paper bag under a stone.

Shoulders shaking with each sob that wracked his scrawny frame, Deku held his palms tight against his eyes. His vain hope that pushing hard enough would hold back the already flowing waterworks was proved thusly so. It was with shaking limbs and unsteady feet that he rose and put his toothbrush under the water. Scrubbing his teeth so hard they bled did not make him hungry again, at the very least. By filling a plastic cup with water he rinsed the toothpaste from his mouth.

Trembling, he moved to start the shower but thought it best not to have his entire body burned just to alleviate himself of this emotional burden. So he filled the tub instead. Surprisingly, even though he'd gone quite overboard with the temperature, climbing in didn't hurt him at all. It was only running water that affected him so; an important thing to note. Judging by the steam he could likely immerse his hand into boiling water and not be the slightest bit uncomfortable.

Yet he was still shaking.

No amount of therapy or hot baths was going to erase what he'd done from his memories. While the decision hadn't been voluntary Deku had sunk his teeth into the throat of another human being. To make the matter all the more scarring, and cemented in his mind, he'd gulped down entire pints of the man's blood. Even as horrified as he'd been of the sin he'd just committed, the teenager had possessed enough of his wits to check him for a pulse before the sirens had drawn close. The thug's pulse was thready, faint and holding as it was. With shakier hands than he'd checked the criminal, Deku made sure the woman he'd beaten unconscious was still alive before he fled the scene.

Fled it so fast he left skid marks on the pavement where he'd alter course along the way. It was a minor miracle he hadn't completely scraped the bottoms of his shoes off. Now here he was, cradling himself, hugging his knees to his chin and shaking with the weight of his feelings in water that would have scalded the skin off virtually anyone else.

Wiping the tears from his face and under his nose with his wrist Deku dunked his head under the water. Still not even a hint of discomfort, but that was hardly shocking. Exhaling under the water bubbles drifted up his skin and popped on the surface, the sound almost too clear to him. So his ears were more sensitive too, which begged the question his other senses had sharpened as well.

Sharpened... a poorer word choice one could not have made. After scrubbing his skin raw, like he were covered in filth that had seeped into his every pore, he pulled himself from the confines of the tub.

Toweling himself off the poor teenager found he'd not stopped shaking even then. Grimacing at himself as he pulled his clothes back on Deku trudged to the kitchen and left a note for his mother. _Feeling ill, went to bed._ He'd have stopped right then and gone to bed if he hadn't thought better to add another few words to the message: _I love you._

Crawling into bed and curling up under the covers he clung to his pillow so tight it might have burst if sleep hadn't overtaken him. Dreams riddled with bodies, spiderwebs and monsters with glassy, black eyes plagued his rest. Whether he was one of them or a victim wasn't clear, but the way he ran from it all bothered him most of all. Shouldn't he be the sort to run toward danger? To
When he adjourned to the kitchen he found a note waiting for him on the table. "Had to leave early, leftovers in the fridge. I love you too! - Mom " In as dismal a mood as he was, even then a small smile spread across his lips. Short lived as it was. Sitting down with his textbooks found him quite unable to study. It was just as well, for all the time he'd spent glued to those old pages. Slowly closing the book he stood and stuffed his hands into his pockets and retreated back to his room. He would not leave the dwelling until his hunger became too strong to ignore.

Of course, even then, had he any sort of plan? Aside from tracking down criminals or assorted scum of the earth he had no food source readily available. Eating what his mother had cooked or even most food around the house made him physically ill. But for her, so long as she was present, he stomached it and dealt with the nausea as needed. "Are you alright?" she put a hand over his forehead, "you look sick..." So she'd noticed, the teenager noted with dismay. In reply he nodded slowly and finished off what was on his plate.

"Thanks for the food, mom." Before he set out to wash the dishes again with shaky limbs, cold sweat and powerful nausea churning in the pit of his belly.

After he'd drained the sinks he walked, with forced calm, to the restroom to vomit. Sputtering the remnants of his dinner from his mouth he brushed his teeth and crawled into bed. Dreams of powerful urges, stalking dark corners of the world and pouncing on unwitting victims with vicious glee. What scared him most was the thrill of the hunt, relishing the fear of those he'd preyed upon and the sheer satisfaction of feeding an all too vocal hunger. He hadn't the will to push aside these feelings upon waking.

For an entire week this persisted before he almost thought he was going to go for his mother's throat. She'd passed him on the way from her room to the living room, moments after they'd woken, when it struck him. The 'blood craze' that hounded his rest stole his faculties from him and he bared his teeth, preparing to lounge. Snapping his control back to him was a single thought, *That's mom, you idiot!* And he flung himself headlong into the floor. Had it been made of something less sturdy than concrete he might have sundered it with his now formidable strength.

"Izu!" His mother shrieked. "Are you okay?"

Muttering quiet curses under his breath he nodded. "Yeah, just a muscle spasm. I'm fine." So long as he lived and bore residence over his own will, that was not something he would ever again allow. His mother was not to be harmed. **Ever.** After breakfast -not easily consumed- he resigned himself to his studies. It was close to impossible to concentrate but he took a few, scant notes where his focus allowed. At night, before dinner, he grabbed his hoodie and his shoes and stalked off with not insignificant trepidation. It was time to find a solution that would keep his mother safe from his ravenousness.

How precisely he was to accomplish this without 'taking it too far' -whatever that might constitute, he was sure he wanted nothing to do with- hounded him as surely as his appetite. What eluded him was any realistic plan. The idea of rutting around in the dumpster of a blood bank crossed his mind, however this was unfeasible for a few reasons. Chief among those reasons was the fact that blood, if unused, is considered biohazardous material and thus not disposed of like common trash. Besides, this entire endeavor made him want to vomit enough as it was. Attacking other human beings seemed to be his only reliable course of action.

He'd almost resigned to turning himself into the police when the now familiar, entrancing smell snared control of him. It took a literal punch to his own face to regain some semblance of his consciousness. Luckily no one had noticed that particular outburst. Luckier still was the source of
the smell: a butcher's shop. With an audible gulp, an effort to avoid profuse drooling, he stepped beyond the threshold of the door and said, "I need blood."

The butcher, large and imposing as one of his trade would be, eyed him suspiciously. "What for?"

_Crap!_ "Um..." he stammered, struggling to invent some reason for it. "f-for cooking?"

Slowly, the butcher blinked. Arms splayed out he shrugged slower than he'd previously moved his eyelids. "Okay." Turning around he limped to the back of the shop. A few minutes -or one eternity to Deku's stomach- later and he'd returned with several gallons of the red fluid. "Here's what I got." Four in total and they all were deposited on the counter before him. "How much you want?"

Without thinking his lips spoke for him, "all of them." And the butcher's eye brows climbed as high as could be. Thinking quickly Deku added, "i-it's for a special event! A fundraiser at my mom's-"

The butcher raised a silencing hand. "Don't need to know," bagging it up he handed the bags to the much smaller person. "All yours kid."

Deku blinked, terribly confused. "W-what?"

Again, the carver of meat shrugged. "It's just something I have to dispose of otherwise. Just take it and go. I don't need to know what you're doing with it next time."

Another very audible gulp. "N-next time?"

"Yeah," remarked he, patience wearing thin, "you and that lady who swings by every so often. She cleans out my supply of the stuff bout once a week." he said, wiping the counter with an old, ratty rag. "Only this week she left that much behind."

"She did?" Images of the woman who'd cursed him so flashed in his mind at the mere suggestion of her existence. He hadn't presumed her to be non-existent but also hadn't pondered her whereabouts or what her doings might have been since that night. Unwittingly, he may have well allowed a menace to walk the streets of the city.

"Yup," he motioned to the door, "go ask her about it if ya want. Now, I'm closing shop. Get lost."

Deku nodded, "o-okay. Thank you!" The butcher rolled his eyes and waved, reaching for a bottle of some very potent looking alcohol. It was assuredly certain that he had some inkling as to what he truly wanted with the blood. But that seemed not to be of any concern. The lady, for he had no words more fitting to describe her, had been a regular for seemingly some time and he'd regarded her almost fondly. Or so the teenager thought, reading the large man's face. Lacking experience in reading one's more... base desires left him neglecting that as a possible reading. Ducking around the corner the young-man opened one of the gallon containers and took a hearty -he did his best not to gag at that choice of words- swig of the cold, red fluid. No where near as filling as the thug's blood. Perhaps due to the temperature? Or... maybe it was the source.

Animals likely didn't satisfy this hunger as efficiently as beings higher on the food chain. He avoided the word 'humans' in this context. That admission was cripplingly uncomfortable. After he'd quieted his hunger he licked his lips free of the excess before capping the remainder of the gallon. Half drained... not a promising amount left over. Simple arithmetic told him that at his current rate of consumption four gallons would last him two months. Granted, the butcher -not that there was only one from whom to procure blood- would certainly produce significantly more than he'd need but were he and 'the lady' the only ones like them? Were there more creatures lurking in the night with senses and attributes so enhanced? Worse yet, what if the blood of animals was only
so effective now?

It could very well fail to satiate his hunger the more of it he consumed. These thoughts unsettled him greatly, more so than the fact that he knew not any longer his own limits. With naught but his curiosity at his disposal, he resolved to answer what he could the following night; His mother once again working late gave him the exact opportunity required for this assessment.

With an old, tattered mask from Halloween over a decade ago -from a costume his father had worn-and some gloves along with his hoodie again, Deku took to the streets in the dead of night. Finding a near empty neighborhood he donned the mask and gloves. Stretching his legs, loosening up a touch, he took a deep breath. Crouching low, muscles tense he eyed the edge of the roof above, gaging, calculating. Springing off the ground he shot into the air with a burst of air. He'd leapt considerably past the point of his intention and landed near the middle of the building's roof. Knees buckling from the force of his landing -and no small degree of surprise- he crashed onto the surface rolling like a tumbleweed.

Groaning with discomfort he rubbed at the sore spot on his head. A lot stronger than I thought... Mused he, remembering the dumpster he'd laid waste to the other week. Even if that was the absolute limitation he had to work with, he no longer felt so nervous about the upcoming practical exam he'd long been dreading. Strength enough to smash solid steel to pieces and leap considerable distances -well over the height of a five story building- into the air; he hadn't even tested his long-jump yet. Pulling the mask from his face, regretting his choice to obscure his vision, Deku walked to the edge of the building. Gaging the distance between him and the next rooftop made his stomach somersault. With a shaky breath and hefty gulp he stepped back and stretched his legs again. Knowing his limits was essential to the task ahead of him. While other prospective students had their entire lives to master their powers, Deku had but a week and some change.

Chances were he was going to injure himself, but worrying about such details as that would have to come later. Every advantage he could attain was not something that could be afforded to become lost to him. A spring forward and he dashed toward the edge in a blur, feet threatening to trip over themselves as he shot onwards. His next bound took him soaring, bounding through the air, a powerful wind howling around him as he sped. When he expected his flight to end -his feet to come skidding to a halt on the roof he'd aimed for- his stomach sank. Once again, he'd overshot his target and missed. Soles of his shoes barely scraped against the edge of the roof, sending him into a spin. His head hit the railing of a fire escape, arm snagged on a clothes line and then he slammed, face first, into the puddled street of the alley.

Sputtering out water tasting of asphalt, he peeled himself from the street while the stars voided his vision. He tried not to think about what else might have been in that water. With a few pops and cracks of his pained joints Deku slumped himself up against the nearby brick wall. That was about as graceful as a rhino trying to do a loop-da-loop. Wincing at the spinning, throbbing pain in his skull Deku was all but convinced his eyes were spinning like spirals. He tried to remember a point in time, before the slime monster, when his life as worse than this but recalled nothing. Given powers he had no control over, a near insatiable thirst for blood and now spending much of the day being flung about like a rag-doll, he was half convinced he'd been born under a cursed star. Which perhaps he was, considering his quirkless sate upon birth and much of his life thereafter.

Upon trying to stand he found his world still spinning and crashed back down into the watery street. "Hello?" Said a woman's voice, either one unknown or too muddled by his bleary senses to recognize. "Are you okay over there?"

She was getting closer, and with each loudening footstep came a strengthening of the rhythm of his
own heart. "The hell did you fall from...?" Her voice trailed off, gaze averted -though he knew not how he possessed this knowledge- and searching for a sign of his error accompanied a rise of panic within him.

A hand ghosted over his shoulder, offering assistance in his efforts to stand. "Here, let me help you." It was at that exact moment, her hand under his arm and pulling him up, that he lost control. Horrified, even as he lurched forward, Deku's fangs extended and he sank his teeth into her throat. "What the fuck!??"

Fighting to haul himself away from her he found he couldn't release her. Blood gushing down his throat found a feeling of euphoria welling within his core. Before his mind could even begin to regain control of itself he felt something jab his face, and his body erupted with pain. It was like he was being electrocuted; his body vibrated down to his bones with such intensity his nervous system threatened to shut down. Muscles going limp, jaw releasing her throat, he was shoved bodily away from her and his head cracked against the brick wall. While she muttered curses, clutching at her bleeding throat, stars exploded in his eyes. Unable to do much more than wait for his senses to recompose Deku simply watched as his world spun about.

"What the hell was that for?" Demanded she, grabbing him by the collar and holding him against the wall. "Do you have anything to say for yourself? Anything at all?" She was furious, and rightly so. He'd no right to do such a thing to her.

As he wracked his brain for any semblance of a coherent reply he became dimly aware of another presence. Someone had followed her into the alley. Someone with a knife and an expression that communicated nothing seemly. Fingers curling around the elbow of the girl he haled her aside and lounged at the ill intentioned one. While she cursed in shock, preparing to defend herself from him, Deku disarmed their would-be assailant by slapping the knife away. Before he could vocalize much of anything he'd hit the man in the sternum, feeling something crunch under his knuckles.

The man flew and skidded across the alley like a rag-doll, landing in a limp, moaning heap. Panting for breath, exhausted from multiple forms of exertion, Deku clutched at his forehead to try and center his brain. After a few moments he had regained something close to composure. Turning around, hesitantly, he saw the girl staring at him with frightened, tanzanite eyes. Mortified that anyone could look at him in such a way, it was another moment still before he could think of what to do or say.

Stepping far from her, against the opposite wall, he bowed his head and answer her question prior. "Forgive me..."

For a time, the sounds of the city around them were all that could be heard. She had room aplenty to flee, but he suspected that she wouldn't so long as he was within what she judged to be his reach. Just when he was about to leave he heard her speak, though were it not for his enhanced senses he could not have heard her. "Why'd you bite me?" Her tone was strong, angry, almost demanding and rightly so. "I was just trying to help you."

Fists clenched, he answered with the only reasonable reply he had. "I wont make excuses." His head inclined further still. "I'm... sorry." It wasn't his place to cry, so he bit back the tears that accompanied his guilt.

As he spoke she noted a certain tremor from him. A trembling, strain of voice and body she'd seen only a handful of times. Junkies, strung out on whatever substances have you, jonesing for a fix had a way of looking almost just like that. It was astounding, a thought bordering on unnaturally alien to her, but she voiced it nonetheless. "You... couldn't help it."
He grimaced, a feeling of disgust washing over him. "Don't say that!" Images of his mother, his teeth sinking into her flesh plagued his mind, "Not for me! Not for anyone who..." he had to gulp back his nausea, not that his body would allow him to vomit. "Does anything like what I did to you. The second you excuse their behavior for them is the second you allow it to go on forever!" He was trembling so much he felt his tightened hands knocking into the sides of his legs. Resisting his tear ducts he manged a final phrase. "You should go. It's not safe around someone like me..."

The girl said nothing, not moving or giving any indication that she intended to do so. Deku remained bowed, eyes closed and holding himself as far from her as he could. This... was just what he was now: A monster, preying upon his own species. As that thought crossed his mind, he heard her stand and begin to walk. These sounds were soon replaced by their absence and an outstretched wrist lurking just before his nose.

"Prove it." Dared the girl, determined as could be even as his maw opened. "If you're really so vile you shouldn't be able to resist biting me again."

It took another punch to his own face to move himself away from her. Shaking, his breath bordering on hyperventilation, he forced himself to remain fixed where he was: away from the girl. "What are you playing at?" He breathed, once air had returned to his lungs. "risking yourself like that for someone you don't even know, someone who hurt you!" He couldn't bear to look at her.

She replied almost nonchalantly, with his ears being as sensitive as they now were he could here her shrug. "It's what heroes do." A simple, earnest reply. "If I want to be one, then I'd better get used to it." She regarded this scrawny boy almost pitifully.

He looked positively gaunt, malnourished as could be. His skin looked as though it was stretched over what scant muscle and bone lurked beneath. And how pale he was, practically reflecting moonlight. She'd known some people who avoided sunlight like the plague, but even they weren't so white as he. In those brief moments where his eyes opened, his emerald eyes, she noticed a faint glow highlighting skin stretched over his cheekbones that seemed just a hair too high for his face. As he grimaced, the exertion from resisting his graving, a pair of slender, glistening white fangs peeked from behind his lips.

If this wasn't an addict she was looking at, she questioned her knowledge. "Besides," she offered, tone a touch softer, "with all that fuss to resist what your body is screaming for, you clearly can't be so bad as you say." Another sharp grimace, a look of anguished disgust maligned his features as he looked at her helplessly. "Are you okay?"

From his lowered vantage point, the girl's form was almost everything he could see. Her slender toned build hinted at a life of athleticism. She had a modest bust -it seemed an insult to her that he had to all but pry his eyes away from her chest- that complimented her frame nicely. Her face was rounded but angular, a sharp jawline and matching, narrow chin complimented her almost triangular eyes. Though, perhaps most distractingly, were her earlobes and hair. Actually, compared to the earlobes her asymmetrical, purple hair seemed normal. A product of her quirk, her earlobes were long protrusions not unlike the chords of audio output connection cables. He surmised those were what she'd 'electrocuted' him with.

"G-great." stammered the unwilling predator. "Please... don't stay near me." He closed his eyes forcing his attention anywhere but her or the scent of her blood. "You're not safe."

She remained quiet for moment, considering that sentiment for a long while, before she spoke. "If that's true..." she began, "then your loved ones can't be much better off, can they?" Her words stung like sparrow bee stings for the truth they bore. She sighed, bitterly. "Fine. Just make sure you get home." Her footsteps leaving the scene afforded him some semblance of relief. "So you and
everyone else stays safe."

Perhaps it was fitting that her words bit him so sharply as they had... As she disappeared from the alley, back into the streets, he felt a sort of calm wash over him. Shakily, he stumbled to the man he'd beaten to a pulp and checked his pulse. Another wave of relief washed over him as he discovered the man was still alive. Jumping back to the rooftops he bounded away -with only a handful more crash landings to the street- to a pay-phone and told the authorities where the unconscious goon lay. After that, it was a simple matter to get home and clamber inside through his window. Walking to his closet he opened mini fridge he'd hidden away inside.

The other night, after procuring the blood now stored within, he'd fished it off a beach whose name implied a green muppet with an odd dialect lived there. A dumping ground of those who littered and the ocean itself. Currents washed garbage from all over the world to that beach. At the thought of it, his plans for tomorrow cemented themselves soundly in his mind. It was as good a place as any to see what he was capable of. No one in their right mind would be there, unless they too were planning on doing something similar to he. Capping the gallon he'd taken a few meager sips from he closed the fridge and his closet. Opening the door to his room he vacated it, lights off, and looked about for his mother.

At the sight of him, her expression brightened considerably. "Hey sweetie, I thought you were asleep." She was on the couch, watching some sort of- Oh good lord...

His stomach did a pirouette at the revelation of what she was watching. With clenched teeth he stiffly shook his head. "Nope." A sentiment spoken for multiple reasons. "Not anymore."

She made room on the couch patting the cushion beside her. "it's another documentary about those spiders, the one you watched a while ago." She gave him an encouraging smile. "wanna watch it with your old mom?"

The phrase moved his fear aside as another heartstring was pulled. "You're not old, mom."

She giggled, " Such a gentleman, but that's my son." Her expression suggested an urge to pinch his freckled cheeks. Suppressing a pronounced sigh, Deku relented and sat beside her, arms stiff as he held his knees to stop his legs from shaking. Another night of spine tingling terror at the unsympathetic hands of nature and far too dedicated camera men. Occasionally his mom would gasp in something resembling shock or disgust and he would reach over and squeeze her shoulder; gently as he could. Why oh why did this documentary have to be so different from the last one?

As if his nightmares about their every day behavior weren't traumatizing enough, this one focused on their reproductive habits. Self genital mutilation, cannibalistic rituals of both the smaller male of the species and then the young -oh dear god- eating their mother alive upon hatching. He gulped, trying desperately to force away the association his mind had just made, inching away from his mother as he did. He thanked his cursed stars when she didn't seem to notice his discomfort. Worse than anything was the way the narrator tried to paint this cycle of cannibalism and birth as 'beautiful'. It couldn't have been more horrifying, more wretched if it was-

...If it was humans doing such things. Throat going tight, stomach in queasy knots, his grip on his knees would have broken the bones of a more fragile being. He wanted to throw up. Vomiting at such a realization was only natural for a member of his species, and even that dignity was denied him. Eyes wide, a cold sweat started at the crown of his hairline. With the ending of the documentary came not any sign of relaxation from him. He only faintly regarded his mothers words of concern before stumbling in a haze to the bathroom. A vigorous scrubbing of his teeth later and he'd curled into a ball in his bed, quietly crying himself to sleep. That night his dreams of arachnids -preying upon frightened women with oddly colored hair- took a sharp turn, as now he
wasn't observing them: he was one of them.

Following a fitful slumber, waking drenched with sweat, Deku rose and trudged to the bathroom. His hand stayed itself upon reaching for the faucet, realizing a shower would only mangle his skin. Switching it to the other setting he filled the tub, disrobed and climbed in. Sighing at the soothing feeling the heat brought to his muscles he let a fraction of his accumulated stress drift away. Though that was as much as he could rid himself of. It seemed his psyche was intent on hanging on to most of his distress for the time being. After scrubbing himself down with soap and shampoo he pulled the plug and dragged himself free of the water.

Then it was a short walk -after drying and redressing himself- back to his room and the hidden mini fridge to down what now passed for breakfast. A short trip back to the bathroom to thoroughly brush his teeth and he was ready to face the day. Sunglasses and shoes on he wandered out into the midmorning sun. As soon as the light hit him he felt his body go almost sluggish. An odd feeling, as that hadn't happened previously. *It's progressing as time goes on...* Wincing at the thought he broke into a run and sped like a runaway motorcycle toward Dagobah beach. It was with a sour disposition that he admitted he was weaker in sunlight.

Panting and wiping sweat from his brow he set down his backpack and took a seat. He'd made it to the beach in what had to be a new world record for the distance he'd just sprinted. A swig from his canteen and he was back on his feet. Trudging across the deserted parking lot he could smell the garbage piled in the sand before he saw it looming over the rise before the sprawling sandy plane. Such a smell... only the sight of it was even close to as rotten. Filth of every kind was strewn about this once glorious work of nature. Bandanna procured from his pocket and tied round his face to mask the stench he made his way forward. Hands gripping one of the larger metallic hunks of refuse he hoisted it above his head.

Were it not for some quick footwork he'd have topple backward and crashed to the ground, garbage in tow. From the size of the thing it had to weight more than an industrial steamroller. *That's a lot more than I expected.* But that was hardly the real test. Straining, lowering himself to the ground he coiled his muscles. With a surging roar of his cracking, adolescent voice he threw the rubble. His eyes widened at the sight of how far he'd managed to throw it: fifteen feet. Quite the distance for something so hefty. *Almost can't believe it,* He thought in awe, taking a weary step forward, *It'd be more impressive if it didn't come with a such a heavy price...*

Trading his humanity for such power was a thought that had never once crossed his mind. But in that moment where he'd had to choose between retaining that piece of his identity or his life, well, not many could have refused. Though he was hardly one to make such a statement any longer. Sighing, wiping some drool away from his mouth he murmured, "well, someone's gotta clean this up..." so long as no one came around to watch, it was a safe enough method to temper his new abilities.

It would be another week before the beach was cleaned, and he would then run off to UA for the entrance exams.

A burst of wind and sand punctuated the fall of a final piece of litter. Perhaps inaptly named for its sheer bulk. Drawing in slow, labored breaths was one Izuku Midoriya, standing triumphant yet exhausted. An entire week of his life had been spent on this beach, hauling garbage, studying whenever his mind was clear, or running home just long enough to make sure his mother wasn't worried. Now, he was falling on his back and panting, getting some rest before he had to get going. The promised day of the entrance exams had come. Sitting up with a groan he lurched to his feet and trudged to his backpack.
With a swig of his canteen-and a strong urge to gag- he wiped his mouth and grabbed his things. Ducking into a nearby changing room he switched to his gym clothes and started toward the school. Somehow, despite his speed and inexhaustible supply of energy these days, it seemed to take an eon to reach the place. And what a place: an enormous complex large enough to hold a sizable city, most of it undeveloped. Nature left to color the landscape with its natural hues. The grounds were littered with grand old trees, the main campus of the building constituted of four, towering, interconnected, glass high-rises. It was daunting, imposing as the reputation the place of learning garnered.

Gulping down his nerves he prepared to stave off his urge to feed as he approached the crowd. Animal's blood was only so effective, after all. He'd bitten that girl almost entirely unprovoked just one week ago. Approach the mass of prospective heroes he felt his fear and hunger peak. Lips trembling, threatening to expose his fangs, Deku did everything he could to keep his mouth shut.

Adjusting his sunglasses, Deku was about to cross the final stretch when he heard a familiar voice. "Move aside, Deku!" The snarling of his former classmate Bakugo. "Get out of my way or you're dead!"

It was at that moment that Deku noted a particular change in himself. Rather than remaining silent out of fear of his old bully, his compliance was prompted by a practiced reflex not to simply attack those around him. It hadn't been an act of self preservation but one of self control. His fear of others was beginning to change into a fear of hurting others. As Bakugo stomped along various murmurs about him being 'that kind from the slime villain incident' worked their way through the crowd. A few might have laughed at him.

Losing focus, having aimed it toward other things, his footing went beyond his notice as he resumed course. With a heart stopping drop he saw the pavement rapidly approaching his face. Eyes flinching shut he braced for his inevitable reunion with concrete. Only it hadn't happened... somehow he'd just stopped falling altogether. As he flailed about in a panic, floating in mid air, a chipper voice caught his ears. "Are you okay?"

He felt absolutely ridiculous. Losing his footing and tripping like that, now this display of anything but grace while suspended... what a first impression. Just like that, with his savior pressing her fingertips together, he fell back on his feet.

She smiled. "Don't worry, that was just my quirk was all," cheeks tinted with a hint of red, "sorry for using it on you without asking but... well, it'd a bad omen if you fell."

He just gawked at her, unable to talk for a number of reasons. First was that his mind was being forced to focus on other things. Second was that this girl was just too damned cute. Her checkered scarf, jacket and leggings all complimented each other -and her legs- quite well. And if her rounded face wasn't the textbook definition of adorable -with a head of brown hair that framed it perfectly- he didn't know what was.

"This sure is nerve wracking," she laughed nervously... " turning to leave she waved at him over her shoulder, still smiling. "Good luck to both of us."

Brain faltering, unable to formulate those now distant things called words he stood there processing what just happened. Unable to make sense of the encounter, a girl being nice to him out of the blue like that was simply unheard of, he blurted out the first word that leapt to mind.

"Wait." She turned, a curious look on her face. Finding his courage -and restraint- he stained out the words, "Th-thank you... for stopping my fall."
Her response was a warm, chipper smile. "Sure, anytime." she gave him a thumbs up and walked inside.

Taking a deep breath and sighing Deku followed suit. Once inside he was directed to an auditorium and assigned a seat. Of course, they would place him right in the middle of everyone. No rest for the monstrous... after everyone else had sat down a man walked onto the center stage and waved at the crowd. A man with a shock of fin-like yellow hair and a pair of sunglasses on his face, slender and a spring in his step that screamed 'I drink espresso like water'.

The Voice hero: Present Mic. "Welcome to today's live performance!"

His voice boomed like a cannon, reverberating across the room in deafening waves that had Deku covering his ears in pain. Somewhere toward the back of the room he swore he heard someone else reacting similarly. They sounded familiar...

"Everybody say 'HEY'!"

His rapturous exclamation was met only with silence. A room full of more astounded or confused teenagers you could not find.

"Alrighty then!" Declared the hero, unperturbed by this lack of enthusiasm while Deku winced in pain. Muttering under his breath about his new volume sensitivity he did his best to listen. "I'll just give you the 'what's what' before you start your written tests!"

What followed was a brief dissertation of what the practical exam would entail. Students would be assigned to one of six -possibly more- 'mock cityscapes' to fight robots. The smallest robots were worth 1 point, the next largest being worth 2 and the largest being worth 3.

"Excuse me!" Shouted a student of very formidable build. "But there appear to be no fewer than four varieties of faux villains listed on this handout!" He was tall, broad shouldered with dark hair and sported a pair of square-rimmed glasses and jawline more squared than they. "And you!" He spun about, pointing right at Deku. "You've been muttering to yourself for much of the presentation... it's distracting!" He scolded the smaller teen. "If this is some sort of game to you please leave immediately."

Fumbling his way through an awkward apology Deku remained silent. After the dissertation ended -Present Mic said something about the fourth kind of robots being obstacles to avoid or some such- Deku put his nose to his test and answered as best he could. He was surprised to find himself confident with most of his answers.

Then it was just a matter of being ushered over to the testing grounds. Filing in step with his prospective classmates he kept his jaw clenched firmly shut. Upon arriving at his designated testing site he noticed her, the girl who'd caught him mid fall. From the look on her face she was concentrating, working up the nerve for the fight that was to ensue. He felt a glimmer of desire to go and speak to her again, but with the loosening of his jaw he almost surged forward to latch onto a nearby student's throat. Cold sweating again he struggled to retain his willpower. So many people... he felt like a wolf among a flock of sheep, with his lips quivering upwards, threatening to reveal his fangs. He was just happy no one wanted to speak to him at this point.

Without warning, Present Mic shouted something about the test starting. After a few moment's confusion, Deku and the other students were sprinting into the arena. Gaining a respectable lead on everyone but that one square-jawed guy he searched eagerly for a machine to battle. At least with these he didn't have to hold back at all. It was an impressive display from most of them. That 'zero gravity' girl ran about, floating the robots into the air and letting them crash to the ground,
sundered by their own weight. She wound up lost in the swarm of machines, fading from Deku's sight. Another student who wore some sort of weird belt blasted lasers from his navel, melting and shattering the robots until he doubled over, clutching at his gut.

That one square jawed guy had... something in his calves. Engines, from the way they behaved, bolstering his speed and strength of his legs as he crushed them with incredible momentum. Deku, meanwhile, resolved merely to smash the machines to pieces. It wasn't as easy as he'd hoped, the three pointers took more than a couple of his strongest punches to destroy. Some managed to hit him, smashing him through things and sending him sprawling across the pavement. Dodging was an animal he'd yet to tame. Still, he managed to gain a decent amount of points. By his calculations, at least.

But would that be enough? Sure others had gotten far more than he, clumsy and unfamiliar with his power as he was. Eyes shifting about he found naught but wreckage of the machines and rubble from the surrounding buildings. There had to be more. This couldn't be all they'd placed in the cityscape! Scrambling to go and search for more, he was stopped by a most frightening feeling. The feeling of the earth shaking beneath his feet.

Slowly, he turned about, eyes going wide, and beheld the source of the disturbance. "Th-that's worth zero points!?

If nothing else, the behemoth of a machine was an impressive feat of modern engineering. It stood at a height of eighty feet, a Goliath, a veritable war machine meant to decimate cities. The other students ran. He ran, trying to think of where else he could go to get just a few more points. He'd almost thought an idea had come to him when he heard a cry for help. Slowly, against the tide of running teenagers, he spun around. Lying in the middle of the street was a certain brown haired girl, her leg trapped under a hunk of concrete, the zero pointer lumbering toward her.

She- she's gonna die! Again, like it had been on the day of the slime villain's attack, his feet ran of their own volition.

"It'd be a bad omen if you fell."

Sprinting forward he leapt into the sky with a rush of air. Instinct having taken over he curled back his hand, fingers extended and let his body dictate what happened next. There, sprouting from his fingertips, were long, black claws. Flying toward the thing's 'face' he let out a savage scream and swung his arm in an arc. Claws rending through metal and wide he severed what would have been the thing's carotid artery as sparks flew from it's twitching neck. It let out a metallic growl, spinning around as he fell to the street on a heap.

He'd only just made it to his feet when its fist came smashing down into the pavement, sending him skidding away. "I'm over here!" he screamed at it, in spite of his nerves, leaping to his feet. "Come get me!"

It lumbered toward him, bringing another arm down to crush him. Or so he thought. Instead it swiped him off his feet, its metal knuckles cracking against his bones and smashing him into a concrete wall. Blood spattered everywhere as his body was torn, skin and clothing smeared across the surface he'd been pressed into like a bug. As the machine pulled back he staggered forward, limbs straining to hold him up. The world might as well have been in an ocean of red, for the blood coloring his vision. Claws still extended he took a shaky step forward, a determined, defiant look of resolution on his face, and he leapt at the thing's knee. This time, his claws tore through the entire limp, unbalancing the machine completely.
As he landed a promising distance away it crashed to the ground after him. There he stood, staring down the metal menace and wiping his own blood from his face. "If it's any consolation..." he managed, though barely, "you probably cost me my passing grade." he smirked bitterly as it prepared to take another swing.

He moved to dodge but his body wasn't having it. He crumpled to the ground like pile of stones as its hand came to bear down on him and he was crushed against the pavement. As it pulled its hand back, its metal knuckles dripping with his blood, he lay there, waiting. Unable to much else he closed his eyes. It was a strange, feeling, almost like floating- Wait. Opening his eyes he found he'd been moved. As the robot's fist pummeled the section of street where he'd been he saw it getting further and further away. Confused he turned and saw that brown haired girl, gripping him by his shirt, carrying him away as they floated.

"R-" she turned green in the cheeks as she pressed her fingers together, "release!" As they landed in a heap she vomited something that looked like rainbow glitter. Somewhere, off in the distance, he heard students screaming.

"We can't just leave them!" As a laser hit the zero pointer in its eyes and a boy with glasses and engines in his legs smashed his feet into its head.

Some girl with pink hair and skin leapt onto its back and began spraying some strange, clear, sizzling fluid from her hands, all over the robot's back. A kid with yellow hair ran up to the thing and grabbed its face, his body erupting into a light show of dancing electricity. A series of small, sparking explosions resonated within the machine. Between what the group of them, the zero pointer had been vanquished. Eyes closing, finally succumbing to his wounds, Deku let unconsciousness take him. His last, fading thought was only that he was glad he hadn't bitten anyone that day.
Vague recollections drifted across what of his consciousness remained. Images of a rosy cheeked girl staring down at him, worry shining in her eyes. The square jawed boy with the glasses shouting for a medic, waving his arms about in manner not dissimilar to the way the machines had been moving. A pink haired and skinned girl with white horns protruding from her curly locks, peering curiously at him. Her golden irises surrounded by black sclera were wide as she fidgeted nervously.

Elsewhere, in the distance, a yellow haired boy stumbled about like a buffoon. His hands giving thumbs up as he murmured nonsense with a very stupid grin. Trying to corral him was another blond, the kid with that weird belt, clutching his gut and complaining of a 'tummy ache'. Then, an old lady hobbling on an equally ancient walking stick had approached with two robots, carrying a stretcher between them.

No... get away...

Something was said about an infirmary, his hand reached up to warn them away but was sternly, and gently, lowered by the brown haired girl. "Just rest, okay?" The only words yet to actually reached his mind, and they prompted a sluggish nod as he fell back into darkness. "Thank you..." A whisper following him into that abyss called sleep. "For saving me."

Whatever happened next went beyond his perceptions. All he knew was that, when he awoke, he was in what looked like a nurse's office. White, tiled ceiling, similar enough walls, shelves lined with medical texts and equipment. From the feeling of much of his skin he'd been thoroughly bandaged, he probably looked like an ancient pharaoh laid to rest. Raising his hands found that observation to be correct. When his bleary eyes reached the IV in his arm he just about panicked. Someone had the brilliant idea of giving him a transfusion. A slight twinge in his head gave way to a trace inkling on the matter, but of only voices.

*He's lost too much blood,* A gruff, tired voice echoed in his memories as he looked at the IV bag, *using your quirk on him will only kill him.*

*We can't just do nothing Aizawa. Said the voice of an elderly woman, Do you have a suggestion or are you just here to prevent me from treating patients?*

...*Give him a transfusion first.* Was the reply of this 'Aizawa' character, *Give him some strength back before jump starting his body's recovery.*

Or was that what had happened? A glance around the room afforded no possible source for an answer. Laying back against his pillow he closed his eyes, giving in to his fatigue once again. At the realization that he wasn't hungry, he gave a bitter laugh and had to ponder whether his appetite had been curbed, those weeks ago at the beginning, with that first transfusion at the hospital. If it hadn't... what manner of dire turn might his recovery have taken? Such thoughts made him shiver, despite his present warmth, cocooned in blankets.

He eyed the transfusion bag sourly, accusingly. Were it that he hadn't needed such a diet to survive... Not that there was much to be done about it now, nor that there ever would be. For the next few hours he lay there in silence, unable to contemplate much else but the ticking of the clock. At the sun falling to the horizon's crest he heard the door to the room open. Who would it be but the nurse of the school, The Healing Hero: Recovery Girl. Deku had to wonder if all the staff were professional heroes at one point or another...
"Well," said she, "you look like you've got some color back." Approaching the bed she put a hand on his forehead. "Some temperature too."

Brushing some of his hair aside she leaned toward his forehead and pressed her lips flush against it. Before Deku could question 'just what the hell she was doing' a fit of fatigue blindsided him. It was a feeling similar to that of stretching a long unused muscle first thing in the morning: rejuvenating, liberating and mildly tiring. Only in this instance it was outright exhausting, had he not been in bed already he might have fallen over.

"Wha-..." darkness encroached on his vision again, threatening another lapse of consciousness, "What did you do?"

"Oh just patching up your injuries." Recovery Girl laughed. "You don't think my name was chosen at random, do you?" He shook his head sheepishly after a moment, then she ruffled his already terribly fluffy, cow-lick ridden hair. "Well, give it a little while longer to rest. You'll be back on your feet in no time." Laying back, head slumping back into his pillow, Deku tried his best to relax.

As Recovery Girl left the room his gaze turned to the IV bag. Really it was lucky that he'd been given a transfusion but it left him wondering. Just why was he given that instead of intravenous nutrient therapy? Considering his blood loss it wasn't altogether unorthodox but... no. Perhaps he was over thinking it. What did he really know about medicine anyways?

Another bitter smile crossed his lips as a thought did much the same to his mind: More than I know about my powers.

Just as the Healing Hero had said, he was ready to leave less than an hour later. Removing his bandages -miraculously he found a complete absence of scar tissue- and changing into the spare outfit in his backpack he pulled the IV from his arm and headed for the door. Once outside the building he winced at the setting sun, realizing he'd have to get new sunglasses. With a groan he fished through his pockets for some spare change. Not a lot, but it sufficed for the shopkeeper he spoke briefly with. At least for a silly looking pair. Perfectly circular rims... his least favorite, so it was with some dismay that he admitted these were stronger than the last pair he owned. That the lenses were tinted a blackish red made him wonder if the hands of fate -should they truly exist- were just taunting him.

His walk home felt as though it were taking far longer than his walk to the school. A text to his mother told her that he was en route, another few later and he'd eased her fear that he'd been gravely injured. He had been, of course, but that was by what he would now have to consider his previous standards. It seemed he was able to take quite some amount of punishment. If his bones hadn't been broken by that gargantuan machine, his mind staggered at the thought of what might be required for such injuries to be inflicted upon his person. Alas, he knew not whether they had been. His pain receptors had been quite overloaded in that brief round of combat.

Although, even if his bones had been broken, the injuries he'd sustained were beyond lethal. That he had no trace of a concussion was astounding, a feat bordering on miraculous. The amount of punishment he was capable of taking would be the thing of envy to most professionals. According to some rather amateur guesswork on his part, he'd really only been 'functional' for the first two thirds of what he'd endured. The majority of his injuries had been dealt to him in that final strike, before the others had destroyed the machine.

Just why it was programmed to be so murderously hostile was a subject of worry for the poor teenager. If someone else had been that thing's target what would have happened? Could they have survived even one punch from it? Even if they did, the inevitable injuries wouldn't leave them in much of a position to escape. How many prospective students died every year trying to fight those
things? With such gross incompetence on display for the entrance exams alone, he worried about the rest of the year might-

...Ah, that was right, wasn't it? His final score hadn't been that high. Barely competitive with the other students, if it could even be described as such. His final tally, if he was being generous with himself, couldn't have been higher than fifteen. Even if he was assuming that their performances were graded at twice the normal scale he hadn't even gotten the higher end of an 'F'. Still, he had to try. It had been his dream since he was old enough to even know what a hero was. If he hadn't tried he doubted he'd be able to live with himself, especially now that he was a blood sucking monster of the night.

Speaking of which, he still didn't have any idea what he was anymore. 'Human' was the word he desperately clung to but had reservations for allowing full belief thereof. Spiders -he shivered considerably at the word- were the only thing other than ticks or mosquitoes that he could compare himself to. Butterflies could drink blood too, now that he thought of it... His range of abilities was too focused, too narrow and didn't align with any of those creatures. For one, he couldn't fly, so that ruled out two of them.

Jumping incredible distances was the extent to which he was familiar with extraordinary methods of travel. He had fangs, his claws being the most recent development, now fed only on blood, enhanced strength and senses, evidently he also possessed astounding durability; or at least a hefty capacity to ignore his injuries well past the point of most people, let alone heroes. A lack of spinnerets -for which he was exceedingly grateful- ruled out the most unsavory option. So that left ticks and fleas. Not ideal comparisons. Of course, now that he thought of it, a hero named 'The Tick' or possessing powers similar to one sounded absolutely absurd. What was next? A villain who's only power was having a chair for a head? No. His powers had to be from something else, so said his claws.

Claws... only the most recent to the list. He was gaining questions faster than answers. Being alone in this, no guide or teacher to turn to, was rather discouraging. Finding that Lady, the one who'd bestowed these powers upon him, had crossed his mind but he hadn't the faintest idea where to begin looking. Lying in wait outside the butcher's shop all week seemed an unlikely option to work. She would doubtlessly be more watchful, more careful than to allow one such as he to observe her without her wishing it. But then why wouldn't she want him to find her?

She was the one who sought him out, saved his life and made him like this. Well, it seemed as decent a plan as any. Maybe from her he'd get something, an answer, guidance; he'd take anything at this point. What he desired most was a method of self control. For some reason he doubted she'd have an answer for that one... "A hunger unlike any you've ever known, a life devoid of companionship..." That such was her prediction of his future seemed to betray her would-be answer to that line of questioning. So resign he did just to venture home and rest, to enjoy the quiet in his stomach for as long as it lasted.

By the time he fumbled inside his home, Deku had no energy left to work with. So off he stumbled to his bed, not bothering to do much more than strip before falling onto the sheets and wrapping himself up in them. A fitful sleep though it was, plagued by his usual assortment of nightmares, he found himself waking upon the floor. Not something he'd done since early in elementary school. Rubbing the stiffness from his neck he stood up and pulled some clean clothes over his frame. It wasn't exactly early, but he cared not. With no responsibilities to consider he shuffled from his room and searched for something his mother hadn't cleaned yet. Eventually he settled for vacuuming the house, with an encore of dusting the ceiling. Following up this act was a generous scrubbing of the bathroom and cleaning the kitchen sink. By the time Mrs Midoriya crossed the threshold of the family home he'd scrubbed the floors down too.
"Izu," she smiled, "what's gotten into you?"

*If you only knew...* "Didn't really know what else to do today," admitted he, "just thought I'd make up for the last week away from home." He offered with a timid, little smile.

"Aww," she beamed squeezing the silly lad in the kind of hug only a mom could give, "you didn't have to do that." releasing him she said, "How about tonight we watch part three of those documentaries you like?" He had to bite back a scream. "They aired part three of it just a few days ago." But that happy almost excited look on her face...

The slight smirk he gave, had anyone been aware of the terror wracking his nerves, would have earned him an Oscar. For his acting betrayed not one iota of his fear. "Sure, that sounds great mom."

*Kill me now...*

So it was grim reluctance that he settled in with his mom for another night of spine tingling horror at the hands of nature. He half suspected the camera men rather enjoyed their work on this production a bit too much... Eventually, with knuckles gone white from the grip on his knees and color drained partially from his face, he sighed in relief as the documentary ended. To his surprise Mrs Midoriya only yawned, stretching her limbs a bit before standing up.

"And so the trilogy ends," she mused almost sighing a little. All Deku could do was thank his nonexistent gods that it was over. Ruffling his hair, Mrs Midoriya kissed his forehead. "Thanks for cleaning up, my little hero."

He couldn't help the smirk that followed. *Worth it.*

With another yawn she bid him goodnight and wandered off after he returned the sentiment. So there he was, in no mood to sleep, huddled up on the couch and fidgeting with the hem of his pant legs. With nothing better to do other than sit and try to erase what he'd just seen from his mind he did precisely that. Given his doubtless failure to enter UA he began fishing through his brain for other possibilities, other schools with hero courses he could still test into. After a few moments he grabbed a notebook from his room and began jotting down notes, looking up various things on his phone and coming up with a schedule for all the entrance exams he'd be taking.

*Vrrrm... Vrrrrrm...*  

Deku's ears perked up at the sound of his phone going off. His hand drifted to the outdated device and swiped the notification open. Eyes fluttering, surprised not at the message but at the name of the sender: Aizawa, he'd heard that name before he'd woken in Recovery Girl's office. It was an address followed by a short bit of instruction.

**Come alone, meet me in the alley.**

A chill ran over his skin, sending ripples of goosebumps in its path. To say this was unexpected was a drastic understatement. What business did a teacher at UA have with him? Not wanting to waste time Deku stood up and slipped into his shoes. Sunglasses secured in his pocket he broke into a jog. Granted it was a jog that happened to be a good deal faster than most people could run, but still it was a jog. Reaching the address in less time than he'd expected the fanged one glanced around, searching for the one who'd summoned him. When no sign of the man was forthcoming - not that he knew the man's appearance- he half suspected he'd arrived too early.
"Think fast."

Before Deku could discern where the voice had come from a foot came roaring toward his head. Reflexes taking over, his hands flew up to meet the limb striking for his face. Fingers gripping the appendage he spun on his heels at the sheer force of the strike, stumbling in his efforts to redirect the attack. His would be assailant flew, tossed aside by the teenager who’s head he’d sought to drive his heel into. Hair floating, swaying as though carried by some ocean current, the man landed like a cat. Agile and accustomed to combating foes significantly more powerful than he. Flowing in the air around him, winding like tendrils of some creature, was his long, white scarf. Adorned on his long, angular face were a pair of vented, yellow goggles.

"W-why did you do that!?" Deku stammered. "Who are- Hey!"

The man had made for the wall and started climbing up the fire escape with almost inhuman speed. Following his instincts Deku gave chase, leaping up the side of the building after him. To his grim surprise the man in black was waiting for him. With a sharp, downward jab of his elbow he’d halted the teenagers ascension and sent him reeling back toward the street below. In a desperate attempt not to get another mouth full of pavement he reached out, fingers clawing for the wall. As his digits scraped along the rough surface of the bricks he felt his descent slowing. Eyes open, as his world stopped spinning, he noticed that he'd stopped moving. Which was odd, due to the fact that his claws were sheathed and his fingers hadn't penetrated the surface. Yet his descent had halted altogether and his feet had never reached the ground. It was with increasingly widening eyes that reality dawned on him: he was clinging to the wall.

"As I thought."

When Deku worked up the nerve to look up at his assailant, he saw him glaring down at him through his goggles. Hair still swaying as though underwater, his scarf lashed out like a mass of flailing tendrils and snared him. What followed was a rather undignified removal from the wall, a somersault over the man's head and a rather painful deposit upon the surface of the roof; all the doing of the man's scarf.

Lips curled in something of a sneering snarl, the scraggly man advanced. "You're one of them."

Standing quickly, but keeping his distance, Deku eyed the man cautiously. "You- you know?"

Answers though he wanted, he wasn't itching to get into another fight. Least of all with someone who was only after him. This man clearly knew how to fight, and without an innocent bystander to leap in and defend Deku found himself wanting to avoid confrontation. But his aggressor had other ideas. Stepping forward every time the fanged teenager backpedaled he watched the younger one like a crazed hawk.

"You're not very good at hiding." stated he, removing his goggles and revealing his narrow, bloodshot eyes. "As if hunting at a hero school wasn't brazen enough, you displayed multiple powers over the course of that exam." One finger raised, "Heightened strength," another followed, "agility, claws and incredible durability. Now either that was all you thought you'd need to survive the exam or you're not aware of your entire repertoire yet."

The thought of yet more powers had Deku's head spinning, as did the prospect of his hunger growing with each power; Something that had only just occurred to him as a possibility. Granted he hadn't noticed any such thing happening but... that butcher had said The Lady cleaned out his supply of blood once a week while his own appetite remained at an even two gallons per month. At least so far.
Cracking of the man's knuckles snapped his focus away from his thoughts. "Either way, I won't allow you to harm anyone else." He made a motion with his wrist, almost like he was drawing a dagger from his sleeve when a cackle split the night.

Interrupting this bout, a laugh cackled over them. "Oh," and the voice attached to the laugh made Deku's spine tingle, "you wont have to worry about that." Turning around, he saw The Lady peering down at them from a nearby rooftop.

She had a strangely bemused expression on her face, and- he couldn't believe what she was holding. "He wants to be like you when he grows up." And with a flick of her wrist she threw the tattered notebook right into his grasp. After a few moments of flipping through it the Hero's expression lost a hint of its severity. "Don't you think that's sweet, Aizawa?"

While it wasn't much of a revelation, it did surprise the greenhead to learn this was the man who'd summoned him here. What had his focus however was the notebook in the Professional's hand. "For the Future..." Aizawa murmured, glancing up at Deku, letting his scrutinizing gaze speak for him.

After a few moments, Aizawa looked back at The Lady. "So... you're the one who turned him then. heh... as if it could have been anyone else."

The sound of boots clattering onto the roof told him that she'd leapt down beside him. It was a minor miracle he hadn't leapt aside in fright, but for some reason his instincts told him he had nothing to fear from her. Although that was somehow unsettling in and of itself.

Holding up the notebook, Aizawa added, "what makes you think he can even do this?" Deku's eyes flashed between the two adults. "Not even you have ever managed to completely gain control of yourself. He's only a child. What can you possibly say to justify turning him into that?"

It was the most outlandish thing: where the hero made him feel afraid, threatened, the being he knew to be a predator actually comforted him with her presence. Even her clawed hand, resting lightly on his shoulder, only served to put him at ease. While Aizawa had hidden none of the venom, the sizzling rage in his voice, The Lady hadn't cared. Reacting only with apparent amusement she lilted her head to one side with a casual little smirk.

"I was no different when I was turned, my old friend." The hero seemed conflicted by being addressed with such a label, so said the subtle flinch of his tired features and momentary shifting of his eyes. "This little one," her hand patted almost affectionately at the younger man's shoulder, "he was there at that slime villain's little rampage."

The confused expression Aizawa gave her prompted further explanation. "You had to have noticed," drawled she, "with those sharp eyes of yours, this little one running into the fray?" A slight widening of his eyes, sinking, lowering of his other facial features. "Didn't you notice that something -some one- had been tossed from the chaos?" Her smile widened, almost unnoticeably. "Quirkless, Young Midoriya here did what so many heroes already present hadn't dared, and it cost him his life." Slowly, the teenager in question turned to look at the woman speaking. When his eyes found her she almost seemed like she was looking fondly at him. "Wouldn't it have been a waste to let that be the end of him?"

Aizawa remained silent, contemplating her words while looking Deku up and down. It was true that he seemed harmless enough. That he hadn't retaliated for any of the attempts made to harm him was certainly a point in his favor. But...

The man sighed, hands sliding into his pockets. "Does he even know what he is?" His tone had lost
its edge, now denoting genuine concern. "What you are?" At The Lady's questioning glance Deku shook his head and Aizawa sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose between his thumb and index finger. "It's been almost a month since he turned..." grumbled he, pulling a hip flask from his pocket and taking a long sip. "You really haven't told him anything?"

Another smile, this one bearing a sardonic tint. "I wanted to see what he would do." Explained she. "If he would live up to my initial expectations." She released his shoulder after a gentle squeeze. "And he did. At every opportunity to give in, to let his hunger drive him, he resisted and prevailed." With a slight shrug she added, "There... might have been some slip ups here and there, but aren't there always with ones so young?" And she looked Aizawa right in the eye.

His only reply was to narrow his own as he gazed back. "Most other teenagers don't have to fight urges that could kill people."

And The Lady laughed. "We live in a world were people are born with the ability to decimate cities and you think he is the only one living as a possible liability? A threat?" She shook her head, only a trace of her little smirk remaining. "Tell me, what do you think would happen if a man such as All Might lost his temper? What do you think the fallout would be from that?" And the last traces of bemusement disappeared. "Can you imagine it?"

"I don't have to." Was Aizawa's simple reply.

"Then we understand each other?"

He considered the boy and the woman for a few tense moments. Eying them both with equal scrutiny until his shoulders sank and he let out another sigh. "Teach him about what he is," and he turned around, "he has a week to prepare for my class."

Deku's eyes widened. "What!?" he cried in disbelief. "You mean I passed?!

Another, growling sigh escaped the hero's throat. "All of this and that's what you react to..." he dug a palm into one of his temples. "Yeah kid, you passed." he turned back around, obvious emotional fatigue plastered on his face. "In saving Uraraka you got sixty rescue points. Thanks your careless bravado she also passed because she had to save you." Deku blinked rapidly, jaw lowering a little as his breath caught. Some sliver of hope had just been planted back in his chest. "Funny thing about that entire encounter..." Aizawa remarked. "Had you not been there it wouldn't have been nearly so bad."

Another flutter of the teenager's eyes. "W-what?"

"See," Aizawa rubbed at a bloodshot eye, "we're not idiots. Those machines have safety measures which prevent them from killing prospective students. The only things they wont hold back against are known villains..." His eyes narrowed again. "Care to guess what else they attack with impunity?"

This time, it was Deku's turn for his shoulders to go slack with the weight of his emotions. "...People like me." His gaze lowered to the ground. "So... if I hadn't been there..."

"It likely wouldn't have been a threat to anyone." Aizawa attempted to soften none of the blow those words delivered. "You're lucky I didn't expose your little secret."

Wait... "W-why didn't you?" Deku asked.

A line of questioning that gave the hero pause. Rather than answer right away he turned back around, hands once again in his pockets, and considered what lie he might tell. In a twist of
whimsy, he went with the truth.

"I recognize heroism when I see it." An almost touching sentiment. "Figured you deserved a chance to prove yourself. What I didn't figure was..." he turned his face toward the stars above. "that my own prejudices would prevent me from following that through." For a brief moment, from the edge of the Man's sleeve, he thought he saw a glint of light, reflecting on metal.

As the reflecting light flickered away Aizawa began to leave. "You have one week to prepare yourself." And he tossed the old, battered notebook over his shoulder with such precision that it landed right in Deku's hands. "Do not disappoint me, 'Young Midoriya'." At that sentence's conclusion, Aizawa bounded off the roof, into the night.

A lot of information to process... he hadn't the faintest idea where to begin doing so either. Pushing that concern well and truly away was the movement in the corner of his eye. The Lady must have been working overtime to resist the urge to latch onto the now absent hero's throat. A violent twitching of her arm, only ceased by her other hand grasping the shaking limb. To his surprise, Deku's hand had moved, reaching out unconsciously for her shoulder, out of the concern he felt for her. He stopped the motion cold, awkwardly putting his hand in his pocket, hoping she hadn't seen.

Of course, she had however.

Her little smile bore a hint of gratitude as she cast him a sidelong glance. "Worried, little one?" She put a hand over her forehead, squeezing fingers at her temples, massaging the sides of her skull. She chuckled, hummingly under her breath. "You needn't. I've just... not had enough to drink in some time."

Hesitant though he was to trust this woman, something in him compelled him to. There was this... disarming nature in her aura. He felt as though he were in presence of a very old friend, not that he knew the feeling from any other era of his life. "Are you alright?" Why did I ask her that...?

The smile perched upon her lips twitched. It was a subtle, fleeting motion but it was there nonetheless. "I'm fine, little one." she took a few idle steps toward the edge of the building and sat upon the ledge. His concern had hardly been eased, and that seemed to be something she felt compelled to address. "You really don't need to worry about me." Her tone left no room for doubt, it hit the young lad's emotional center like a stone.

But... why? "I know I don't look it, but I've lived many a long year walking this earth..." She gave the night sky a longing glance, the nature of her little smile now becoming much clearer to the young man observing it. "The thirst for another's blood is not something creatures such as we can ignore for long. No matter how much you try to fight it..." she reached a slender, graceful hand toward the bright, blue moon. Fingers stretched out, longingly toward old, watchful Luna. "But my will is my own. When and where I lose that fight are well within my say." Though from the look on her face, he could tell -even with his limited interpersonal experience- that this was spoken more as a wish than a statement of any fact.

For a time, just a few quiet moments, he stood there and looked at her as the wind pushed gently over them. There was certainly an elegance about her, while it was something earned by the passage of her time spent wandering this world it bore with it a hint of something else. Something the young man had yet to learn, as only experience could teach what such a weight was bequeathed by.

"Who are you?" Of all the questions he had, this one, somehow, seemed the most important. She'd given him a second chance at life, a fighting chance at his dream. He wanted to know. He needed to know.
Slowly, her gaze turned to his. Eyes glowing blue, now no longer hidden behind her sunglasses, blazing sharply into his. Considering her answer was no simple thing, from the look her face bore upon it. "You may call me Vanessa." She stood, much steadier than she'd been, and began striding toward the opposite end of the roof. "But that's not what you meant, is it?" She gave a knowing look, tone dropping some of its playful lilt.

"N-" stammered he, "not only..."

At his answer she drew in a slow, bracing breath. This was not a matter she'd spoken of since the day she was turned herself. Yet the topic demanded discussion, and so... "We're Vampires." Was Vanessa's simple reply. "The last Vampires..."

Some eons ago, at the dawn of the human race and when the world was young, existed a nomadic tribe. Traveling across the throat of the world - a mountain chain now long forgotten - they fell victim to the shifting of tectonic plates, though it was no simple earthquake that befell them. Rather than a tremor of the land the stone simply gave way beneath their feet. Thousands of humans fell into the abyss, screaming as the world swallowed them up. Many did not survive the descent, many more were devoured by the beasts that dwelled beneath the earth. When the dust settled, and the survivors found refuge in the underground caverns, it became clear that the dead were the lucky ones. No light with which to cook, or see by. No tools with which to hunt. In the barren land, so close to the center of the world, humanity carved a concept for itself in the stone that would reverberate forward, into the eons of the species and all that would be done to flee this one word: Hell. But humanity, as it was trapped in the underworld, survived. Several groups of them, three in total, splintered off from each other.

Those without conscience or, perhaps sanity, were particularly adapted to this strange world. So it was, with such an advantage, that two of the groups managed to endure. Beneath the surface of world, one tribe became two. One resorting to a mix of cannibalism and near suicidal hunting tactics, taking on even the nastiest of predators roaming the underworld. Devolving to a prehistorically primitive state the members of this portion of the tribe forgot all that made them human, over time. Names, language, music, art, all forgotten in the madness that came from their need to live. The second portion of the tribe held onto their culture, their humanity in as many ways as they could.

But the underworld is a place most unforgiving... their reluctance to change, to adapt to their new environment cost them dearly. For the first splinter of the tribe preyed upon them more so than anything else lurking in the dark. Their only method to avoid being eaten, killed or worse was to abandon light and fire. In doing so, as the eons rolled on, their eyes changed. Adapted to the complete, starless darkness of the world below. It was only through this miracle of evolution that they managed to linger on, and persist in their competition with the other splinter.

But this has said nothing of the third...

In the beginning, they were the smallest group. Thoroughly disadvantaged by sheer malignant luck, they'd fallen into the most inhospitable place in the underworld. Hounded by predators so ferocious they would be akin to a plague of locusts on the wildlife above, for they would consume all in their path. Such was the nature of their predatory habits upon these hapless humans. For centuries, beneath the soil and stone, they hounded them all, hunting them with relentless hunger until only seven remained. Born to the smallest, the youngest woman among them was a single child. A child they protected with their lives, until all but the mother were taken.

Then there were only two. Eventually, after years of running, they were cornered. Hiding the child away in a crevice in the rocks, she fought with all she had to protect her baby. Days went by,
dozens of beasts were slain and eventually: she fell. Succumbing to injuries the most seasoned of warriors in the world above would not have been able to suffer, she died in time to assure her child that all was well. The danger was gone. There, cradling the dead woman in her arms, the child cried.

Were it only grief the little one had felt, history may have taken a much different turn. For in that moment, in the pitchest black any human had ever seen, the girl yielded to a hunger gifted to her by sheer, random chance of evolution. She bit into her dead mother's throat and drank. For every drop of blood she consumed her strength multiplied. Eventually, she moved to the corpses of the predators. Then she hunted the living ones, following their trails back to the other splinters and met more of her kind. Though the underworld had changed them, she recognized them as her own kin.

The second splinter, those who could see in the black, were afraid of her. She was a goddess among insects, one with extraordinary power in a world where so few had the strength to life's barest embers. A predator who possessed strength enough to rule as she saw fit. But in the trembling fear of the night-sighted ones, she saw her own reflection from when she was a child. So she spared them, aiding them in their bid to survive the underworld's harshest dangers. Into her twilight years, did she aid them, until she was made their leader. A wiser, more powerful leader they had not known since their descent into this rabid, merciless world. But it was not to last.

At the turn of that very year beneath the world, a new danger made itself known. For a creature, so horrid and ravenous it had been hunted to extinction in the world above, had fled to their home. A terrible, scaly thing with muscular, clawed limbs and breath of fire. It possessed an intelligence not seen in wilder creatures. It was ancient, angry and desperate. For with it was a small clutch of eggs, within were young it would one day need to feed. What better to feed them with than the human descendants lurking beneath the world?

With a will unseen from most other creatures, it snared the minds of the first splinter, sending them to hunt at its bidding. It was then that these animalistic human descendants once again began to hunt their night-sighted kin. Only now 'The Lady' was there to defend them. With her immense strength she managed to fend off the attacking human offshoots and follow them back to their dens. It was there that she first laid eyes upon the creature, sending them to hunt their kin.

When she saw it could snare the will of the living, replacing theirs with its, she fled in mad fear. But when she returned she found her tribe, those who trusted and followed her, had been taken away. In a rage, she tracked down more members of the cannibals in a desperate mission. Gazing into their eyes, praying with all she was, she found that she too could take the will of others and make it her own. Gifting them with their lost intelligence, surrendered to madness those long years ago, she led them against the creature and into war.

In the caverns, deep beneath the earth, the fire breathing monstrosity and its horde felled many of her followers. In the end, only a quarter of all humans living in the underworld remained. During the final moments of the battle the beast struck The Lady's chest with a savage claw as she drove a spire of stone through its head. So it was with a great tremor that the two goddesses fell. One the humans were glad to see gone, the other they would all sorely miss.

With her dying breath she uttered the few simple words her mother had spoken at her passing: "Do not lose each other, for if you do, then all is lost." and then she died, gone to join her mother.

For her funeral, she was placed on a raised, stone alter, looming overhead in the largest cavern. Her blood was made to flow freely, into pools at the base of the alter, and in her memory, they drank. The eldest of either kin walked to the top of the alter, after all had drank of her essence, and made a mighty declaration. She was the one who had, after so many years, reunited the tribe. The one who
had seen them to safety and cared for them as if they were her own. In honoring the memory of her mother, of her family, she had become a mother to them all: She was 'The Night Mother', their guide in the dark and their savior.

over time, further centuries and millennia, the humans lost their differences to breeding together. From the first splinter, they gained retractable claws, the ability to cling to surfaces like spiders and great endurance. From the second, a great intellect and eyes of the night along with all other senses greatly enhanced. From the blood of the Night Mother, they gained strength and a thirst for blood which compelled them to leave the underworld, for they could not bear to harm each other any more. Not after her sacrifice for them all... so it was that their dwindled numbers headed for the surface in droves. To each corner of the world, exiting to find that much had changed, they joined the humans and started anew.

This, and only this, is the true origin of the Vampire species.

A gentle breeze wafted through an open window. Threadbare curtains, wisping in the wind like cobwebs, clung to what little remained of their anchor points. Moonlight shone into a dusty, bare apartment, afforded only a cursory amount of electricity; enough only for the fridge filled with blood. This was the place to which Deku had been led, and had been related the history of who were now his kin.

"And now..." murmured Vanessa, a sad glint in her eye, "once again, we're only two." Her fingers fidgeted at the edge of her chair's armrest, picking bits of string and fluff from the fraying stitches. "Hunted by humanity until they thought us all extinct." With her other hand she raised a glass and half drained its crimson contents into her gullet. "That is... until one hunter took pity on one in particular."

From his spot on the floor, Deku could see a hint of tears at the corner of her eyes. At least... they might have been tears, were they not clearly so red. She reached up, and with her thumb and index finger, wiped the corners of her eyes. "You mean Aizawa?" she nodded at the mumbled question. "Why?"

All hints of joviality vanished from her face. "when..." she searched for a place to begin, "I was initially turned, I wasn't alone. It was me and my older sister." her eyes seemed to go dull, losing their color and glow as she spoke. "For a long time it was just the three of us, us and our teacher until he succumbed to father time."

Pausing, she let out a long, slow breath. "Then Aizawa hunted us, us and our coven down." she was almost totally still, save for the movements of her lips and chest as she spoke. "He killed all but me and my sister. In a move I didn't predict, he threw a dagger at my heart. My sister, she..." her hand gripped the couch, face scrunching to hold in her tears. "Well, she's not around any more..." and she relaxed, having avoided the statement altogether, but it was obvious what had happened...

"But he spared you..." Deku mumbled. "Why did he do that?"

She looked him in the eye. "Rather than flee, after she died, I flung him aside and cradled her." The wounded, broken look in her eyes told all. "In that moment, as I cried over her without a thought to escape... I think he realized we were people." Her eyes shifted to the moon, Deku's to the floor in horrified contemplation.

Shota Aizawa, Eraser Head... he recognized the name now. A hero who avoided the spotlight like the plague, with such utter detest for the fame garnered for hero work. Was this the reason why? Was it guilt? Had it been because of that and similar incidents, because he had been a Vampire
"So... what were you doing before you found me?" Deku asked, looking back at her. "Why did you save me?"

Her smile returned, though it was a somber little thing, perched on her lips. "Questions for another time, little one." She reached over and ruffled his cow-lick ridden hair. "I think it's time you headed home. Your mother will be worried sick if you stay out much later." She rose from her chair and wandered to the door, gesturing that she wanted to show him out.

Standing up, he complied. Following her to the exit she smiled warmly at him and waved as he left. "Will I-" why was he asking this? "Will I see you again... Vanessa?" It wasn't her last name, surely, but he felt like he was saying goodbye to family... what absurdity for that to be his feeling now.

In reply she nodded, "Goodnight, Izuku." Then waved as she shut the door.

It was at a much slower pace than he'd ventured out with that he made the return journey. Trudging along, kicking up stray pebbles here and there, he tried to process all that he had just learned. He'd made it into UA, helping another student do so in the process no less. He now knew what Vampires were and that Aizawa had apparently killed quite a few of them here in Japan. At the top of that list however... he was one of two Vampires left in the world.

Numbly, he reached for the doorknob of his home and entered. Sliding out of his shoes he wandered to the bathroom and brushed his teeth. After changing into his pajamas he climbed into bed, but found he could not sleep. So, with a breath that failed to alleviate any stress, he turned on the light and went to his desk. Opening the pages of his battered notebook for the future, he turned to nearest empty section and began to write everything he could remember about his powers. This particular chapter of his notes bore a rather obvious, though entirely necessary title: Vampires.
Shifting Paradigms

Researching the topic of vampires proved to a task more headache inducing than any Izuku had previously undertaken. Separating fact from from fiction without Vanessa's guidance was outright impossible. Any notable authorities on the subject were either online conspiracy theorists, those who specialized in certain fields of fiction -some of which made the poor boy turn the deepest red he'd ever managed- and a few, very obscure news articles. Obscure because the media, or some driving force within it, had worked tirelessly to bury them. Even when he'd managed to dig one up it told nothing he didn't already know.

"I'm surprised," Vanessa admitted one day, "I didn't think they'd still be working so hard keep us a secret when they could just write it off as a strange, emergent quirk."

It did seem a logical solution at that. "Maybe the old stories and their prevalence made them think it was a bad idea," Suggested Deku, pen twirling in his hand as he paused taking his notes, "it would look like very coincidental."

From the look on her face, it seemed she agreed. "Perhaps," she stood up, walking to the fridge, "but stranger things have happened in this quirk-mad world."

Taking a small container -less than half a gallon- from the fridge she opened it and took a few lengthy sips. Licking her lips she offered him some of her drink, which he declined. With a shrug she capped it and closed the fridge. These daily visits to her abode felt intrusive enough without taxing her already meager rations.

"To answer an earlier question," she said with a languid stretch, "you wont have to worry about your appetite increasing exponentially." His sigh of relief was practically audible to the world outside. "Unless you're gravely injured, or indulge far more than you should, you can expect it to remain as is." She fussed with the fraying stitching of her chair, pondering what else there was to tell him at this juncture. "Have you discovered your healing factor yet?"

There's more? As if his list wasn't already extensive enough. "No, not- not yet..."

"I thought not..." said she, "those don't usually emerge without... well," letting her voice trail off, she reached up and fiddled with a strand of her hair, "hopefully that will never awaken." If he was being honest, he'd have voiced his agreement with that sentiment. There was a hesitance he'd noticed in her voice that made him wary of what might unlock that particular gift.

"Seems a little excessive..." Deku commented, "how did that power come about anyway?"

Vanessa seemed to think about this. "Maybe it was someone's quirk a long time ago. Those who are turned, if they turn anyone else, do pass on their gifts to future vampires one way or another."

Their visits usually consisted of little more than this. Speaking at length of what the young man could expect, that he should be ready to be overwhelmed with thirst while crammed in a classroom for hours at a time. The heat of battle, real or otherwise, would offer him no escape or outlet for this thirst. If anything such extraneous exertions would only make things more difficult. Occasionally she would speak of her past, stories of long nights under the moon, hunting with her sister. Reckless abandonment of youth, she called it. A longing in her voice, glistening in her eyes, spoke to how much she longed for those days returned to her. Or perhaps it was merely for those she'd shared such times with... Regardless, in no time flat, it was time for his first day of classes at UA.
Somehow he'd imagined his return journey being far less nerve wracking. Reality had decided this to be quite the opposite of what transpired. First real steps... He attempted a smile to reassure himself but ultimately found it a fruitless gesture. No amount of smiling or sedatives were going to calm his nerves with anything less than it would take to render him unconscious. With this in mind, he cautiously ventured into the school. Glancing at his student pamphlet, somehow surprisingly easy to read even through his silly, round rimmed-sunglasses, he saw that he was assigned to Class 1A. True to the hero's word, Shota Aizawa was listed as his teacher. Wonder if that was his doing... and if so, why? From their early -and only- interaction it was very obvious that his teacher did not care for him.

Bracing for his eventual confrontation with that reality, he wandered up the steps of the main building toward his classroom. Until that moment he hadn't thought it possible to be more jittery than he had been. Trembling limbs, clattering jaw and uneven footsteps, he made his way to the door, silently praying Bakugo wasn't in his class.

"Remove your feet from that desk!" The unmistakable voice of the imposing one with engines in his legs. "Such an action is insulting to those who came to UA before us, and the craftsmen who made the desk!" Of course, he found upon opening the door that the student who he was scolding happened to be none other than the one person he was hoping to avoid.

"Like I care." Bakugo's smile obnoxiously smug and echoed of his sadistic tendencies. "What middle school are you from, Extra?" It figured passing the entrance exams would only return his overflowing ego...

"I- I am from Somei private academy." He seemed taken aback. "My name is Tenya Iida." He extended a hand toward the other student, an olive branch hoping to end their bickering before it had the chance to continue.

An olive branch Bakugo was only all to excited to literally swat aside. "Somei?!" Laughed he. "A stuck up elitist then?" His smile shifted, a menacing shadow falling over his face. "I should blow you to bits."

Taken aback by this, Iida recoiled a step from the smaller teen. "Blow me to bits!?" He parroted in mortified disbelief. "You're awful! Do you really wish to become a hero?"

It was a fair question, when considering Bakugo's rather rancid personality...

In the act of recoiling, Iida caught a glimpse of a mess of green hair hiding behind the classroom door. "You..." he breathed under his breath, beginning to approach his newly arrived classmate. "You're the one who..." The recognition on both their faces would have been impossible for a literal vegetable to miss. Extending a hand to his new classmate he said, "My name is-"

"I-" Deku Stammered, "I heard you..." he had to clench his jaw, the all too familiar urge had made itself known once again.

There was another matter that demanded his attention at that time however. Sitting in the seat immediately to Bakugo's left was another student who clearly recognized from the look on her face. For the second time a look of recognition flashed across his features. If he'd tried his damndest for a hundred years, he'd never forget the face looking at him underneath that purple haircut or those ears of hers: The girl he'd bitten in the alley, his first innocent victim. Her surprise at his attendance to the class was only briefly shown, but he definitely saw it.

Gulping, finding his nerves he addressed the student in front of him. "M-my name is Izuku Midoriya." Despite his better manners, he avoided offering a handshake. "Pleased to meet you,
Iida." He said through a tightly clenched jaw.

Noticing his discomfort, Iida smirked and stepped back a pace. "There's no need to be anxious," said he, "I merely wanted to congratulate you for passing the entrance exams, and for seeing through to its true nature!" Bowing, perhaps exaggeratedly, he said, "You were truly the superior candidate!"

I didn't see through to anything!

At the sight of him, his eyes went wide with murderous fury."Fucking Deku, what-!?" Bakugo managed to growl in shock, completely displeased to see him joining the class. He had a look on his face that screamed 'extra killing time'.

"Oh yeah!" Said the kid with the yellow hair, decorated with that odd, jagged black stripe. "I recognize you now!" He stood up, followed by the students nearest to him. That kid with the belt and the pink girl, who was smiling excitedly as they trotted over. "Denki Kaminari, nice ta meetcha." His attitude was rather... lax, laid back. Almost too much, Deku felt, as he hesitantly shook his hand, jaw clenching so tight he thought his teeth might crack.

"You were crazy to go up against that thing!" The pink girl exclaimed, radiating energy and an infectious level of joy. "Still pretty awesome though!" With a wink she gave him a thumbs up, grinning like an idiot. "You can call me Mina Ashido." she shrugged. "I'm not too picky about which name you use."

With an odd twirl, almost like a ballerina, the blond with the belt flourished his hand in such a way that he flicked at his own hair. Had he put just a sliver more motion into that, it might have looked as though he were blowing a kiss... "And you can call me Yuga Ayoyama," he said with a wink, "you were quite the inspiring one during that entrance exam, weren't you?" For the life of him -or unlife, as the case may be- Deku couldn't tell if this kid was flirting with him. Maybe he was just... like this?

Either way, he and the others seemed nice enough. "T-thank you for stepping in," he managed through his simultaneously frozen and burning nerves, "during the entrance exams..."

"Eh," Kaminari shrugged, very nonchalantly, "it's what we're here to do, right?"

With another energetic thumbs up, Ashido exclaimed, "Right! Today's heroes of tomorrow!"

Iida blinked. "Is-... is that how that's said?"

"Ah!" From behind him, was an outcry that nearly jolted Deku's skeleton out of his body. "That curly hair!" Oh he recognized that voice. "The plain looking kid!" Said that brown haired girl who'd saved him from becoming a smear on the pavement.

He noticed with some surprise that she was surprisingly cute in the school uniform. Not that her radiant smile wouldn't have completely decided that one. "You got in!" She exclaimed, clearly quite happy with this turn of events. "Just like present Mic Said!" She raked her hand through the hair in a repetitive motion, almost like she were imitating an animal clawing at something. "Not that I'm surprised, mind you, the way you sliced off that thing's leg was amazing!"

It was... a conflicting mix of emotions he felt. On one hand, he was incredibly flustered simply having this girl talk to him, causing him to shrink away and hide under his arms like a shrinking violet. On the other was his constant urge that become nigh irresistible around other people.

She wasn't aware of any of this, however, and just kept merrily prattling on."You just clawed
though it and shouted 'hey! Pick on someone your own size!' Well, not literally, obviously, but then
you just completely toppled it!" And she was still doing that clawing motion... "I'm really surprised
you weren't more seriously hurt by that thing, to be honest." In any other scenario, involving
different participants than they, their positions would have been entirely reversed.

"I'm, uh..." croaked his straining voice, for multiple reasons. "Sh-should probably thank you for s-
saving me from getting crushed while we're at it..." dear lord alive, how was it possible to be so
overwhelmed. To make matters more confusing for his flummoxed, little mind he wasn't even
certain he didn't like it.

"Oh you don't have to worry about that," she giggled, "I was just returning the favor at that point."

My god she's like a puppy... how is anyone this cheerful? Come to think of it, there seemed to be
two of them in this class alone. Wait, why was Ashido winking at Kaminari and laughing
mischievously like that?

"So what do you think we're doing besides orientation today?" She was almost bouncing up and
down with excitement. "I wonder what our teachers are like, I can't wait to meet everybody!" Even
as flustered as he was, Deku was certain that should have been more than one sentence. But his
brain was presently unable to communicate this information to itself.

A prolonged growl resonated menacingly from somewhere beneath the teacher's desk. "For God's
sakes, quiet down." That could only be Aizawa. "You're liable to wake the dead with this much
racket." Rubbing a very sleepy eye was their scruffy, disheveled teacher, glaring at the lot of them
like they were trespassing with the intent of vandalizing the school. "If you're just here to socialize
then go home, this isn't the school for you."

Sheepishly, the six of them retreated to their seats. Deku was not pleased to discover he'd been
assigned a seat immediately adjacent to the window. That one girl with the purple hair watched
him closely as he sat down. He was one row back and one seat to the left of her, directly in front of
one of the tallest, lankiest students he'd ever seen. He had a mess of black, disastrously unkempt
hair hanging over his very long face. His features were like some cross between Iida's and
Aizawa's: Lengthy and very square. His eyes were narrow, sporting both irises and pupils of pure
white. A long nose sat between his eyes, ending in a slight hook that gave him an almost crow-like
appearance. He seemed to watch Deku carefully, a dim look of recognition hinted in his eyes.

To make matters more uncomfortable, he could practically feel the burning rage blazing around
Bakugo from the seat in front of him. Gulping quietly to himself he tried his best to keep still, jaw
clenched shut, and focus on the teacher rather than his urge to feed.

"It took you all of eight seconds to quiet down," scolded the teacher, "from here on out, every
second counts if you want to be heroes." Reaching into he desk he procured a sizable bag, "I'm your
home-room teacher, Shota Aizawa. Pleased to meet you." Not that his tone of voice at all agreed
with that sentiment... at that sentence's conclusion he yanked what looked like the school's gym
clothes. "Get changed into these, then head to the school grounds."

Despite the initial surprise it didn't take them long to file to the head of the class and collect their
gym clothes. After that it was a simple trip to the locker rooms to change. Deku, however, opted to
hide away in one of the bathrooms and change. Avoiding time with his classmates meant a reprieve
from his ravenous hunger, however brief. Once in his gym clothes he went to splash some cold
water on his face but soon found himself yelping and recoiling from the running water.

"RRRRGH!" Groaning, wincing and hissing in frustration he exclaimed, "Idiot!" through clenched
teeth as he punched his own forehead. Turning off the water he bitterly sulked out of the room,
only to walk face first into that lanky guy's chest. He'd evidently been waiting just around the corner. "AUGH! SORRY!" he shrieked, leaping aside and bowing many, many times in rapid succession.

He was in the middle of explaining that he had a lot on his mind, and that he hadn't actually meant to do that when he heard the other boy chuckling in a voice that chilled his blood. "You're not what I expected..." Trembling, for his usual reasons, Deku glanced up at his classmate to find he looked darkly amused. "Oddly timid for someone of your kind, aren't you?"

Deku gulped. "N- no idea what you're talking about..." at the knowing grin that stretched the other student's lips he felt a cold sweat coming on.

After a few moments, he shrugged, a look of amusement that said 'guess I can play coy for ya' plastered on his face. "If you say so." and he extended a hand toward him. "Looks like we'll be classmates from here on out." Why did he have to speak in a manner that was just so creepy? Did he know how unsettling he was? "What's your name?"

Accepting the handshake with a quivering limb, Deku replied. "I-Izuku Midoriya."

He was about to attempt a return of the question when the much taller student interrupted. "Stendhal," said he, "or... Chizome Akaguro, if you prefer my 'real name'."

"N-nice to meet you." Managed the utterly mortified Deku. He'd seen super villains less intimidating than this guy. Hell, he'd run right up to one less unnerving than this guy!

"Anyways," Said Akaguro, hands drooping to his sides, "I just came to tell you that," he shrugged, his dark chuckle punctuating his speech, "if someone in our class happened to be a creature of the night," there was that urge to hide under a rock for all of time... "he needn't be concerned about what I thought of them." His smile flickered away for a moment. "There's enough stupidity of that ilk in this world without my adding to it."

Keeping pace, feeling his fear slink away some minuscule amount, Deku kept himself over an arms length away, but kept his nerve enough to speak. "Y-you're not scared of..." and after a momentary bit of self correction, "people like that?" Akaguro smirked and shook his head. "Why?"

"I'll tell you later," replied he reaching for the door to the outside, "sunglasses."

"Wha-ARGH!" Deku recoiled from the light, shielding his eyes with his scrawny arms.

Akaguro gave him a confused yet concerned look. "...Was that not enough warning?"

"I'm k-kind of distracted!" Deku exclaimed, rubbing the pain from his screaming retinas as he perched his tinted spectacles upon his nose. "I've g-" his guard had begun to slip. It was with no small portion of effort that he managed to keep his fanged maw shut as he stiffly turned away from his classmate. "got... more on my mind than just sunlight."

"So I see..." If it wouldn't have surprised him to hear it, he almost thought the other boy sounded concerned. "You haven't been what you are for long, have you?"

"No," admitted Deku, eyes still a bit sore, "I've only-" wait. "W-why am I talking to you about this!?

Akaguro shrugged. "Limited options?" It wasn't the worst guess in the world. "Besides, I'm not unfamiliar. If you have questions about anything," he pointed at himself, giving the smaller one an off-putting smile, "I'll answer them. " Maybe he wasn't as creepy as he seemed.
Then again, Deku was no expert at social interaction himself; hardly one to think such about anyone. At least this guy seemed like he wanted to be friends. He'd seen a fair bit of that attitude directed his way already. If it persisted, if they persisted, he'd just have to adapt. It was going to be difficult not biting anyone as it was, without them trying to get close to him.

It only took them a minute or so to reach the grounds where the others had gathered. Upon their arrival Aizawa gave them the description of their lesson: A test of their quirks.

"What about the entrance ceremony?" questioned the brown haired girl, she seemed rather distressed about this decision. "Or the guidance sessions?!

A tired groan escaped Aizawa's lungs. "No. It's a pointless waste of time; every second counts if you want to become heroes." Turning to look at his students from over his shoulder Aizawa tried ineffectually to erase their concerns. "UA is known for its freestyle educational system, I plan on taking complete advantage of this to help you reach your full potential." With a stretch of his neck, rubbing at a shoulder, he said. "But we'll go over that in a minute. You," he pointed right at Deku, "follow me, you've got another lesson already prepared for you."

A moments hesitation preempted his short jaunt ahead to catch up with the teacher. Following the scraggly man he fidgeted nervously with his hands, opting to walk in silence until Aizawa spoke. "I trust she taught you as much as she could." Realizing who he meant, Deku nodded. "Good," muttered the hero, "in truth there was only so much she could really do, but it's important that tried."

That didn't sound like an optimistic statement... "What does that mean?" Mumbled the teenager, suddenly worried for his Vampire mentor.

Aizawa considered the answer he might give for a brief moment before, as seemed to be his way, going with he truth. "Officially she's the last of her kind," Said the teacher as he opened the door to what looked like a storage shed, "Not exactly healthy for any social creature to be so alone." Aizawa grumbled. "I've gone to great lengths to ensure that she is not discovered. With you around... well, hopefully it all goes smoothly." Whatever that meant would clearly to wait.

At the center of the storage shed was a chair, bolted to the floor, and Aizawa was pointing right at it. "Go on, take a seat."

Not at all sure what to make of this, feeling very nervous, Deku walked over to chair and sat. As soon as he was seated a series of laser tripwires activated all around him. Barely enough room to breath around them all. Strangely enough, he could see them without the presence of smoke. Those eyes of his at work, he supposed.

"Don't worry," said the teacher placing a small pail on a stool near the door, "the only thing these triggers activate is a tally. Trigger enough of them? You're expelled." Quite the disciplinary measure for a failing grade.

Deku blinked, thoroughly confused. "You just want me to hold still?" A bizarrely easy task. Unless...

As if to answer his forming doubts Aizawa opened a tiny mini fridge and procured a small IV bag. Upon seeing the color of the contents Deku's eyes went wide. Oh he's not... Looking him right in the eye, Aizawa answered his question. "Exactly."

With a small pocket knife, he opened the bag over the pail. At the scent reaching his nostrils Deku's muscles immediately lurched toward the scent. Jaw hanging open as he salivated profusely
he twitched in alarm at the sound of one of the trips being triggered. "And that's one point." The teacher sighed. "Loose nine more and that's it." Turning toward the door he waved over his shoulder. "See you in a few minutes." as he exited the room, returning to the rest of the class, he closed the door behind himself.

Deku's body was screaming, shaking so hard he'd have knocked the chair over were it not bolted to the floor. His legs seemed to moving for him, acting against his every effort to keep them still. Gripping tightly to the sides of his seat he soon lost feeling in his fingers. For every muscle in his hands that he retained or gained control over, two more started straining against those efforts. Twitching, opening and closing of his jaw while his tongue slid toward the scent, dripping torrents of saliva produced a feeling of disgusted humiliation. Reduced to little more than the rapidly deteriorating mental state of a rabid animal by a simple scent... What business had he in public to any degree -least of all in a school for heroes- if his will were truly so feeble? This had to be some form of torture, he almost couldn't control himself.

Lurching his legs back, feet planted squarely on the ground he shoved himself as flat against the back of his chair as was possible. For his redoubled efforts his head reeled back, over the back of his chair, and he heard another trip's trigger being thrown. Slowly turning around he saw that there were even more triwires behind him. Good grief, he left me with no legroom at all. Turning around again, jaw trembling open and shut in spasms he attempted to center himself even as his body continued to resist his commands.

Muscles in his neck began to clench, twisting his head about in jerking, uneven motions. Breathing becoming so jagged and uneven that for brief flashes he saw the world go black. Or perhaps that was just his hunger, forcing control away from his mind. With Each successive blackout he woke up just a little farther away from where he'd been, and each one ended only when he'd heard another laser trip. Sometimes closer to the pail, sometimes slipping off the side of his chair, other times pressed so hard against the backrest that it hurt his it was that when something finally happened, when the lasers finally disappeared he almost screamed in relief.

"I'm impressed." Said the voice of Aizawa from the other side of the door, "The entire lesson and you only tripped seven of them." Deku couldn't reply, his mind was so far away from language he may as well have been a wild animal. "Go ahead, kid." He froze at the words, not daring to act until some clarification was provided. "Drink it."

No further instruction was necessary. Launching from the chair, crashing to the other side of the shed, he hauled the pail to his lips and guzzled down the blood with reckless abandon. It was somewhat impressive that he hadn't spilled any. Even as he felt the hunger disappearing, his mind crawling back to him, the poor teenager just wanted to cry. So said the strangled, miserable whimpers that squeaked their way from his throat.

Peeking into the room, Aizawa almost pitied him. "What the hell were you thinking, V..." he muttered, shoving a palm into one of his eyes. "This kid's not even close to cut out for what you've given him."

Had he not been so distracted, Deku almost assuredly would have heard that. Only he hadn't, so no reply was given. Breathing in exhausted gasps, the greenhead reached up and wiped some of the sweat from his brow. With shaking legs, and a nonexistent center of balance, he stood, facing Aizawa and awaiting further instructions.

The hero merely motioned for him to follow. "Come on, Kid." he reached into the fridge and grabbed a thermos before leading him away. "Lunch."

Shaking his head, trying to regain some focus, Deku squawked, "I- I didn't bring-"
Aizawa interrupted by tossing him the thermos. "Drink it. I don't want you acting out in my classroom." A sentiment that stung more than intended or expected. "You have remarkable control for one so recently turned," Probably because you're a damn softy... "but I don't think either of us want to bet all our chips on it."

Glumly, Deku had agree. "Where'd you get this?" Voicing the question quietly, he fiddled with the thermos in his hands, uncertain exactly where he should try drinking down its contents.

Aizawa rolled his eyes. "The nurse's office. Next time think about it before asking."

"Yes, sir..."

The slap delivered to Deku's back just about knocked the wind out of him. "Go on," said the teacher, adopting a tone that almost sounded encouraging, "join your classmates. I'll see you all back in home room." Leaving it at that, Aizawa wandered away with his hands in his pockets.

Secretly wondering if the Erasure Hero was deliberately making himself so difficult to read, Deku shuffled off to the cafeteria. Without knowing exactly where he should be going -and without his classmates to follow- it took him a few minutes to track the place down. By the time he arrived most of those in his grade were already seated, chatting and whatnot. Smelling the aromas from the kitchen made him miss normal food all over again. Whoever the cook was clearly knew what they were doing. Yanking his mind -and in fact all the rest of him- away from these thoughts and the cafeteria was the hand of a certain, angry, explosive blond. Finding himself pinned against the wall, staring down a furious Bakugo, Deku was suddenly very thankful for the fact his hunger had been so recently curbed, bot it hadn't been completely satiated. It still took some effort not to lash out and bit his aggressor.

Far less thankful was he for the screaming of his life-long classmate. "What kind of dirty tricks did you use to do it, you quirkless twerp!?" At that volume it was somewhat surprising people in china couldn't hear him. "HUH!?!" Demanded he, his face so contorted with rage he barely resembled his usual self. "I was supposed to be the first and only!" His grip on the smaller teen's collar shifted, hauling him off the floor as he continued screaming at him. Deku could only flinch his eyes shut, trying desperately to keep his still burning hunger in check. "You tore my plans to shreds, you quirkless shit! I told you to go somewh- GNNNNNNG!"

Deku opened his eyes, only to feel completely confused as he was dropped, unceremoniously, to the floor. It was hardly a shock that someone had managed to sneak up behind Bakugo for all the commotion he was producing. Contrarily so, was it surprising to find it was none other than the purple haired girl with audio-jack earlobes. Earlobes she was still jabbing into Bakugo's side.

"Talk about garbage first impressions," she muttered as she finally halted her assault on the living bazooka, "threatening Iida back in the classroom, flaunting an ego the size of damned monolith, calling him and the rest of us 'extras' while you were at it."

The exchange had rendered Deku speechless. He'd never seen anyone get away with talking to Bakugo like this, although that was largely because he couldn't reply. The girl had rattled him soundly with her quirk just then. It was a testament to his constitution that he was even standing.

The girl, however, was unimpressed. "Now you're outright assaulting someone?"

The look in her eyes screamed of contempt, it was the way in which most people looked at insects. An expression the green haired boy had been on the receiving end of for much of his life. Seeing someone direct it toward the one responsible for his familiarity with the expression wasn't something he could process.
"Tell ya what," said she, arms crossed in front of her chest, staring down the now recuperated Bakugo defiantly, "I think you might be my least favorite person here, and one of the most annoying people I ever went to school with is here with us."

Bakugo's lips twisted in a snarl. "What the fuck is your problem!?" He bellowed. "This had nothing to do with you, you damned idiot extra!"

At being called an extra again, her eyes narrowed and earlobes twitched. It was almost as if she had to resist the urge to jab at him again.

"Good point," she quipped in a very nonchalant tone, "maybe I should get someone it does have something to do with then." Her expression shifted, matching the anger radiating off of Bakugo. "Like a teacher. Bet they'd love to see this on your first day."

Silence hung over them, colored only by the din from the cafeteria. Never in his life had Deku seen him so mad with rage, and he'd been pushing the envelope on that one each time they'd rendezvoused in recent times. Which was what made all the more jaw dropping when Bakugo, without so much as a word, stomped back into the cafeteria. Not that he witnessed it transpire, but every student he walked past on his return to his seat moved clear away from the blond.

The girl, on the other hand, had. "Wow..." she exhaled the word like a stale breath, shaking her head, "he's like a living land mine. Approach him wrong and you get blown to bits." Looking back at the continuingly stunned Deku she asked, "You're okay, right?"

Numbly, he nodded. "Uh, y- yeah." he chuckled breathlessly from his nerves, completely unsure how to feel about this. "Thanks for that."

She shrugged. "He was being an ass." Like that was all the answer required. "I'd do it again in a heartbeat."

"You might have to," Deku replied nervously, "Kacchan's not someone to forget something like that. He's going to be holding a grudge because you helped me..."

Scoffing, she rolled her eyes. "Bring it. Jerks like that don't deserve their enemy's fear."

So they were enemies... Once again, his problems were troubling other people. Worst of all it would be her, his aforementioned first ever innocent victim.

...Wait a minute. "Why did you help me?" Deku murmured, prompting her to raise an eyebrow at him. "You... you remember me, right?" He rubbed at the back of his neck, fraught with nerves and self consciousness. "What I-...that I-"

She held up a hand, effectively silencing him. "One," she began, "letting him get away with that would have gone against everything I was ever taught about human decency." A fair answer, to be sure. "Two, duh. Why do you think I was so surprised to see you here?" She looked at him in a way that genuinely confounded him. Whether she was amused, surprised, confused, thinking him a fool, concernedly interested or some combination thereof, he knew not. But her following words gave him a small clue as to the answer. "Didn't think someone with your problems would even think about going for something like this."

"Believe me," said Deku, making sure he had the thermos right where he could get to it, "it's not something I'm thrilled about..." Fidgeting awkwardly with his hands, he thought of something.

"Can't imagine you would be," said she, hands in the pockets of her jacket as she shifted her weight to one leg. "So... what happened?"
"What do you mean?" Inquired he, trying to ignore the growling of his stomach.

She rolled her eyes. "You know what I mean. Why do you drink blood?"

Deku looked about nervously, hoping no one was around to hear that. "It's a long story..."

This time she was the one who shrugged. "I'll ask after class then. If I'm gonna trust you not to go for my throat again," she pointed two fingers toward her eyes before spinning her wrist round to point right at him. A rather telling motion... "knowing what you're up against could help with that."

If anyone had the right to demand answers from him, it would be her. So Deku nodded. "I usually take the train home," he ran over the route in his mind, "my stop's not too far from the school, but we probably shouldn't talk there."

She nodded. "Okay." Her expression gone neutral, the purple haired one wandered away. "Meet you at the station then."

What was with today? Sure, most of it had gone by uneventfully but had happened had all been rather overwhelming. That run in with Bakugo and her. His initial introduction to the entire class would have been almost more than he could take with the positive interactions alone. Aizawa's attempt at training his self control was about the most humiliating thing he'd ever been through. If every day here were going to be so harrowing as this, he wasn't sure how long he could last. What weirded him out the most, in this instance, was the attitude of that purple haired girl. She had every reason to be afraid of him, to hate him, yet she didn't. She'd remained consistently forgiving, even helpful today. Whatever he was to make of her eluded all reason in his possession.

Perhaps most concerning of his interactions that day had been with Akaguro. Someone evidently knew what he was, apart from Aizawa and Vanessa that hadn't precisely happened yet. Unless he were to count the purple haired girl as someone who knew his secret. Soon enough -if she hadn't begun to put the pieces together already- she'd know. Deku let out a long, groaning sigh. What a first day indeed. Twisting off the cap of the thermos he drained the contents and licked his lips. Capping it again he walked off to the locker room and changed back into his uniform before returning to the empty classroom. Empty, that was, aside from the rather audible snoring from under the teacher's desk. Sitting down at his own, it wasn't long before his textbook was open and he was lost to his studies.

Hunched over and nearly dragging his feet, Deku was thankful the day hadn't lasted a minute longer. Exhaustion didn't even begin to describe his current state of fatigue. Even with what Aizawa had given him, resisting the urge to feed was a constant struggle. So many people, at all times. Afforded not even one moment of sweet isolation he'd been forced to power through the day with his jaw clamped. Rubbing at his jaw produced some degree of pain, enough that he considered going to the dentist.

He'd briefly considered the idea of running it by his mother when a hand on his shoulder made him leap out of his own skin. "Midoriya!" Iida, apparently having run to catch up with him, wanted to talk. "What was that lesson Aizawa had you doing while he tested our quirks?"

"N-nothing!" Blurted the smaller of the two. "Just some endurance exercises for my quirk!"

Technically, that wasn't a lie...

"Really," Pondered Iida, rubbing at his chin ponderously. "Curious that he'd single you out... unless he's already familiar with your abilities." It was beginning to dawn on Deku, the kind of person Iida was. Overtly serious, dedicated and possessing a single minded tenacity toward achieving his...
goal of being a hero.

Something he could certainly identify with. "He, um..." he had to think quickly, "he's just familiar with someone from my family who has the same quirk, that's all." Now that one was a lie.

"Hey, you two!" The second voice made Deku's heart jump. That brown haired girl again. "Headed to the station?" She was running over to them with a grin plastered on her face. Between her and Ashido -or what he'd seen from her in that brief moment in class- the scrawny boy wasn't sure the class would ever have room to be moody. "Wait up!"

"Ah," Iida gestured to her, "infinity girl." Deku had to wonder exactly what she'd done to earn such a moniker, but was afforded no chance to ask.

"I'm Ochako Uraraka," then she pointed to the taller of the two boys, "um... you're Tenya Iida." He nodded in confirmation. "And you're..." for the time spent considering her next words she seemed intent on getting his name right. "Deku Midoriya?" Well, she was nice enough to try...

The boy in question gulped. "W- well," stammered the flustered teen, "not really. My, r- real name is Izuku. Kacchan just calls me that because he th- thinks I'm useless," he attempted a smile and quickly wished he hadn't for how awkward it felt. "Like the old idiom Dekunobou?"

"Really," Said Iida, quite disapprovingly. "That's unsportsmanlike..."

Uraraka suddenly looked very guilty. "Oh, I didn't realize that... I'm Sorry." Even if she hadn't looked quite so guilty -or sounded so sincere- he wasn't sure he could be mad at her for calling him that anyway. Almost everyone else in his life had at one point or another. "Ya know what?" Her mind had apparently changed gears, back to her positive demeanor. "I like Deku, it could make a great hero name. Plus," oh, so her smile could get brighter than that then... He had to redouble his efforts to keep his mouth shut. Focus! You don't want to bite her, do you!?" I think it sounds kinda cute."

"Deku it is!" From his perspective, someone else with an eerily similar voice had just blurted that out. To everyone else present, it was clear that it had in fact been Deku who'd all but shouted that. "Just like that!?" Iida could scarcely believe how quickly he'd made that decision. Gesturing about with his hands, denoting his unabashed confusion, he said, "Weren't you just saying it was an insult?"

Spinning about, hiding his face in embarrassment -his face was so red it was probably visible from orbit- he rambled, unaware he was saying anything out loud. "Total paradigm shift... my entire world is upside down!" His speech then devolved into incessant, nervous laughter.

"Wait, what?" Uraraka hadn't the faintest idea why 'Deku' was acting this way. It was probably just normal for him, not much about the boy seemed to suggest anything ordinary. That was aside from his face, aside from the green hair, eyes and freckles he was kinda plain looking.

Of course, Deku's flustered statement about said paradigm shift was fairly spot on; for reasons he'd already been contemplating. It bore not an insignificant twinge of pain that, for all the positive now being thrown his way, it was masked by the ever present reality of what was required for his survival. Trading physical handicaps for social ones mixed with dietary handicaps that directly impeded his already stunted ability to get along with anyone. Even if the other people now in his life remained determined to keep him, what chance had he at a normal life? The only reason his hunger was even close to manageable was thanks to Aizawa. Had that blood not been provided, the chances of Deku making it through the day without incident would have been scarce to none. An
unpleasant topic to ponder, yet one that must be duly so. A lax attitude ran the risk of harming
more than he, after all.

Eventually, he and the other two reached the train station in question. Rather than board as
intended, Deku was reminded of a previous engagement upon seeing a familiar face. "Um, hey."
Timid as he was, it was only polite to tell them. "I'm not getting on this one. See you guys
tomorrow?"

Uraraka nodded, smiling brightly. "Alrighty. See ya then, Deku!"

"Until tomorrow, Midoriya." Iida saluted him, boarding the train with the other in their company
before Deku wandered over to the purple haired girl. She hadn't heard him coming, but that was
merely due to the MP3 player she'd been listening to.

Upon seeing him wave, she promptly put it in her pocket. "You actually showed up."

"Y- you almost sound surprised."

Speaking of surprises, he was feeling a bit of that himself. Sitting not terribly far away, on the
same bench, was Akaguro. He had a large, oblong object, wrapped in cloth, slung over his
shoulder. It wasn't thick enough at any point to be an instrument, and it was over three feet long...
what on earth.

"What's-" shaking his head, Deku addressed him directly. "Why are you here?"

The hooked nosed teen shrugged. "Should I not be?"

Yeah, still unnerving... "N- no... it's fine." Sheepish as his reply was, it sufficed. Or so he thought.
The purple haired girl raised an eyebrow at him, waiting expectantly for an answer. "He, uh... he
knows." explained the boy in the sunglasses.

She shrugged, not giving any indication that she cared particularly. "If you say so." collecting her
school bag, she stood up. "Come on," she motioned for them to follow, "I know someplace we can
talk."

Following her closely the other two boys exchanged a look. Akaguro with a question in his eyes,
Deku without an answer. Not minding one way or the other the taller, hunched teen put his hands
in his pockets and begun to hum to himself as they walked. Of all the people he'd met, and who'd
known his secret, this Chizome Akaguro was the first non-vampire who hadn't been bothered by it
in the least. In fact he was completely cavalier about it.

"So... what's the story?" Mumbled Deku.

Akaguro's brow raised. "Hmm?"

"E- earlier," stammered the smaller of the two, "when I asked you why weren't scared of me, you
said you'd tell me later." Hoping that would jog his memory Deku resumed keeping his jaw
clenched shut. Couldn't let his guard down, not for one second.

Pondering this, the taller of the two drew in a long breath before slowly releasing it. From his face
alone, it was clearly not a lighthearted topic... "My mother, she..." began he, rubbing at the back of
his head, brow furrowed downward slightly in an apparent wince, of sorts. "She married someone
like you."

Tongue sticking from his mouth, Akaguro's story paused long enough for Deku to get a good look
at it. Sure enough, it was disturbingly long and snake-like, just like his own was now. "Where I gah thith thilly thing frahmuh." said he, before drawing the thing back within his maw. "For a time, I grew up around people like you."

_For a time..._ Deku's thoughts echoed of the words, wondering whether it had been Aizawa's doing that such times had ended for he.

"But that's all over now." Sighed the white-eyed boy, shaking his head. "Like I said, if you have questions: you can ask me." For a brief moment, Deku actually smiled, grateful without conflicting fear for the first time that day. Noticing this, Akaguro nudged him fondly. "Stick with me, Midoriya. We'll go places." Creepy or not, he really wasn't such a bad guy.

Just a few steps ahead of the, the purple haired girl turned to the side and spotted what she'd been searching for. "We're here."

It was an abandoned parking garage. Left in ruin after a particularly nasty battle between a hero and some villain. The building had been condemned, deemed unfit for anyone to enter much less demolish safely. Having frequented the place for years -and being intimately familiar with its safe and unsafe areas thanks to her quirk- she knew exactly where to lead them: the roof. Once upon that familiar surface, her little hideaway, she walked over to the ledge and stretched. Taking in a deep breath, she sighed and relaxed, letting her arms drop back to her sides.

Turning around, poker faced as they come, she took a seat on the ledge. "You should probably start at the beginning," said she, while Deku collected his nerves, Akaguro leaning against a nearby wall, hands in his pockets. "Why do you need to drink blood?"

Finding his nerve was... surprisingly easy. Telling the story oddly refreshing. It was the first time he'd been allowed to really talk about it with anyone since any of it had started. As he went on, it was almost a relief. He hadn't been alone in this for over a week now, but this... was this what having friends around to help felt like?

When his story reached the night he'd met her in the alley, she held up a silencing hand and nodded. "So," she began slowly, "it's not an addiction, but a biological imperative?" she gave him an almost sympathetic look. "You need it to live?" Slowly, hesitantly, he nodded. "Shit," she chuckled darkly, "that's a lot worse than what I figured. You've got it rough, Green." Rubbing at the back of her neck, smirking guiltily, she said, "sorry I stuck my wrist in your face the way I did. Kinda feel like a jerk now..."

Blinking in surprise, his brain worked quickly to formulate some kind of reply. "It- it's not like that! You didn't know what was going on, and I had just bitten you..." he fidgeted with his hands, trying not to mumble but utterly failing in his efforts. Luckily, she had hearing very few possessed.

"Eh, still." She stood up, carefree nature showing in the slowed motion of her limbs during and after her ascent. "Don't expect me to do something like that again, okay?" She kicked a pebble, watching it skip across the dusty, concrete roof.

"Y- yeah." Managed he, unsure what else to even say. "I wasn't going to. Not after the way you defended me from Kacchan like that..." He managed a shy little smile, "Thanks. Again, I mean."

She gave him curious, searching look. _You know, there's something..._ decided she, as she looked at those glowing, timid eyes of his, hiding behind those perfectly circular sunglasses. _Different about this guy..._ Stepping toward him, hand outstretched, she said. "Kyoka Jiro." _He's not at all the type who should have powers like the ones he does._
Accepting the handshake, he gave his meek reply. "Izuku Midoriya, but... Deku works too."

She quirked an eyebrow at him, clear skepticism on her face. "Like Dekunobou? Why would you want me to call you that?"

The nature of the comment sailed right over his head. "It's just what I'm used to," he shrugged, "is... that okay?"

She shook her head, hands up like she were surrendering. "You're the one choosing the name." She turned to the other in their company, waiting for him to speak up.

The tallest of them shrugged. "Chizome Akaguro." Answered he, "But I prefer 'Stendhal'."

*Oh yeah, he did say that, didn't he?* "Why?" asked the green haired boy. "Does it have a special meaning?"

He shrugged. "It's the name I chose," patting his stomach, 'Stendhal' smirked. "Anyone else hungry?"

"Yes." Said the other two in perfect synchronization.

Akaguro laughed. "Alright, follow me this time. I know a place that'll serve you too," he pointed right at Deku that time, leading the way. As they proceeded down the street -off to a diner he'd not soon forget- Deku couldn't help but feel just a sliver more optimistic about his situation. He had friends who knew what he was, and weren't scared of him because of it. Taking that for what it was, something he wanted to keep, he vowed not to make them regret that decision.
Black pudding, a food previously unknown to the green haired vampire. That it tasted so sweet on his tongue was a welcome change of pace. Whether it was due to his preferences or the blood now flowing through his veins he cared not. It was solid food he could actually enjoy.

"Doesn't actual food make you nauseous?" Jiro commented, chopsticks stirring in her noodles, letting some of the excess steam billow out.

Akaguro smirked, "Well, that shouldn't. Anything so saturated with..." his eyes shifted about, giving their surroundings a quick scan. "Blood, will be fine for him."

In confirmation, the vampire nodded. "So far so good." Though it makes me wonder what else is safe for me to eat... his fingers started idly strumming against his chopsticks, his other hand on his chin as he contemplated.

Answering and interrupting these thoughts was the further musing of Akaguro. "Raw meat, but that will only get you so far." And he took a rather large bite of his sandwich, incidentally packed full of the stuff. "Aside from that, animal blood is your best bet."

Deku nodded. "Yeah, kinda figured that one out on my own." When Jiro gave him a curiously cautious look he added, "Ah, I- I get it from a butcher." This answer seemed to put her at ease, even if her eyes did linger suspiciously on him for another second.

Feeling a bit self conscious, he shrunk a few inches into his seat, taking another bite. The other two, being more at ease in their present situation, didn't seem to notice. Finding no end of distraction in their own dinners the conversation ended. All common ground and shared topics of interest exhausted they sat in relative silence. It took Deku some time to adjust, to realize this was, in fact, perfectly fine.

Even still, the words potentially left unspoken kept running through his head. Notions of offense, creepy or unsettling behaviors displayed or murmurings he might have let drift between them had him fidgeting as he ate. Occasionally Akaguro would mutter something under his breath, some scornful remark directed at the news being broadcast from the television just above the bar of the diner. At one point Jiro actually tried to pass him the soy sauce, but she quickly realized her error and set it aside; rolling her eyes at herself. Deku tried to reassure her it was fine but she ignored him.

Her own worst critic, he guessed...

Eventually, after bill was paid and food eaten, the trio wandered outside. Checking her phone Jiro noticed the time and flinched. "I gotta go, mom's gonna be worried if I'm not home soon." Giving a slight smirk she added, "this was fun."

Akaguro nodded, returning the warm expression. "Surprisingly. Considering the reason you two were originally heading out together."

Not something Deku was eager to revisit. "Y-yeah," mumbled he, "we'll, ah, have to do this again at some point." From the absolute lack of confidence in his voice the statement sounded more like a question.

Not that the others seemed to mind. "Sure," Jiro shrugged, waving to them as she slowly backpedaled away, "see you in class." and with one of her earlobes plugging into her phone she
turned around and wandered away.

"Difficult to read, that one..." muttered 'Stendhal', idly rubbing his chin. "But she seems alright." In reply the green haired boy merely nodded, feeling a tad too timid to speak.

A large, long fingered hand clapped onto Deku's back. "You worry too much." At his questioning glance at the taller boy took a moment to comprehend the unspoken inquiry before answering. "She's either forgiven you, or wants to." The bespectacled boy wasn't so certain of that and, from the doubt upon his features, Akaguro surmised this. "If she didn't, you'd know." Hands to his pockets he smirked and added, "She doesn't strike me as the 'subtle' type." Before walking away. "Take care, Midoriya."

"Y-you too." Waving meekly he started fumbling with his feet until his trajectory home had been set.

Staring at the ground as he walked, he did his best to ignore the people around him. He'd found it was best to keep his jaw tight as iron, lest his hunger get the better of him in the crowded streets. Thankfully, the black pudding -along with what Aizawa had issued in the way of rations- had more than sufficiently dulled the bite of his appetite. Upon arriving home, red high-tops kicked off to the side of the door, he found he was once again alone. A note on the kitchen table informed him that his mother would be at work well into the night: 'Sorry, sweetie. It's getting really busy around here. Dinner is waiting for you in the fridge. Love you! -mom.

Sighing, Deku removed what amount he could stomach from the container and placed it in the oven. After forcing the food down his own throat, he fumbled to the bathroom and drew up a bath. Tried though he did, both in and out of the tub, he couldn't brush his hair into submission. Though it did prove a sufficient distraction from his own discomfort, along with the bath. After drying and redressing in pajamas he climbed his way into bed and closed his eyes. It was with a queasy stomach that and a muddled mind from the day's events that he let sleep overtake him.

Deku sat in class the following day, jaw held tight as he focused all his energy on reading the textbook threatening to snap in his grip. Someone -most likely that guy with the white and maroon hair, if his nose was to be trusted- had a paper cut and it was driving him up the walls. Every now and then he'd put down his textbook, long enough to remember to breathe, only to 'see' the rage pouring off Bakugo's shoulders. Of course that was hardly the case, but, with how angry the boy often got, such an absurdity being made manifest wouldn't have surprised him as much as it ought to. Since yesterday's outburst he'd been bracing himself for an explosion from the other teen: A Phrase that could be interpreted as literally or figuratively as one wished.

English class was long behind them, being the first of the day and taught by Present Mic. Deku was almost giddy at the prospect of escaping the sheer volume of the man's voice. The decibel levels he could reach even without his quirk were daunting. If his career as a hero had fallen through, Mic would have made a fortune in the opera. Presently, the class was taking Civics, a class arguably more important than any combat training they would receive. The logic being 'how can one enforce laws if one doesn't know them?' Plus, there were regulations involved with being a hero, just like the police. Only difference was heroes were allowed to use their quirks whereas police were issued weapons. Heroes could use weapons as well, but it was a rare occurrence that they felt so inclined.

At the blaring of the bell, and wincing from both Deku and Jiro, the horrid sound prompted the class collected their things and wandered off to lunch. Waiting for for the school's resident
vampire, just outside the classroom, was Aizawa; shoving a thermos into the boy's hands.

"You're going into your first heroics class today." Warned the scraggly man. At the audible gulp from the teen, his tone sharpened. "Good. You should be nervous, because if you bite a classmate today expulsion will be the least of your worries."

That the risk of such was enough to prompt such an emphatic warning from the Erasure Hero had him nervous. Something had to be in the works today that would serve to increase the chances of such an occurrence. Considering the name of the class he had to look forward to, he was fairly certain he knew what that was. Giving Deku a stern, knowing look the teacher wandered back to his own classroom to take a nap.

It was with a cold sweat and shaking limbs that Deku eventually made it outside. Finally away from other people he unclenched his jaw and exhaled a mountain of stress. Leaning against the wall he ran his hands up his face, under his sunglasses and pressed his palms to his eyes. His every breath felt like there was ice in his lungs, despite the heat. Pulling his hands back from his face, Deku leaned close to the ground, coiling like a spring, and then leapt into the air.

He landed, somewhat clumsily, on one of the connecting points between two of the towers. Little more than a few hallways, roofed and windowed, between the spires. Once on his haunches, and after dusting himself off, he uncapped the thermos and inhaled its contents. The pitiful, anguished and frustrated expression that followed this display of wanton gluttony was one he was glad not to have an audience for. This wasn't something he could afford to have so badly under wraps. The threat of attacking another student was ever present, a fact he was sure to continue reminding himself of.

One slip could be the difference between going through the next three years without incident and seriously injuring someone. With a tired, strained sigh he pulled his old notebook from his backpack and started writing down various notes on some of his classmates. He hadn't witnessed much from them as of yet, but today, quite probably, that seemed likely to change.

A glimmer of sunlight reflected off the inside of one of lenses, stinging tears from the eye it was meant to protect. Flinching away from the light, Deku hissing in pain, the young man could only sigh. You know... thought he, through a bittersweet smile, for all my dreaming about being a hero, I never thought I'd miss watching a sunrise. After a tired sigh, another thought followed. And I've barely even begun to get there.

At the ringing of lunch's ending bell Deku had scarcely the time to prepare his nerves. Leaping from the roof, collected notes and backpack under his arm, he landed with a light clunking of his shoes against the cement of the walkway. Ducking his head, teeth once again digging into each other, he trudged along the halls, avoiding eye contact and any idle chatter thrown his way.

Stepping through the doors of his homeroom it was a simple matter to walk over to his desk and shrink into the seat. As the remainder of his classmates filed in, one by one, he felt his anticipation rising. The exact nature of heroics eluded him, no straightforward description having been afforded. Thankfully he wasn't left wondering for long.

From outside the classroom came a booming, enthusiastic announcement: "I have," Deku knew that voice, "Come through the door like a normal person!"

It was all the young man could do to avoid flailing about in shock. Of course, true to his own particular form, the owner of that booming voice did precisely the opposite of his narrative declaration. Tromping in as though he were marching to the beat of an eccentric drummer. Such was the strangely disarming way of the symbol of peace: All Might.
"H- he's a teacher here!?!" Deku shrieked under his breath, earning a very curious look from Jiro.

"You didn't know?" her voice was quiet, little more than scarce breath.

From the look in her eyes it almost seemed as though she hadn't expected him to hear her. All the same, the vampire shook his head. "How could you not know? Did you not watch the recording that came with your acceptance letter?" Considering that he hadn't needed to read it, no. Another shake of his head prompted her to roll her eyes and turn back to teacher at the head of the room. No helping the foolish, it would only serve to encourage such behavior.

"Heroics!" As he spoke, All Might Struck a pose, kneeling on the teacher's desk and flexing, facing away from the class. Ashido and Kaminari exchanged a very confused look between them. "the class that'll put you through all sorts of special training to mold you into heroes!"

As a side note: it also grants those who take it an absurd amount of credits.

"No time to dally." Flourishing a painstakingly sketched cue card, All Might announced the exact nature of the class ahead of them. "Today's activity is battle training!"

At his announcement the mood in the room shifted. Bakugo's face contorted into a sadistic smile, parroting the last two words spoken by the hero. Turning over his shoulder, looking to the rest of the class, Deku saw a fiery look flash across his Akaguro's eyes. Devious, with excited anticipation the lanky teen let a toothy smile part his chapped lips, a quiet, almost sinister chuckle rumbling under his breath.

"And for that, you'll need these!" All Might had drawn a remote from the drawer of Aizawa's desk, and pressed one of the few buttons it had. Slats on the wall rolled out, rows of cases all labeled with numbers: one through twenty, in the same array as the class's desks.

He'd almost forgotten... "In accordance with the 'Quirk Registry' and the special request forms you filled out before being admitted, you've all been given costumes!"

An almost somber smile perched itself on one corner of Deku's lips. During the entrance exams he'd been so focused on passing that the 'special request form' had fluttered to the periphery of his memory. Of course, seeing something come of it was to be expected.

All Might cleared his throat. "After you change into those, head to ground beta and look alive!" But his mind had been on other things since that day, "Because from today on..." and that trend didn't look to be ending any time soon. "You're all heroes!" The class got to their feet as one, clamoring, some practically stampeding to their respective costume cases.

Hands on the case in question, Deku thought he might recall what he'd written for his own request form. He gulped, almost afraid of what they might have made for him. Once again, same as the day before, while the others ducked off into their respective locker rooms, he went and hid in the nearest restroom. Akaguro gave him a nod, giving some vague hint of encouragement. A silent 'see you on the battleground', or something along those lines. With such limited experience reading people it was as good a guess as any.

Case laid on the sink his shaking fingers unbuckled the latches, and gently raised it open. The craftsmanship... A feeling of awe bloomed inside him, plucking the suit from its cradle and holding it up for his eyes to take it in. Now, now he remembered what he'd written: 'Lightweight armor, something protective that doesn't restrict movement. Something for enhanced agility and strength.' They'd come through on that in spades. From the specifications listed on the interior of the case it was suit of banded mail. Black and red, comprised of primarily graphene and Kevlar.
"Holy..."

Ask for armor, and UA apparently delivered. As he stripped off his uniform and climbed into the suit another object caught his eye. Reaching out, with a now very protected hand, his fingertips plucked the black elastic from the case, the final part of his request echoing in his mind: 'A mask that strongly restricts movement of the mouth. If that is not too much to ask...' Evidently, it hadn't been. Slipping the mask over his face he turned and looked at the mirror, jumping at the sight of himself. You'd never know he was such a beanpole in this... he looked like some threatening combination of a warrior from legend and some sort of black ops commando. With his sunglasses, those red-tinted and silly round things, his 'look' would be one to remember.

Although, something about the mask seemed incomplete; too bland for a hero. But that was a minor detail, something to be rectified later if at all. Taking a deep, bracing breath he tucked his uniform into the case and closed it. Leaving the restroom behind he broke into a jog toward 'ground beta'. He'd almost assuredly be the last one there.

"Shall we begin, my wards?!" Even before he'd reached the staging area All Mights voice boomed in his ears like a cannon. "It's time for Battle Training!"

Upon arriving, the variety in his classmates costumes was such that it gave him pause. Such creative designs... he hadn't anticipated this on day two. Catching his attention with a wave was Akaguro who resembled some sort of riot-police samurai. His mask completely covered his face, very angular in its construction there was a faint impression of a relaxed smile in the metal. Akaguro's calamitously messy hair was drawn back into a pony tail, a katana strapped to his back lay ready to unsheathed at a moment's notice. From the look of it, the costume was divided into two main parts: the under-layer, a baggy jumpsuit resembling a tank-top and baggy pants. Then the over-layer, lightweight sections of armor, some metal and some made of something akin to plastic, with cloth-armor sleeves. Strapped to his chest and hips were an array of small knives. Nothing lethal or quite as intimidating as the katana, but clearly there for a reason. Deku tiptoed over to him, trying not to disrupt the lesson.

Not so conscious of any such thought was a certain brunette. "Ah, Deku is that you?" Turning to see his other friend left the green-freckled teen's brain momentarily fizzled out. "Cool costume, even if it is a little threatening."

Definitely not a description befitting her. Ururaka's costume was so... bubbly. Skintight, black, white and pink jumpsuit with... very curvy accessories on her wrists and boots. Heeled boots, for some undiscernable reason... UA's costume department had a very distinct sense of style, one that quite the trick not to stare at the curves of the young woman wearing said costume.

"I wish I'd been more specific on my form..." she laughed nervously, rubbing at the back of her head with a light blush. Blush... he was thankful for the mask hiding most of his face for two reasons now. "This suit's so puffy and curvy..."

"That does bear a tactical advantage," Akaguro put forward, "if your opponent seems to notice, you can distract them, giving you a window."

Uraraka almost frowned at that. "Not sure I wanna be that kinda hero... or person..." she did not add.

The dhampire shrugged, offering nothing further. He'd spoken his piece, and left it as such. "Sensei!" Iida called out, "This appears to be the same field used in the entrance exam." Indeed it was, they hadn't even finished rebuilding the place either.
Turning his gaze off to the distance Deku saw the shattered remains of the zero pointer and felt his bones ache. Seeing lie there like a rotting husk sent a chill down his spine, like some foul omen before a long voyage at sea.

"Will we once again be performing cityscape maneuvers?!" The costume of usually bespectacled Iida looked like some hybrid of a hot-rod and a robot. Deku made a mental note not to call him 'autobot' and suppressed a smirk. It was too cool a costume to poke fun at like that.

"Nope!" Deku almost sighed in relief. "You'll be moving on to step two: Indoor anti-personnel training!" That could only mean one a few things... "You'll now be split into hero teams and villain teams!" Of course it would be the worst of the available possibilities. "Then you'll face off in two-on-two indoor battles!" Raising his index finger toward the heavens, All Might blurted out perhaps the most dreaded of phrases for a first day class: "Now! who wants to go first?"

Suddenly, it seemed as if the space around Deku became much more open, the air less constricted and somehow colder. Before he could look over his shoulder to see what had happened, All Might was speaking again. "Aha! Very brave of you, young... Midoriya, was it?" And he let out a booming, hearty laugh.

The rest of the class, so his over-the-shoulder glance told him, had backed away at the question; leaving him standing at the front, alone.

Yup. Same as middle school.

"But you can't be the only volunteer!" All Might put a hand over his eyes, shielding his gaze from the sun, as if he would have to search far and wide for anyone to answer his next question. "Who else wants to go with him?"

Raising her hand, metaphorically running to his rescue, was Ururaka. "Okay!" Deku had to do a double take just to be sure that had actually happened. "I'll work with Deku." She shot him a reassuring look along with a thumbs up, her eyes insisting that they had this in the bag.

"Excellent!" All Might returned the thumbs up, even though it hadn't really been directed at him in the first place. "Anyone for team two?"

Before the fear could even begin to set in, came the all too obvious outcry. "ME!"

It would be Bakugo, ever the first in line to beat him into the dirt. His costume... Black tank-top with a red X stichted to its front, very baggy and matching cargo pants, some sort of mask that resembled a fire decal on a race-car -complemented by the shoulder piece resembling the exhaust pipes of such a vehicle- and massive, grenade-like gauntlets on his arms. What kind purpose could those have served? There was no way he had those for decoration alone, not with how much they had to weigh. "I'LL KICK HIS QUIRKLESS ASS!"

"Language!" All Might roared, though it didn't even phase the ashen-blond. "and... what do you mean 'quirkless'?" that ever present smile flickered with confusion. This boy, if the files were to be trusted, had gone to the same school as 'young Midoriya'. Most likely it was an inside joke they'd shared for years, that had to be it.

"I volunteer as well!" Iida shouted with a raised hand, prompting Bakugo to roll his eyes. Whether this was another attempt to get on his good side eluded Deku's understanding. If it was, Iida sure had a long road ahead of him. "And surely you know he's not quirkless?" This time he was addressing his would-be teammate directly, pointing to the fallen zero pointer. "He almost felled that vicious machine by himself during the entrance exams."
Deku gulped. It took a few seconds for the words to reach their destination in Bakugo's brain, but when they arrived the look on his face sent Deku's skin crawling for the nearest exit.

"What," the ordinarily boisterous teen's voice had dropped to a haunting whisper, hissing with the barest hint of his simmering rage. "the fuck," climbing to a more noticeable volume, his speech had the green-freckled teenager quaking in his armor, "did you just say...?"

The look in his eyes could only be described as murderous. Wide, piercing and devoid of any amusement whatsoever. The look of a man who wanted to slaughter a creature he'd only just discovered, in defiance of his own lack of comprehension of its existence. It was the expression of a Spanish explorer who'd snapped upon finding there was no gold in the promised land he'd 'discovered'.

"LAST WARNING!" All Might's voice cut through the air like the blade a guillotine. "Another utterance of such a word and it's straight to detention with Miss Midnight!" He let out an exasperated sigh, "Now, come this way, my wards!" He said, throwing ear-piece radios to the four students in question and pivoting about, leading them onward toward the first arena. "We have a lesson to get through!"

Before the class followed in his wake, Bakugo's gaze shifted to the trembling outline of his old bullying-victim. There was some scathing, searching hatred in his eyes. Something screamed from behind them, calling out some offense the green one should never have dared to make. Whatever that was, Deku would never know, not for certain. All he knew was that Bakugo wanted to crush him like the little bug he'd always likened him to. Even with his versatile array of vampire abilities, Deku wasn't sure if he could stop him. So far the only real training he'd had was on restraining himself, not actual combat. If his meager performance during the practical exam was any way to judge their talents for combat, then Bakugo was leagues ahead of him.

Just like always.

Deku's footsteps were shaky, hesitant, placing him a few paces behind the other students as they rambled onward. Fidgeting hands wrung each other to the point of constricting blood-flow and he broke out into a cold sweat. He was not ready, not prepared physically or mentally to face Bakugo in combat. His only advantage was an understanding of the explosive teen, both his psychology and preferred tactics in combat. Polished tactics, years of practice with his own quirk like it were a second set of limbs he'd been using since birth, while he was only just learning to stop dragging his own through the dirt behind him. No, he needed to stop thinking about this, to focus.

"Are you okay?" The worried voice beside him prompted a jump. Uraraka looked almost more concerned than she sounded. "You've gotten kinda pale. Well... paler than usual, that is." There was something very disarming about those brown eyes of hers, something calming in the way she regarded the world. Wide eyed and innocent, taking in everything she could with eager abandon. Harmless and earnest.

Maybe... maybe he could let his guard down around her. Just a little, enough to stop clenching his jaw and talk at least. He couldn't bite her through the mask anyways. "N-not sure." He spoke truthfully. "Kacchan-" his jaw spasmed, his instincts trying to overpower him even with the mask prompted a sound clattering of his teeth, maw snapping closed.

It took a couple shuddering breaths before he could continue talking. At least he was getting better at fighting it, he thought with no shortage of bitterness. "He's angrier than I've ever seen him..." Uraraka's head tilted to the side, denoting an almost child-like inquisition. "And well... of all the times I've fought him-" a sharp inhalation of air interrupted him. All nerves, no brains. How was he going to strategize for this if he couldn't think? "... he's always won."
This seemed to catch the brunette off guard. "You guys used to fight?" She frowned, sounding a little sad. "I forgot... he used to bully you, didn't he? Here I was daydreamin and thinking you two were friends. Sorry, Deku."

Deku's gaze cast itself to the street as he trudged along. A quiet sigh pushed passed his lips, made a little louder by the mask it had to move through. "Until recently... I- I'd always thought we were friends too. Or... hoped we could be." Again, anyways...

To his left, gone unnoticed by he and Uraraka, was a very confounded look from Jiro. What the fuck had Deku just said? Friends? In what universe-

"Here we are!" All Might, as seemed to be his role as a teacher, ended any and all trains of thought unrelated to the lesson at hand. "Now listen close, because we don't have time go over this again!"

The parameters were simple enough: The villains were to hide in their lair, protecting a mock nuclear weapon while the heroes were sent in to either capture the villains or disable the weapon. To spice things up, and ensure everyone got a chance in the ring, All Might had set a time limit and set up something of an observation area where those not participating could observe. Learning isn't just doing and hoping you get the hang of it. Before Deku and Uraraka shuffled off to the testing ground a finger tapped on his shoulder.

Spinning around, taken by surprise, Deku blinked a few times, taking a few seconds to realize who'd gotten his attention. "He's just a bully," Jiro, her face as blank as a professional poker player, whispered in his ear. Little did she know his hearing was almost on par with hers when she wasn't focusing her quirk, "he acts scary because it makes him feel like he has power when someone is afraid of him. Use your 'quirk' and show him you're not gonna play along, and that he's not as tough as he wants to think he is."

Deku gawked, taken completely aback by her entire assertion. Questions burned at the forefront of his brain: why she cared, why she was getting in between him and Bakugo again. Sure, yesterday they'd maybe started to get to know each other but aside from that the only interaction Deku remembered with her was negative. Whether she 'wanted to forgive him' or not something about the way she'd approached this seemed unrelated. Her tact was more direct here, less uncertain than she'd seemed yesterday when the topic of his vampirism had been approached.

Before he could un-clench his teeth to reply, "Come on now, Midoriya." All Might scolded him, though entirely without impatience, "there'll be time for your friends later! You've got villains to stop!"

So it was with bated breath and sparking nerves that Deku followed the others to the arena. He had only a few short minutes to brace himself for what was to happen next, no simple task in either case. He was so hungry now, and he blamed his nerves for that one, at least in part. How he hated his sense of smell, simply knowing people were around him was already harrowing enough without his newfound instincts urging him to attack.

To make matters worse, Uraraka seemed to be picking up on it. "Maps of the building's layout," Though focus, it seemed, was at least within her current capabilities. It certainly wasn't within his... "better memorize em." Dropping her seriousness, she gave a lighthearted laugh. "Though there's no punishment for failure like with Mister Aizawa, so I'm not worried." Spoken like someone who'd never gone up against Bakugo... "All Might's so nice, just like on TV."

Something about that rambling seemed off. "...What punishment?" he mumbled, through his mask. Uraraka blinked, "He threatened to expel us if we couldn't perform well enough during the
exercises he put us through." She smiled, "Thought he did the same to you."

Deku could only blink. "...I thought it was just me."

Uraraka chuckled, "Nope, same as the rest of us newbies!" She'd adopted a very All Might looking pose and jokingly deepened her voice before laughing in her normal voice. "Guess he wasn't playing favorites after all." And I can tell everyone to hush up about that. ...

Was she trying to cheer him up? She'd already noticed he was upset and the topic of Bakugo's malicious attitude toward him had been broached, however briefly. It was at least possible that was what she was doing. "Anyways, " she pumped her fist, thrusting another into the air, "we've got this! Right partner?"

Where ever she got such bountiful optimism from, Deku was grateful to have it on his side. "Right." He clenched his fists. "Don't wanna lose." Not to him. Not this time. And the bell rang, exhaling sharply through clench teeth, Deku took the first step forward. "Let's go." With an enthusiastic nod, Uraraka skipped with her first step, falling in line behind him.

No doubt, Bakugo would be racing right for him, abandoning his post to satisfy his anger. Not something he could leave ignored for long, and after that interrupted altercation with him -thanks to Jiro- it was doubtless he'd be dealing with the remnants of that too. Maybe that was an advantage, if he was really that angry he'd be operating on almost pure instinct: no control, no finesse but also no holding back. A dangerous combination where the walking warhead was concerned, but that could be played to their advantage. If he could bait Bakugo far enough away, maybe Uraraka could get to the nuke and win the exercise.

It was a long shot, but it was the only shot they really had. "I'm not sure what else to do..." Deku mumbled, peeking around a corner, now deep in the inner recesses of the building serving as the villain's 'lair'. "Do you have any ideas?"

Uraraka shook her head, "Nothing with that much thought behind it," admitted she, "guess it's true, what they say about knowing your enemy." She smiled, "Alright Deku, if you're sure you can handle it, then I am too."

Why the hell did she have so much faith in him? "R-right."

He took a deep breath. Nothing to do now but keep moving, hopefully get a little closer to where they were holed up before- "DEKU!" Or not. "WHERE THE FUCK ARE YOU, YOU SHITTY F**KING NERD?!" Definitely still angry about yesterday. He gave Uraraka a look and a nod.

Time to act like heroes.

Lowering to the ground, footsteps as light as he could manage, he crept forward with his senses on high alert. Sounds, smells anything that would indicate the explosive blond was nearby. After years of being pelted and burned with that boy's quirk Deku had a very intimate understanding of what it smelled like. Thanks to his now heightened senses, he'd have a bloodhound's warning before he even saw him. How he loved to hate his powers. Of course, he hardly needed them. Bakugo was stomping so loud and with such anger the building was shaking. His talent for intimidation was the stuff some villains would likely envy. Waiting around the corner, back against the wall, Deku did his best to settle his breathing.

Jaw as tight as freshly sprung bear trap he began forcing himself to breathe through his nose. No room for error, no allowance for a single tooth or claw mark. Tensing the muscles in his arms and legs he waited until Bakugo was just about to round the corner, then he sprang. Leaping into view,
deliberately overshooting his jump, he yelped in pain. Bakugo had missed with the explosion, just as planned, but Deku had failed to anticipate the flash and his eyes paid for it. Working off memory, he kicked off the wall and flew back the way he'd come from, eyes still seeing little more than blurs peeking though a white expanse.

"DON'T YOU FUCKING DARE RUN!"

Oh good, he was getting angrier...

"YOU LYING LITTLE SHIT! YOU COULD MOVE THAT FAST THE ENTIRE TIME,Couldn't you!?

Hitting a wall with his nose, and much of his body, Deku threw himself leftward, hoping there was more hallway to go down. Damn it, his eyes just wouldn't recover.

"All those years," Bakugo's voice trembled with fury, "you had a quirk," his tone, his voice were both so unsettling... "looking down on me like you better than me..." He almost missed the screaming. "WEREN'T YOU!?" And an explosion blasted the wall he was hiding behind to smithereens. Only this time, Deku was ready: his eyes flinched, but managed to absorb most of the light without worsening vision. "ANSWER ME!"

"YOU'RE WRONG!" And he sprang right at him, fist swinging and narrowly missing the retreating Bakugo.

At the sight of his knuckles smashing another wall to bits, the warhead's eyes went wide and for a moment, Deku thought he smelled fear.

"I spent the entire time..." Deku stood there, body shaking, doing everything he could to maintain his bravado. Thanks to the adrenaline now surging in his veins, it was working. "the entire time we were kids..." Images flashed in front of his eyes, even as he spun on his heels to face him. "Looking up to you!"

Chasing after Bakugo, following him and his friends everywhere they went, "I wanted to be like you, Kacchan!" and the images faded, legs launching him right at him. "But I'm not the same person I was back then!" Muscling through another round of explosions, bits of his armored costume tearing and burning from the force and heat, he narrowly missed with that second strike.

Sweeping with his leg, trying to kick Bakugo's feet from under him, left Deku wide open. The explosive blond had leapt over his swinging foot and aimed both palms right at the green haired vampire. With staggering volume, Deku was blasted through several levels of the building and buried beneath the rubble of the crumbling building, sunglasses flying who-knew where. Kacchan screamed something, but his senses were staggered, trying desperately to recenter and find where 'up' was. After a few moments, with gritting teeth, Deku rocketed out of the rubble like a canon ball.

"Throw whatever you want at me," another narrowly missed punch, another explosion to the chest, only this time he kept his footing, "hurt me as much as you can!" that one connected, and Bakugo shouted in distress as his ribs nearly shattered and he was flung into a wall. For the first time in his life, the blond looked at Deku and had no idea what to think.

Blinding speed, strength and durability. He was badly burned on the chest and shoulder, his costume tattered to dust and rags on all the way from his left elbow to the adjoining, bony ribs. His right hand was exposed halfway up his forearm, his right leg was smoldering and his mask was exceedingly discolored thanks to some nasty burns. Yet, despite being almost as scrawny as ever,
just the barest hint of toned muscle on his bones, every instinct Bakugo had told him Deku was a threat. A walking, super-powered contradiction that defied all words he failed to speak.

So Deku spoke for him, "because I'm going to be a hero!"

"LIKE HELL!" Defying the screaming in his chest Bakugo used his own quirk to propel himself right at him. "You've always been a bug! A useless little, STUPID DEKU!" Using his quirk like some crude engine, he rocketed his fist at Deku's face, narrowly missing. "AND DON'T YOU EVER FORGET IT!"

Bakugo's eyes went wide once again. Rather than move aside, granting him more room to set off a laeger detonation, Deku had grabbed his arm. Acting on his fear, Bakugo shoved his palm against Deku's abdomen and fired away as much as he dared to. If he used too much force, and the little shit held his grip, he'd risk tearing his own arm off. Accomplishing little more than burning more of Deku's flesh and destroying more of his costume, he braced himself as Deku flung him through what was left of a wall.

Rolling onto his back, the world now spinning in every direction at once, Bakugo groaned as his body began to register what had just happened to it. Holy fucking shit did it hurt. "As much as I might want to..." Deku's voice was almost a mile away, it didn't help that he sounded significantly calmer now. "I can never forget it."

He stepped over the rubble, handcuffs at the ready. "I've been called that so much, even inside my own head, I'm not sure I'll ever see myself as anything other than 'Deku', thanks to you."

The defeat in his voice would have been delicious at any other time, but now it just pissed him off. Feeling that ire rekindle reminded Bakugo of the day before when 'long-ears' had dared to stop him from putting this little shit in his place. When Iida had told that fucking story of Deku crippling a zero pointer.

"So, Kacchan," ...Kacchan. Was that his version of 'Deku'!? "I won't ever forget-"

His jaw clamped down in a vice as his eyes went wide. The smell, the sight! In throwing Bakugo through that wall he'd not only torn his costume to shreds but the skin on his shoulder too. Standing there, shaking with restraint, it was everything he could do not to attack, not to tear his own mask off and give in to his now screaming hunger.

Scoffing, hissing under his breath, Bakugo's body relented to his fury. "You're fucking right you won't."

In spite of his screaming instincts, telling him to dodge, thanks to his ravenousness the blond was now much faster. The ensuing explosion rocked the entire building. Deku was sent reeling, crashing and skidding along rubble covered floor, leaving a trail of armor, cloth and blood in his wake. Groaning, rolling onto his front, he tried to push off from the ground but couldn't shake this feeling of dizziness. His eyes were seeing spots, the world so unfocused he might as well have had bleach poured into them.

"Saw you looking at my gauntlets before the teams were decided," Hissed the warhead, his face twisting into a malicious grin, "wanna see what they're for, Deku?!" "You're fucking right you won't."

He couldn't even open his mouth to reply. The resulting explosion only caught his senses for a flicker of a moment before the world erupted in pure pain. Searing flesh on the side of his face, a blaze of fire up his forehead and into his hair that was so hot it felt cold. Sizzling, popping of his flash-broiled skin was then punctuated by something in his eye-socket exploding in a wet splatter,
then the feeling spread to the inside of his skull and the world went black.

"FOR THE LAST TIME, THAT'S ENOUGH, BAKUGO!" All Might shouted into his microphone back at the observation room. From the readout on his screen Deku's ear-piece had been destroyed almost immediately into the fight. "STOP THIS SENSELESSNESS, OR I'M ENDING-"

And the entire building shook. The arena was an entire block away and the building was still shaking. Cameras on the other end of the feed showed nothing but static, microphones either blown up or blown out if that horrid feedback noise was anything to go by.

"What the hell?!" Jiro exclaimed, bracing, preparing for the building to collapse. "What did Bakugo just do?!"

"Nothing good..." said the boy with the two differently colored eyes, while All Might furiously wokred at the instruments on the monitor. "If that earthquake was anything to go by he'll be lucky if he hasn't just outright murdered that other kid." Although it sounded like that wasn't the case. Distorted, but coming through, was the sound of Deku screaming in agony.

Cracking knuckles told all that Akaguro had clenched his fists. "What kind of insanity-" And the feed came back. All around the room reactions varied. Kaminari's jaw dropped, Ashido screamed, Aoyama recoiled and flung two hands over his mouth to stop himself from vomiting, a girl with a very long pony-tail reached out and instinctively gripped Jiro's hand. A motion she reflexively reciprocated as her expression fell in horror.

Somewhere to the pony-tailed girl's other side she heard the heterochromic kid breathe out in shock, "oh my god..."

On the screen, right in front of everyone, was Deku, in a haze of smoke. His right eye had been burned to the point of bursting, the skin around his eye socket burned away while more of his molten flesh dripped onto what remained of his costume. A splash of his hair had been completely incinerated, leaving charred remains of scalp from where it had formerly sprouted. His mouth was wide open, mask nowhere to be seen, as he screamed. Bakugo had unleashed an explosion big enough to shake part of a city at point blank rage, right into Deku's face.

"Stop this..." Jiro's voice murmured, "All Might!" she said, now much louder, "STOP THIS RIGHT FUCKING NOW!"

Pulling out of his shock the professional hero leapt from the room, not even bothering to open the door as he went. Sprinting, with surprisingly similar speed to All Might, was Akaguro, Kaminari following right behind him along Ashido. On the screen Deku had moved in a blur and now Bakugo was screaming.

"GET THE FUCK OFF- AAAAAAAAAARGH!"

It took a moment for the camera to shift, following the path of the ruined teenager. When it did everyone present wished like hell that it hadn't. There was Deku, face as destroyed as it had been moments before, with his arms holding Bakgo against a wall, face first, and his teeth sinking into the blond's throat.

"Wait..." Some kid with spiky, red hair breathed, "what is he...?" No answer was forthcoming, at least not verbally. Right before their eyes, as Deku gulped down no small amount of his old bully's blood, something remarkable happened: His skin starting regenerating.
"Holy-" Breathed the pony-tailed girl.

As his flesh got busy knitting itself back together, his eye blossomed. There was no other word for it, the way the flesh simply... appeared and unfolded bore no other likeness as a patch of snow-white hair sprouted from the ashes of what had been burned away. But the eye was wrong: Black sclera, much like Ashido's, but with the same glowing, green iris. Even the skin around the eye looked off, a touch lighter, just a hue or two darker than milky white, following the pattern of the grisly burn. As his flesh finished re-knitting itself his face twisted in horror. Hands on Bakugo's shoulders he tore himself away from him, recoiling, gripping his own skull as he fell to his knees.

It was at this moment that All Might burst onto the scene, just in time to see Bakugo, seething with fearful hatred, preparing to turn his other gauntlet on Deku. He was screaming something about finishing the job when All Might grabbed him. The piercing look was all he needed to reduce Bakugo to little more a simpering, tiny, mass of submissive flesh. Meanwhile, Deku had stood up and began staggering for the door. He would have run for the hills had Akaguro, Ashido and Kaminari not arrived, blocking his path inadvertently.

Shaking, his legs threatening to buckle beneath him, Deku's flinched away from them, falling against a wall, feeble arms flying up to shield his head as he sunk to the floor. His face just screamed the phrase *don't look at me*. Ashido was at a total loss, but approached Deku all the same, confused by the fact that his face was now miraculously healed. Akaguro, slowly, re-sheathed his katana, eyeing Bakugo like a hawk. Kneeling beside Ashido and Deku was Kaminari, eyes searching between the injured green haired boy and that psychopath Bakugo.

He saw the injury on his throat, the blood on Deku's lips and a look of comprehension spread across his features. "What did...?"

Deku's reply was a pitiful one. "I'm so sorry..." Little more than a whimper, "I- I couldn't stop- he-I- I..."

Tentatively, Ashido reached out, her arms looping around him. As he started sobbing, her grip on him tightened and she tried to soothe his nerves, gently shushing him and murmuring what reassuring words she could find. "It's okay," she breathed, "It's over now, he's not going to hurt you again."

He just sobbed louder. That wasn't at the reason he was crying, not even close. He'd just bitten someone, *again* and this time... no. There were never any excuses. His lapse of control, his fault.

His fault...

"Hey man," Kaminari reached out, squeezing one of his shoulders, "it's alright. Just... breathe, okay?"

Only he couldn't. Between the sobbing, the adrenaline, being beaten and blasted to a pulp and the tornado of emotions he was feeling, it all became just too much. Deku, with almost painful slowness, fainted in Ashido's arms.

All Might let out a quiet sigh. "This lesson is on hold." With a firm hold on Bakugo's arm he turned around, the upstart in tow. "Could... could you please take Young Midoriya to Recovery Girl? I need to take this one to see Aizawa." When the blond went to start shouting in protest, The Pillar of Peace just gave him the look again, and any semblance of defiance vanished.

All Might had had enough.
Hesitantly, hand dropping from the hilt of his sword, Akaguro stepped toward Deku. "I'll do it."

Ashido looked up at him, somewhat surprised. "We're coming too." Kaminari nodded, confirming the sentiment.

"Do as you wish," Akaguro muttered as he gently hoisted the unconscious teen into his arms, "but my guess is he's going to want to be far away from people once he wakes up." Nodding as though she understood, Ashido rose to her feet and followed him, Kaminari not far behind.

Back in the observation room, a palm to side of his head, the spiky haired redhead spoke up. "What the hell just happened?"

"This is," the pony-tailed girl gulped, "just a guess, but... it looks like Midoriya's quirk lets him heal by-" she had to suppress a gag. "Drinking... blood." Nauseous as she felt, she wasn't surprised to later hear that she'd turned green.

Somewhere, in another corner of the room, someone ribbitted. "But... I thought his quirk was super strength? That's what it looked like until now."

And thus the wheel of the rumor mill began to turn.

Not wanting to hear any more of it, Jiro let go of the other girl's hand and made for the door. Chancing a look back at the screen she saw All Might dragging Bakugo along and she broke into a run. If there was going to be a conversation with Aizawa, one that potentially outed Deku as something dangerous, then she was going the conversation about Bakugo had all the available facts. Growling out a sigh, she sprinted for the main building, cursing at the weight of the boots afforded to her as part of her hero costume. Really, this was a conversation she should have had with Aizawa yesterday.

With any luck, it would at least help Deku a little bit, though she wasn't about to bet on it.
Finding peace was a task that seemed forever unachievable to little Izuku 'Deku' Midoriya. Waking moments of much of his life fraught with anxiety, born either of social isolation or of being the favorite punching bag to every bully he'd ever come across. Even at home it felt as though there were no escape, for he always, inevitably, have to leave. Out there in the real world was where his tormentors lurked. The only place of solace he had was his dreams. Dreams he now found haunted by the fears which plagued him in the day.

It was such a dream that he failed to realize he was having at this very moment. Machines, menacing, covered in webs and towering over a burning city marched about like soldier ants attacking a rival colony. Deku, quite beyond his limits, was alone in his efforts to protect said city. Dozens, hundreds of machines lay destroyed upon the ruins of what he'd failed to protect; but for every one he defeated, it seemed a hundred more took its place. Spent, his injuries to severe to carry on, he relented. Collapsing to the cracked and ruined street he closed his eyes and waited for the end.

To his surprise no such thing was forthcoming, for in that moment aid finally found him. People he recognized, Jiro, Akaguro, Kaminari, Ashido, Iida, Ayoyama, even All Might along with Uraraka charged into the fray. Vigor renewed, inspiration lifting his spirits to new heights, Deku leapt up and followed them. Together they vanquished the machines, the metallic titans crumbling into smoking wreckage.

Taking a knee, panting for breath and bleeding, Deku finally relaxed and felt a sense of calm wash over his aching body. Just when he was about to sleep a hand reached down with padded fingertips. Looking up he saw the encouraging smile of Uraraka and felt safer than ever before. Taking her hand, pulled to his feet, he smiled too and the others began to gather round. It was then that he, finding himself more daring, went to hug her and she hugged him. It was serene until his stomach growled. Maw lurching open he sank his fangs into her throat, drinking with reckless abandon.

She only giggled in reply. "So... that was really it, wasn't it?"

Horrified Deku could only let his eyes go wide in terror. Again. He'd just done it again! Confusing him, driving his mind mad with conflict, were the arms of the girl he'd just bitten wrapping loosely around his neck.

"Being alone," her voice was calm, comforting. Everything he didn't deserve for it to be, "truly terrifies you doesn't it? After spending so much of your life that way." What the hell was going on? What was this? "But..." She giggled, in a tone that almost sounded... coquettish. "Now it's something else, isn't it?"

He pulled away from her throat, her arms remained as they were, hand playing in his hair as his eyes went wider still.

When she grinned impishly at him, slender fangs peeked at the corners of her mouth and it was all he could do not to scream. "You're afraid you'll make someone else like you, bring someone else into the world you're now a part of."

This... was this his doing?

"Maybe now you'll just agree with everyone that you should be alone forever," No, please no, "but
now, with a chance at your dream, maybe you just don't care." The others, looming around them, cast black shadows that drained the color from the world around them. Eyes glowing red, hands drawing all manner of weapons as they drew nearer.

"Just by coming to UA, you've placed so many people in danger." Their maws opened, laughter of the most devilish sort echoed sharply around him. "Guess your dreams are worth any price, no matter who pays them then."

No... NO! That's not-! And, as she drew him in for what could only have been a kiss, the others pounced and he, consumed with fear, tore their bodies to shreds. Screaming, arms flailing, shoving at everything around him, Deku screamed. "NO!" Not again! Not again! DON'T LET ME DO THIS!

His head hit wood. Eyes snapping open found half the world back and the rest of it looking like a nurse's office. Chest heaving with his breath Deku saw the state he was in: bed torn to pieces to his sudden fit of movement, sitting up before he was even awake, the furniture that had been next to the bed was no on the floor across the room. Realizing his hands were still gripped tightly at the mattress he unfurled them and saw his claws had extended and torn much of the bedding to shreds. Fingers jolting at the fearful realization he retracted his claws back beneath the bandages covering his hands and shoved his palms into his eyes. Knees curled to his face he sat there in the tattered cloth and cried. For the first time, in any memory he had, he hoped no one would come to comfort him.

Naturally, as it was with every prayer he made, the opposite transpired.

"Midoriya?" It sounded like Kaminari. "You okay, bud?" Despite his efforts, Deku couldn't stop crying. So frustrating... he didn't want him to feel sympathetic. "Yeesh, you must've been having one helluva nightmare..." He didn't deserve sympathy. "You're not alone pal," Yes. Yes he was, more so now than ever before. "Ashido and Akaguro are outside too, if ya want me to get em."

A hand touched his shoulder, his face flew, jaw open, right for Kaminari's throat. NO! Milliseconds before his fangs made contact with the other teenager's skin, Deku's fist flew up and decked himself square in the jaw.

"HOLY SHIT!" As Kaminari yelped in surprise the force of the punch sent Deku off the bed, bones and remains of his costume clattering on the floor while his head hit the wall. "Dude!" Kaminari's voice reeked of shock, "What the hell just- are you okay?" Deku sat, with his back to the wall.

Hands gripping tightly over his mouth, he stared at the electric teen with like a puppy that realized it just hurt its best friend. Again... How many times in one day could he fuck up this badly?! How... Oh god... Crying. It was because he'd let his guard down enough to cry, he hadn't even seen the urge to feed coming.

If he wasn't going to be a threat to anyone, he couldn't cry anymore. "damn it..." His heart was in shambles, guilt and shame gnawing on the pieces. If he couldn't cry then what the hell could he do? What could he do when he felt this terrible?

Kaminari just looked at him, unsure what to do. This kid was terrified of something, another incident like with Bakugo he guessed. All he knew was that he absolutely shouldn't leave him alone. Walking over, he offered a hand to pull him up. "You're still banged up," he offered a friendly smile, "come on, get off the- HEY!"

Like a bolt of lightning, Deku had flown to his feet and toward the window. Tearing it open, still
dressed in little more than bandages and tattered rags, he jumped. Unsteady, weak from the toll of his recovery, his legs buckled as he landed and he tasted the all too familiar taste of dirt.

"Dude, wait!"

Clawing at the ground, tearing the bandages on his hands to pieces in the process, Deku lurched back to his feet and ran. Somewhere behind him, as he leapt over the front gate, Kaminari was yelling something about him fleeing. Where ever he was going didn't matter, just as long as no one was there.

Ashido came running into the room, right up beside Kaminari at the window. "What just-"

"He took off!" Kaminari exclaimed, arm gesturing out the window.

"Why?" It made no sense, how could he still be this worked up? "You didn't scare him, did you?"

"I don't see how," he gave her an exasperated look, "he almost bit me- no, I'm fine." He held up both hands, stopping her from grabbing him and examining his neck. "Kid punched himself in the face before he could..." he pointed outside, where Deku had just pulled quite the vanishing act. "then- HEY, WHAT THE HELL ARE YOU DOING?!" What was with everyone and jumping out windows? Suddenly, it wasn't just her leaping outside, cursing under his breath as he dusted himself off from the landing he chased after her. "You know he probably wants to be left alone!"

"Don't care!" Ashido called back, "Speaking from experience: Last thing he needs right now!"

Looking over her shoulder she waved, beckoning him onward. "Keep up, Kami!"

Growling, he did exactly that, muttering to himself as he went. "Ya know... I really just wanted to go to school today. That was it!" Naturally, he'd left his bag and water bottle back in the classroom. Ah well, how fast could this Midoriya kid really run?

Most of the class had followed behind them, wanting to see what happened next. The indignity of it all... what had he done wrong? So he'd pissed Deku off enough to make him bite someone. After an explosion like that not even phasing him he was the one that should have been being treated like this. Only a freak could survive something like that without a single mark to show for it. At least... that's what Bakugo thought had happened. Through all the smoke and pain he hadn't been able to glimpse the results of his handiwork. Evidently it hadn't been much, Deku was still strong and crazy enough to slam his face into a wall and then chomp down on him like a rabid dog. This was just All Might protecting the wimps, like he always did. So unfair... It really pissed him off.

When the door to class 1A swung open, Bakugo was almost shocked. He hadn't noticed how far they'd just been traveling. The benefits of spacing out. Grumbling as he was pulled into the room, his eyebrow quirked for a moment. On his desk were a pair of feet wearing clunky, black boots, criss crossed as their owner's arms as she glared at him. "What's long ears doing here!?!" Her earlobes twitched with something resembling malice at the voicing of his demand. He just glared right back, this bitch was always butting in where she had no business. Fuming with equally as much contained rage, more so spilling over through his face than her, was Aizawa, listening intently to the phone in his hand.

"YOU!" Bakugo barked, "YOU FUCKING TATTLE TALE!" He stomped toward her. "What, it wasn't enough that All Might and..." he stopped for a moment, forgetting Aizawa's name. "Him were already about to chew me out!? You had to get in on it too!?"

"Like you don't have it coming," her eyes narrowed, posture not moving in the least, "after
yesterday and today I am officially done being passive with you."

He scoffed, rolling his eyes. "You call this shit passive?" All Might made a considerable effort not to growl at how much this kid was swearing. "You have been getting right in my fucking way since we got here!"

"Yeah," remarked she, "wonder why..."

He lounged forward, hands slamming onto the desk she'd rested her legs upon, quirk searing the wood as he did. "You obnoxious little-"

Not even flinching in the slightest, her legs still on the frying wood, Jiro stared him down with grim, but hidden satisfaction. At his outburst she'd sent her earlobes right up to his throat, just a hair's breadth away from filling his world with pain. "Go on." She goaded, "give me an excuse." and her glare went sharper still. "I dare you." He could only grit his teeth in wide eyed, irritated fury. If he moved more than that, she'd use her quirk on him again, and that was something he'd never allow.

"Enough," All Might's voice rumbled like distant thunder, "I won't allow another incident like on the training ground." And he yanked Bakugo away from her. "Sort out your differences some other way, and after you've calmed down."

Gently and slowly hanging up the phone on his desk, Aizawa prepared to speak. His voice rumbled like a volcano threatening to erupt. "Sit down." So this was two teachers who unjustly had it out for him today. What the fuck? Was today opposite day or some bullshit? Because he and Deku seemed to be inhabiting the wrong spaces today. As he huffily complied, teeth gritting at the humiliation of it all, he glared at the teacher. A teacher who glared right back. "Explain yourself. Now."

"What the hell for?!" Bakugo's immediate retort was met with Aizawa's hands gripping so hard his knuckles snapped. "Everything I did to him and that useless Deku was FINE!" A growl escaped the teacher's throat. "Fucker went crazy and bit me!" He pointed right at the site where Deku's fangs had pierced his skin.

The instant Bakugo stopped talking he felt the air in the room run cold. "Do you want to know why?" From his tone, it was obvious that wasn't really a question. So Bakugo kept his trap shut while Aizawa elaborated. "I was just on the phone with recovery girl," he began, "that last attack you made," it was disturbing how level his voice was with all that rage pouring off of him, "did so much damage to Midoriya's face that he was driven into a mindless haze." Before Bakugo could voice how bullshit that was, Aizawa silenced him by raising a single finger. "I'm speaking literally." Bakugo blinked. "That last explosion," the teacher went on, "destroyed his eye." And the warhead's gut sank. "It gets worse." ...How? How the fuck could it? "The damage didn't stop there. Recovery Girl, when she was examining him, found something incredibly disturbing on the back of Midoriya's head and neck. Any guesses what it was?" Bakugo, with an air of numbness, shook his head and Aizawa scowled. "Bits of bone and brain matter."

If it was possible to feel smaller than Deku's level of importance to anything, Bakugo was certain that was what he felt in that moment. "Wh- whu?" Speechless, another new experience for that day. "You mean-"

He had to gulp, stomach so low and queasy he thought he might pass out. For all his boasting, screaming about squashing people like bugs, making such a claim literal filled him with rot. Somewhere outside the room he heard that brown haired extra squeak in dread. Iida sounded similarly shocked, cursing under his breath. Great, everyone was here to witness this. Just what he wanted.
"If he hadn't bitten you, he would be dead: his regenerative abilities would never have activated."
Some of the rot subsided, leaving the warhead feeling only mostly disgusted with himself. Yet the
feeling persisted, as well it should have, digging into his ego.

"I want you to think about this," Aizawa stood up, his glare sharpening, "Had you been fighting
literally anyone else, you would now be a murderer." Any semblance of rage dropped from
Bakugo's features, all that remained was the shock. "Congratulations. Midoriya's healing factor has
kept you out of jail. Now, if I hear about another such incident as today or yesterday," Bakugo's
gaze shifted, glaring at Jiro with all his venom before the erasure hero's continuing scolding drew
his attention back, "you'll be out of this school so fast you'll think All Might threw you out himself.
Have I made myself clear?"

Swallowing his pride and trying to quell his rage, Bakugo managed one, perfectly leveled word.
"Crystal."

Aizawa pointed to the door of his class room. "Get your injuries seen to. Then go to the principal."

Shaking, barely keeping himself in control, his trembling hands grabbed his belongings. He cast
one last spiteful look at Jiro who returned his gaze in full. This wasn't over, and they both knew it,
Bakugo almost felt better knowing he had another pathetic enemy to crush. Almost. Barging
through the door, everyone outside moved out aside as he stomped passed them. Afraid. That was
the only look on any of their puny, extra faces.

He gritted his teeth, biting back his remarks about them long enough to climb inside the elevator.
As the doors closed, anyone nearby might have heard him howling out all his frustration as he
began his descent. Back in the classroom things were considerately closer to silence. Aizawa stood
at the window of his classroom, face squeezed tight by the fingers of one of his hands. Of all the
nightmares to contend with on day two. This class hadn't made it two days in without someone
almost literally attempting murder. To make matters worse, there was the matter of Deku to
contend with.

"All Might..." Aizawa's voice was barely even breath. "Send them... send them to go get changed."

The pillar of peace nodded. "And then what?"

Slowly shaking his head, Aizawa's hand splayed from his face and off to the side, at level with his
shoulder almost. "Just that. But don't let them leave."

An affirmation murmured, All Might wandered outside and sent the teenagers on their way, shortly
before wandering back to Recovery Girl's office. Another long sigh dragged itself passed his lips.
The secret was out, and likely only on its way further along that trajectory. Protecting that kid, keeping
him hidden was impossible now, so the old saying declared: 'the only way three people can keep a
secret is if two of them are dead'. There would be a long talk with principal Nezu and then,
depending on how that one went, another with... Him.

Conversations with him were occasions to dread with all one's being. Even All Might found the
man unsettling and he'd never had to answer to him. Then again... "That includes you, kiddo."
Aizawa added, catching the still present Jiro by surprise, "head to the locker rooms and change,
then tell them all to head back here." Silently, the girl stood up and left the room with a nod,
closing the door behind her. This was an idea bordering on insanity, but... promises were promises
and that was why he rarely made them.
It was a very old room, so old it couldn't possibly have belonged in this spire of a building and it didn't. Creaky wooden floors, glass windows so touched by time it had become a murky green. Bookshelves built into the wall sagged at their centers, the tomes thereupon so frayed and decayed that their materials had begun to turn to dust. A desk at the center of it all fared no better. Meticulously dusted and maintained though it all had been, the makings and furnishings -to the threadbare, moth eaten curtains, lounge chairs and couch- were on their way out. It was from a house that had once belonged to a humble family, farmers at the border of Edo. Now, the last living descendant was a man in his forties, the last inheritor of an ancient legacy. When his grandfather had built this place he'd gone to the decrepit family home and salvaged one room: the study.

Engraved at the head of the doorway was one phrase: "Remember your roots". And so, with the wood of the old home broken down to dust, it was mixed into the foundation of this towering structure, where the office now resided. The owner, a man in the suit, a man who's name was never spoken, gave a grim smile. It was impressive how he could give an air of harmlessness and be intimidating at the same time, without so much as trying to be. "You understand why I've called you here?" Puffing of cigar smoke punctuated his sentences with trailing wisps of tainted air. A cloud of it followed him where ever he paced in the shrouded office. It unsettled the young hero standing before him.

Aizawa only nodded, quelling trembling nerves with steely determination. "I have no reputation, no face in the spotlight." The Nameless One smiled darkly at the young hero's extrapolation. "My methods and efficiency also match something you must be searching for," yes, this 'Aizawa' would do as nicely as he suspected, "you want to send me on a mission."

"Couldn't have said it better myself," his smile shifted to a form considerably lighter than before, "would you like to know what that mission is, Eraser Head?" At the hero's nod, a glint of excited anticipation in his eyes, a feeling of satisfaction welled within The Nameless One. "Tell me," he said, eyes narrowing, smile widening, "do you believe in monsters?"

... Monsters... as it turned out they were much like the stories of old had described them. Bearing the face of humans but hungers from the darkest nightmares imaginable. When he'd killed his first, a vampire working as a nurse in a hospital, he'd found it draining a child dry. The sight of it had filled him with disgusted fury. Scarf flying toward the thing, he snared its wrists and throat, pulling it over backwards to its knees before plunging a dagger through its heart. Even as the blade pierced the most vital of organs it screamed and struggled, something 'mercy' escape its lips and Aizawa twisted the blade as he savagely shoved the thing to the floor. Slowly, with a raspy exhalation of air, did its limbs droop, going limp and sagging to the floor. Yanking the knife from its chest he checked the child for a pulse and found none. Gritting his teeth, he turned on his heels and strode away, anger fuming from his body. As he battered the doors to the ward open and stomped away, he failed to notice the label above them: 'Hospice: Cancer Ward'.

From then on, he was on the warpath. Every vampire he was assigned to kill, he did so without hesitation. Leaving a trail of bodies, some impaled, decapitated, other simply burned to ash. He'd learned the secret was to use their strength, their momentum against them. Once they got moving fast enough, stopping was a pipe dream leading to a cement wall. All over the country, 'Eraser Head' garnered a reputation, ironically making a name for himself as 'the unknown hero'. His exploits were the matter of speculation, nothing he did had any press, his villains all without name.
While some would glimpse, whisper of the bodies he left in his wake, these rumors were ensured to be little more than such. Shota Aizawa was a hunter, a lethal machine as ruthless and efficient as he'd boasted to the Man Without a Name.

'The Hero who Operates in the Shadows'... he liked that label.

Of course, this crusade could only go on so long...

**Ring, ring...**

Aizawa's eyes fluttered. Back in the classroom, back at UA. Just another memory, replaying before his eyes... how he'd grown tired of them invading his waking moments. Silencing the phone, picking up the handset and putting it to his ear he composed himself. "yes?"

"It's me," the voice of All Might, "I have an update on Midoriya..."

Putting any real distance between himself and the school had proven a rather fruitless effort. The afternoon sun had scorched his eyes so badly that he couldn't even see anymore. Not that he cared. Fingers along a brick wall guided him, giving some semblance of a path to follow. What he heard, the various sounds of the city around him, almost overwhelmed his ears. He couldn't see and his other senses were picking up the slack. How he wished his sense of smell hadn't bothered, as nothing smelled quite as awful as a city during lunch hour.

You'd think the smells of freshly cooked foods, of all kinds, would serve to reduce the vileness of every other scent. Garbage, exhaust, urine -for those who didn't care enough to wait and find a public restroom- drugs, rust, the leavings of birds. Putrid smells intensified by the mingling appetizing odors. One moment you're ready to start salivating and sit down for something delicious, the next that feeling is then corrupted by the rancid filth invading your nostrils. Even though such smells were no longer appetizing to he, Deku missed them enough for the effect to be the same. Trying to open his eyes, to rest his other senses produced a very loud, disorienting yelp. Of all the times to forget his sunglasses, not that their location was in any way known to him. There was also the matter of the rest of his belongings being there too.

He'd have to go back to UA... The thought filled him with dread. That was the last place he wanted to be anymore. If he hadn't just proven he was unfit to be a hero to All Might and Aizawa, he'd definitely just proven it to himself. What good could he really do there? Chasing this dream was self indulgence at its most ugly: without regard for the potential consequences to others. No matter, he wouldn't allow such things to go like that if he any say. Of course, he may not; considering Aizawa's prior warning it was almost assured that he would want Deku far, far away from the rest of his students. At least, now anyway, they agreed he was little more than a monster.

"Hey, kiddo," he heard a familiar voice, "you okay? What Happened to your... you?" It was the woman who'd given him that first pair of sunglasses. "What happened to you?" He'd almost forgotten about her.

"L-long story." He mumbled, completely uncertain what he should say.

A hand wrapped its fingers loosely around his, he jumped, flinching away from her touch. Forcing his mouth closed, almost by reflex, his heart rate skyrocketed. Recoiling, arms flying over his head, fingers clamping down on his mouth it was all he could not to scream 'stay away!' as loudly as possible.

"Kiddo, hey..." She'd walked over to him, he could... sense that she was reaching for him and
flinched into a somehow smaller shape. "It's okay," her tone sounded like she was smiling, trying to be reassuring, "come on." she took his hand again and his entire body went rigid with fear. "I'm just bringing you inside." Without many other options left to him, Deku complied. Once indoors, sweet lack of illumination kissing his retinas, he dared to reach up and massage them. "Here," she guided him to a chair, "take a seat, kiddo. Let those eyes recuperate."

"...thank you." Whatever this place was, it had some comfy chairs.

"I like what you've done with your hair," His hair was different? News to him, as he had yet to even catch a glimpse of a mirror, "when did you do that?" Small talk, not always the best method for soothing nerves. In this instance, however, it was reassuring to just act like a normal person.

To act like a human. "Uh, pretty recently." Deku mumbled, eagerly searching for a change of subject. "W-where are we?"

"Hmm? Oh, we're just at a barber shop."

...what?

"This is the only place I trust to cut my hair. Anywhere else and they just get it wrong." Eyes peeling open, tears covering his eyes in a protective film, he caught a distorted glimpse of the place. Just like back when these places first started popping up, a true antique of the city. Right down to the barber-shop-poll outside the front door. "I was just about done when Ikari pointed you out to me."

A sudden feeling of guilt, by now nothing new to him, gnawing at the pit of his stomach prompted Deku to lower his head. "S-sorry..."

"Oh don't sweat it," she smiled, batting the apology out of the air, "I just had to make sure you were okay." Eyes gaining some focus back he took a look at his would-be savior, coming to his aid for the second time and his eyebrows jumped. "What do you think?" He'd barely noticed her hair, he'd been far too distracted by her earlobes. "Thought I'd try something different." She brushed some of her violet hair behind her ear with her fingertips, further exposing the long, earphone-jack earlobe dangling from the side of her head.

"Y-you're-!" He checked himself, making sure he wasn't forgetting to keep control of his jaw. When she raised an eyebrow at him, he had to conclude his thought. "...Jiro's mom?"

Her eyes fluttered, smirk broadening to a smile. "Oh, you must be my daughter's classmate!" making a fist she lightly bumped her knuckles into his shoulder. "Unless that's not a hero costume you're wearing," she teased, in a strangely polite manner. "Tell me, is she making any friends?"

Deku blinked. "Whu... why?"

"Well..." she trailed off, expression falling. Fingers fussing at her pant-leg, a quiet click of her tongue against the backs of her teeth preempted her next words by a noticeable margin. "Can you keep a secret?" Hesitantly, he nodded and she sighed. "I'm... uncertain what to tell you."

Deku blinked, some of the focus finally returning to his vision. Sitting before him was... a sight that truly caught him off guard: her shoulders were slumped, head slightly inclined, eyes staring at her lap as she remained almost entirely motionless. A sad hint of a smile perched upon her lips, matching the look in her downcast eyes. "Whenever the thought of my little Kyo-Kyo going to school crosses my mind I get a little muddled," despite the woman's rather downcast demeanor, it was all Deku could do not to audibly go 'aww' hearing that nickname.
Instead, he allowed himself a smirk as she went on, "see, when she was in elementary school, going into early middle school, something... changed." Judging by her tone, this was not a topic lightly broached. "She started getting more and more closed off, standoffish with people." One of her hands gripped at a portion of her pantleg. "It was so... jarring. Watching my sweet little girl turn into something harsher, seemingly out of nowhere."

Her expression fell completely, taking Deku's heart with it as it sank. "The change in hairstyles, the clothing, the swearing, never smiling, always sounding growly... It wasn't until much later that I learned there'd been something going on with a bully at her school." Something clicked, "she and one of her friends were targets of their's," and clicked loudly in Deku's brain, "I didn't find out until after... well, it didn't make much difference by then."

This, this was why she had it out for Bakugo.

"She spent so much time yelling at the teachers to do something, which," she scoffed bitterly, "of course they didn't. So she put on a brave face and dealt with it on her own." She turned and offered Deku a sad smile, "she only tells me anything when she has good news, even now. Color me surprised when she starts talking about this boy with green, fluffy hair who protected her from a thug, with a little smirk on her face." Her look shifted, adopting a more knowing expression, again 'bopping' his shoulder. "Wonder who that might have been."

"I- I dunno," Deku tried to smile reassuringly, but he wasn't exactly feeling well himself, "s-some clumsy weirdo, I guess."

Miss Jiro laughed. "Probably, but who knows." At least his flimsy attempt at humor had worked. Sighing, somewhat more happily than before, she hesitated before voicing one last thing. "Keep looking after my little girl, would you?" Another bout of blinking in surprise corrected nothing with reality. She was being serious. "She doesn't... her first instinct isn't usually to trust adults, or much of anyone. If she wants to be your friend... would you?"

...God damn it. "Yeah," he muttered, "I will. ...if that's what she wants."

So much for abandoning UA, and for ignoring that old dream. When was he going to get it through his head that he could only help by staying away from people? Leave it to a lost soul with no other options available and asking for help to turn him back the way he came. Back toward the wrong path, the path life seemed determined to steer him away from.

She smiled, appreciatively at him for a moment when something outside caught her eye. "More friends of yours?" Bracing his eyes, Deku turned toward the window. Sure enough, there were Ashido and Kaminari -the latter of the two being entirely out of breath- racing into the shop.

"Caught ya!" Ashido blurted out, poking him square on the nose. "You seem a lot better." Her smile quirked, a note of concern on it. "All except for that eye though. That's still a thing..."

His eye? "What?" Deku turned toward the mirror and watched the orb in question widen in shock, leaping toward it, close as his face could go. "WHAT?"

When the hell had his sclera turned black?! And that scarring... Bottom lip now the latest victim of his teeth, though it was lucky enough not to be punctured by them, he could only stare in dismay at his face. Half the hair on the right side of his face was white, eyebrow included, skin gone almost milky white where Bakugo had burned him. His forehead slumped against the glass and he let out a groan. "Oh come on..."

Panting, gasping for air, Kaminari did his best to make him feel better. "Hey... relax..." his voice
cracked in the funniest way when he couldn't breathe, "chicks... dig scars, man..."

"Says you!" Deku blurted, spinning his face round to look at him. "Do you know what my mom is gonna do when she sees this!?" His head slumped, a palm rising up to shove itself against his face. "Oh god she's gonna have a heart attack..." Hell, she might try to keep him from coming back to UA at all.

Pulling him from these thoughts was Ashido, nudging him. "Hey, it's okay. She'll calm right down when she realizes it's just one psycho ya had to deal with." She grinned, carefree as could be. "Nuthin to worry about."

Deku could only gawk at her in awe. "...what kind of parents do you have?" She just laughed at that.

"Hey there," at the sound of that voice, doing its best to sound as non-threatening as possible, every face in the room turned to see its source: All Might, with one of Deku's belongings in particular in hand. "It's not wise to run away from medical treatment like that, young man." With a gentle smile, he handed Deku his sunglasses. "I understand it's been a rough day for you, but you can't just run off like that."

Nodding, Deku reached out and put his sunglasses back on. "...where did you get these?"

All Might chuckled. "Your friend Uraraka dug them out of the rubble." At least the silly things weren't cracked to pieces. "Ran into her on my way to Recovery Girl's office. She was very insistent that I made sure you had them."

Deku was one part touched and another part confused. "Is- isn't everyone scared of me now?" mumbled he. "Why would she...?"

Kaminari scoffed. "Of you!? Dude, no. If anyone's scared of anyone, it's gonna be Bakugo."

Kaminari shivered. "Talk about unhinged..."

Stunned, Deku turned toward Ashido who smiled encouragingly. "So your quirk has some unorthodox stuff about it," she gestured to her everything, "so does mine, and no one's scared of me."

Says the pink marshmallow... He thought, in reference to her personality. Though from what little that costume left to the imagination, had he meant it another way, not many would have argued. "Easy for you to say... you didn't just-"

"Hey," Ashido pointed right at his face, smiling in a way that was difficult to read, "stop beating yourself up. You're supposed to be doing that to villains, silly." ...her methods of consoling others left much to be desired. "Now come on," she grinned, carefree as her usual self could be, "lets get outta here."

"I concur," said All Might, "Lets get you lot back for the last hour or so of school. I think Aizawa wants to go over something with all of you."

Gulping at the prospect, of what surely lay before him, Deku nodded glumly. Filing outside behind their teacher -his childhood idol- he gave a last look toward Miss Jiro and waved. She smiled, waving back, mouthing the words 'good luck' as he ventured outside. At least the walk back wouldn't be nearly so unpleasant, despite what was waiting for him up ahead.

Principal Nezu, a man more resembling a rat than a human. His entire body, from head to toe, was
that of a three foot rodent in a suit. A scar hung over and across his right eye, the only sign that he'd ever been a hero, how he got it was a story he seldom told. Presently, he sat at his desk, fingers laced together, elbows propped up on his desk and his chin resting on his entwined fingers. Aizawa sat in silence, in one of the chairs before Nezu's desk, waiting for his reply. It was only a few more seconds before he needed wait no longer.

"You're sure?" Nezu opened his eyes, ears tilting down like weighted leaves, denoting an air of something akin to sadness, or concern. "This is how you want to handle things?"

Aizawa scoffed. "Are you kidding?" Nezu tilted his head to one side, waiting for him to elaborate. "This is the exact opposite of what I want to do," the teacher sighed, "but I don't see any other way."

Nezu smiled, more to reassure himself than anything else. "You know he will find out eventually." Aizawa's fingers curled into a fist, gripping his pant-leg. "This can't stay a secret forever..."

The teacher turned his gaze toward the window. "It doesn't have to." Voice the barest trace of a murmur. "It only has to last long enough."

It was always painful to see a member of his staff so dejected, and with nothing to be done about it as well. It rather left the old mouse wishing he could do more than simply offer consolation. "I should warn you," Aizawa cast him a sidelong look, "if its redemption you seek, helping this boy... you may be disappointed to find what it leaves you with."

And his gaze was back to the window. "Who says I'm after redemption?" the teacher murmured. "Redemption implies forgiveness, and to obtain forgiveness, there has to be someone left to forgive you." Heavy, with wound and weight the world would never see, he stood and walked to the window. "There is no forgiveness for what I've done." Outside he witnessed the approach of All Might, the runaway students in tow. Hands to his pockets he turned to leave when a thought struck him. "You'll go along with it, right?"

Again, the old rodent smiled. "If that's what you think is best."

"Heh..." Aizawa chuckled mirthlessly. "That's what got us into this mess, if you remember." He turned and smiled, darkly at his old friend, shadows cast under his eyes accentuating the dark circles around them. "Thanks, Nezu... guess is another I owe you."

Nezu chuckled. "So long as your student's are taken care of, we'll call it even." With that, the teacher walked away, leaving the old rodent to ponder their decision. In truth, only time would tell if they'd made the right call with this one...

Changed back into his uniform, bandages removed and costume sent to be salvaged, Deku stared glumly at the mirror. All his life, all that he could remember, he and Bakugo had... well, they'd never really been the best of friends. When they were very small, three going on to four, he used to follow him about like a duckling. Bakugo was the kind of kid who just charged off and did things. No qualms, no nerves to get in his way. Naturally the other boys flocked behind him, easy to follow a brave example.

As time went along, and this slowly became the norm, Bakugo getting good grades, starting to show signs of athletic prowess his attitude started souring. With all the praise being heaped upon him, it seemed the natural order of things that it just go on, even when his behavior was less than ideal. So rarely were words of criticism spoken of him that it began to sound strange whenever someone dared to defy the trend. Hey, did you know the kanji for 'Izuku' can be read as
'Deku'? He'd announced one day, like it was the greatest thing in the world. Like 'Dekunobou'! Izuku's a useless Deku! And so the trend of the poor, green haired child being Bakugo's preferred punching bag began.

If Bakugo was one side of a yin-yang -representing talent and potential, things to aspire to be- then 'Deku' was the opposite. Eventually, as decades rolled on, everyone saw it that way. No one questioned it when Bakugo treated him badly, no one cared. Only when they'd reached adolescence did things take a turn for the worst and it had crossed the line toward being truly antagonistic. Even still, the poor, quirkless child couldn't bring himself to admit that was what was happening. He'd always held onto the hope, the denial that things could ever be anything else; that they could be like they were when they were small. He'd always been able to deny the evidence saying such things were no longer possible.

Now that such a truth was literally engraved onto his face, he couldn't. There was no denying it any longer: Bakugo was... not worth it. He'd stopped being worth it long ago. An eye scorched black, burn scars across one half of his face, even his hair had been disfigured. Though he supposed he was lucky to even have it by this point. Reaching up, tracing fingers over his newly deformed skin, he found it felt no different. Just the same as always, with perhaps a wrinkle here or there. Oh well... The price you pay for being so ill prepared.

So it was with a sigh that he put on his sunglasses, put his hands in his pockets and shuffled along to the classroom, where he saw Aizawa waiting for him. At the sight of the poor boy his eyebrows jumped. "That-" he paused. "Your injuries didn't heal the way they should have."

Deku shrugged, "any idea why?"

The teacher shook his head, "ask The Lady." Obviously, Vanessa. "As for now... listen close." And listen he did, though all the while he felt his stomach churning.

This couldn't possibly end well.

"Do you understand?" At his teacher's inquiry, Deku nodded, though it was without heart. Sure he understood, but this had him understandably on edge. "Good," Said Aizawa, "then lets get this over with."

The two of them walked into the room, Deku devoid of confidence -shivering in anticipation- and Aizawa sulking forward as usual. Though there was an odd weight to his step. Standing at the head of the room, side by side, they faced the rest of the class who were sitting expectantly. For some reason, Bakugo was absent. Unknown to Deku he was currently being given a detailed description of his punishment by the principal. All Might gave them a thumbs up from the back of the room, but this only made Deku's nerves scream louder.

"Listen up," the hunter turned teacher announced, his tone demanding their full attention, "because we're not gonna say this again, and what we say is not leaving this room unless you want me to ensure none of you ever get to be heroes. Clear?" Murmurs of affirmation, nervous though some of them were, made their way to the front of the room, and Aizawa gave the floor to Deku. "All yours." And he sat at his desk, waiting for the inevitable to unfold.

Deku took a deep breath, for all the good that it did, and looked across the room.

In for a penny... "Um, h-hey." He shuffled his feet, toes of one foot poking at the floor. "There's uh, s- something I should-" he gulped, "I mean, something you should uh..." come on, Deku, you can do this... "W-what you saw back at the training ground, there's an- um, an explanation for..." he bit his lip, jaw trembling.
This was mortifying, humiliating, scary. He was amazed at the amount of words he'd even managed to speak at this point. Drawing in another breath, the quirkless teen made up his mind, and just blurted it out. "I'm a vampire!" His eyes, such as they were, flinched shut. "It's not a vampirism based quirk or- or something like that, I'm-" flinching, shrinking where he stood, the truth stung like the burns had on his face. "I'm a monster... an honest freak of nature who- who drinks people's blood just to survive." Silence followed his exposition, fellow classmates onlooking with faces he feared too much to see. "I'm a vampire..." he repeated, "you had a right to know..."

More silence, a few murmurs and looks were exchanged among those present of his classmates. His eyes remained shut, face turned to the floor. Any second now he'd hear it: the outcries of disgust, matching the fear doubtlessly written on their faces. Bracing for it, shoulders going as tense as could be, he grimaced at the sound of a student's voice. "Yeah..." said she, ribbiting for some odd reason, "we know."

Deku's eyes peeled open, an expression of astonishment plastered on his features his jaw hung open as he looked up at his classmates. "...what?"

"We know," repeated the girl, she looked vaguely frog-like too, "we kinda puzzled it out on our own... it was obvious."

He blinked, his eyes searching all over the room for any sign of what he'd anticipated and found nothing. Eventually he looked to Uraraka, who giggled nervously. "Ashido kinda made us promise not to say anything about it until you were ready to tell us." The pinkette in question snickered mischievously at the mention of her involvement. "It's okay, Deku," there was that smile. "You'll figure out how to get a hang of it!"

"Not sure what difference you think that makes," Kaminari shrugged, regarding the snickering girl with a quirked eyebrow, "we all saw your, uh, powers in action and no one's afraid of you, right?"

"And its not as if any of us are really in any place to judge you," said one girl with the longest pony tail Deku had ever seen, "from what I hear the teacher of class 1B's quirk is... considerably more unsettling to behold." Poor girl looked pale just at the mention of it...

A kid with a very bird-like head nodded in agreement. "You're not so monstrous or out of place as you might think, Midoriya." Another student grunted, nodding in much the same way as the bird-boy. A student with six arms, a splash of white hair and a mask over his entire lower jaw.

"So what if your biology's a bit different?" Ashido remarked, "Everyone's biology is a bit different!" She grinned. "Just part of the human experience."

Deku couldn't help but flinch. "But... I'm not human..."

"Screw that noise," He was almost shocked to hear Jiro speak up like that, "you're still a person under all the fangs and claws, aren't you?" She offered him a smirk, and Deku noted -thanks to what her mother had told him- that it did seem a little awkward. The same kind of awkwardness that his own fake smiles bore, from his lack of practice dealing with other people. "Don't sweat that nonsense." She remarked, tone trying for something nonchalant, reassuring. "Just keep trying to be a good person and no one will care what your species is."

Jiro... A truly touching sentiment indeed, the first time he'd heard such a thing. Being acknowledge as different and accepted anyway wasn't something he'd ever considered possible; not since the day everyone learned he was a quirkless freak. Were it not for the clenching of his jaw, the shoving down of his welling emotions, he might have teared up. But that wasn't something he could afford to do anymore, for the lack of control that followed, and that hurt worse than anything.
"I'm sure you'll make an exemplary hero!" Iida declared, finally joining the conversation. "The best heroes often have handicaps such as yours, if not worse in some instances. The greatest hardships produce the greatest strengths!" Okay, that was oddly encouraging. For a guy who was all business, Iida had some heart.

Akaguro chuckled under his breath, a wide smile pulling at his face. "Didn't see this one coming..." He looked to the vampire. "At least now you can rest a little easier, friend."

When Deku turned to Aizawa he just saw the man nod. "Go on," he murmured, "sit down." As he treaded lightly to his seat, the teacher walked back to the head of the room, pondering what to say next. With a tired sigh, he seemed to have discerned it. "It is a difficult thing, being a hero. Over the years you may be expected to keep secrets." The class lost some of its lighthearted demeanor at the utterance of such a thing. "Being trusted by the public, by law enforcement agencies and the like is... no small burden. It carries with it a heavy responsibility and complicated relationship to the truth. Knowing when to tell it, when to lie and when to say nothing at all is one of the most difficult lessons any of you will ever learn."

Eyes glancing at Deku for a moment left the vampire feeling cold, wondering what lesson he was supposed to learn from this. Wondering whether this was a moment to feel dread rather than relief.

"Consider this, and how you handle and keep this secret with your classmate," Aizawa declared with an air of finality, "the beginning of that lesson." His expression, for the first time Deku had seen, lost any hint of fatigued and carried only a stern resolution. "Look alive, children. Because from this moment on: You're all heroes." Or at least, they'd taken their first real step toward becoming heroes. Deku could only hope it was for the best, as it was now far too late to alter course.

This was his life now.
Shuffling of chairs, metal scraping against the floor of the classroom sang out in a chorus as the final bell sounded. While the others all walked for the door, Deku remained where he was. This earned a pair of rather puzzled looks from Jiro and Akaguro, who were waiting for him at the doorway. Uraraka and Iida appeared as though they might have joined them, but one look at their homeroom teacher's glowering face discouraged them, so off they went.

Just when the green haired boy was about to say something, Aizawa spoke instead. "All Might and I have business with him. Be on your way." With some hesitation, wavering between one path or another, the two remaining teens obeyed, leaving the vampire to whatever awaited him.

Once the classroom was free of all but Deku and the two teachers, Aizawa sighed. Digging his thumb and index fingers into his eyes he took a few moments to compose himself. "I'm sorry."

Deku blinked. For a moment, the teenager was rendered thoughtless.

"I… allowed my prejudices to affect my judgement once again, and as a result I failed to consider your safety when passing my notes on this class to All Might." Of all the unprecedented occurrences to have graced his life lately, a teacher apologizing for negligence in the face of Bakugo's wrath was somehow the most unexpected.

Maybe his brain was still damaged… "I should have been more concerned about that boy's attitude, and your adversarial relationship with him in conjunction with that." Fingers pulling away from his eyes, Aizawa's face looked as though it had aged another decade with how tired he appeared now. Truly, he was as out of his element in this as all the others. Thinking of a vampire as anything other than an obstacle, a menace, would take time.

"As a result... " the scraggly man motioned toward the boy's face. "I'm sorry."

It was odd, but not knowing what to say was becoming a familiar feeling. "...I'll be fine." Mumbled he, fidgeting with his fingers.

After another few moments of quiet, Aizawa voiced another concern. "What do you intend?"

The vampire could only blink. "What?"

Aizawa considered how best to phrase this for a time. It was a rather sensitive matter. "Are you still interested in being a hero?"

Mild confusion was now replaced with a feeling of astonishment. "Th- that's an option?" Deku's voice was barely above the decibel level of a sleeping person's breath. "You're not- I'm allowed to-"

Aizawa growled out a sigh, thumb and index finger back at his eyes. "Were you not paying attention just a few minutes ago?" Shifting in his seat, the teenager managed to feel quite silly listening to the man talk. "When I said 'from this moment on, you're all heroes', I didn't exclude you." Wanting to simultaneously cry and scream in joy left Deku's face looking almost absurd. Not that the teacher noticed. "What happened during your heroics class… even if I wanted to blame it on you, there's no way I could." Once again, fingers dragging down his features left the man looking all the more exhausted.

"Th-thank you sir." Deku managed to avoid blurring the words out in exaggerated delight. All the
same, the teacher yet to speak placed a hand on his shoulder, patting him reassuringly.

"Worry not, young Midoriya. You've nothing to fear as far as all this is concerned." If he had any worries left over at all, All Might had just removed them from the equation. "Eraser Head and I will have your back for as long as you're in our classes." With a thumbs up, a gesture he was only all too famous for making, he concluded, "You have my word."

Rather than say anything on this matter himself, Aizawa simply remained silent. From his complete lack of motion it seemed as though he was trying to blend into his surroundings and disappear. How he loathed promises…

"Now," All Might clapped his hands together, "sorry to just abandon you after this, but I must be on my way. Until next time, future hero!"

For a man of his size, All Might sure could run when he wanted to. Deku's eyes almost hadn't followed through with the motion of his body as he fled the room. Comical as it was, he thought he saw steam or clouds of dust billowing in his wake. For such urgency, it must have been something important.

Again, Aizawa sighed. "You can head outside now, but I'm going to request that you wait for me." Before Deku could ask why, the teacher was already answering. "I imagine your mother… will need convincing that you should be allowed to continue here."

Deku gulped, audibly. A matter his subconscious had been doing its utmost to avoid contemplating, for the sheer terror it elicited. For all the long years he'd been Inko's son, she'd never given him a reason to be afraid of her. Sure, she was terrifying when she was angry -as all mothers are to their children- but this was not what had the junior Midoriya so afraid. For all her nurturing and generally placid demeanor, when she got protective of him there wasn't a force on this earth more formidable.

If there was one thing he and Bakugo had in common, it was that they took after their mothers. Angry, prone to outbursts and the loudest, most imposing voice in whatever room they occupied. The only difference between Bakugo and his mom was that she smiled more, and possessed an indoor voice that didn't still burst people's eardrums. At least, so far as Deku had observed.

During a parent teacher conference, back when Deku was nine, the matter of 'Kacchan's' treatment of the green haired boy had been brought up. When Mrs Bakugo had tried to brush off the matter of her son antagonizing the other boy, Inko had given her a very distinct look. It was the only look she'd needed to sway the conversation in her favor. While she hadn't managed to stop the bullying altogether -as no one and nothing ever did, teachers being as useless as they were- Bakugo had eased it back a bit from then on.

Such a feat from the simple, menacing glare of a mother bear and as icing on the cake: Bakugo's mom, the woman whom the explosive teen took after, was wary of Inko Midoriya. Deku wasn't proud of much, but for that he was proud of her. But now… Now he was afraid of what her verdict would be on this matter, and that thought had him gulping down his nerves. "She- she might…" managed he, fear lacing the tone of his voice.

With another sigh, the hero reached for the closest drawer on his desk. A humble nod was his only indication that he understood. Swiveling around in his chair, massaging his temples, Aizawa motioned for Deku to leave, muttering something about needing a minute. Evidently it hadn't been an easy day for him either. Head held low, the young vampire wandered out of the classroom. Somewhere, out of the corner of his eye, he saw a tall man with incredibly angular features, a shock of spiky blond hair and sunken eyes. Black sclera, much like his own right eye, with piercing...
blue irises. The man looked exhausted, staggering to the teacher's lounge. Probably the teacher of some extracurricular class he hadn't the option of taking yet. But that could be answered later, right now he wasn't in the mood to find out.

Considering what surely awaited him at home he doubted there was much point in indulging any curiosity relating to this place. Crossing the threshold of the front door, sunglasses adjusted further up his nose now, he flinched a little at the light of the setting sun. It was only a moment later that his eyes blinked open and wide in surprise. Standing, leaning against one of the marble statues lining the walkway to UA's front doors, was a certain woman with long black hair and glowing, blue eyes. When she caught sight of Deku her expression took a turn toward forlorn.

She approached him, sad eyes locked on his face, taking in the damage wrought upon his features. In a surprise gesture, she reached out, fingers running over his scarred flesh, and pulled him into a hug. Further still to his surprise, he didn't mind at all. If anything, the embrace put him at ease. "I'm so sorry, little one." Her hand was on the back of his head, fingers squeezing lightly at his skull.

He hugged her back. "It wasn't your fault… I got reckless, thought I could handle myself enough to face Kacchan…"

She shook her head, hugging him just a bit tighter. "Teaching you how to handle yourself is my job. That you couldn't, and wound up like this, is my failure. Not yours." Why was everyone determined to take the blame away from him?

Behind him, the doors to the school opened, Aizawa stepping through them paused at the sight of them embracing. Seeing them act so… human jarred him, like a needle had pierced his chest. Bodies, broken and torn to pieces by his own hands flashed before his eyes. Faces twisted in horror, rage, lips spread just wide enough to show their fangs but the eyes, always so afraid as their faint glow extinguished, held an icy grip on his mind. Motion of two creatures, the only two yet living, pulled him free of the visions. She was shielding the boy with her arms, glaring at the hero with accusation burning in gaze. All he could do was look away in shame, though he let none of it show. Both because of the day behind him and the years further still in the past.

Now wasn't the time to face down those demons… "Thought you'd be here sooner." He adopted his usual tone: tired, gruff and seemingly without the patience required to deal with humanity.

Her eyes glazed for another moment longer, but the look faded as she released the boy from her arms. It seemed she was intent on giving the impression that all was well between her and the hunter. "I came as soon as I got the message," she disclosed, "other responsibilities kept me occupied from the moment I awoke." Despite her warm smile, those eyes still cut like razors. "And I believe you know of what I speak."

Indeed he did. "We can discuss this later," Sighed the weary, sleep deprived human, "right now we have other matters to contend with..."
diagnosis.

Credit Japan for as much as you like: its cuisine, the colorful and sordid history of its ever evolving culture and the art that came with it, technological advances, the creation of certain animated entertainment medium. If there was one thing the people never seemed entirely rid of -something hardly unique to the nation in question- it was foolishly prideful men, clinging to the last vestiges of an outdated, archaic form of masculinity. It was such that prompted Hisashi to abandon his family, leaving for some faraway nation once described as 'a frozen wasteland whose only exports were alcohol and domestic abuse'. So it goes…

Soldiering on, dusting off her degree from college and heading back into the professional she went. Her old boss had been more than happy to hire her back on, apparently her newest accountant was an idiot, head in the clouds and all too eager to clock out each and every day. Sad as she was to get someone fired, her baby needed her here. Many a tired night was spent crying herself to sleep after tucking that little boy in and singing him to slumber.

Now, despite the persecution, despite his obvious handicap and ever mounting stacked odds against his favor, her son was attending UA and on the road to becoming a hero. It almost didn't seem real, such an impossible and unlikely feat being performed by her little boy. She'd have tasted a lie to say that the fear for his safety didn't come some small amount of pride. Although, the aforementioned fear rather overwhelmed most other feelings she had about their present situation. Nothing was more pressing on her mind than the worry that she would one day receive some news, delivered with the cold clinicity only doctors or police could manage, describing some horrid affair that left her baby in ruins.

It didn't help that it was presently well past the time he usually texted, announcing he was on his way home. She could only fidget with her tea, read so many pages of her book before it all started really digging in. A text shot his way went unanswered. Another, asking him what he wanted for dinner, served as a gentle reminder that she was awaiting a reply; or any word at all. Rather than any sort of reply to calm her currently spastic nerves, she received a jolt to her heart when someone knocked on the door. Clearing her throat, attempting to center herself, she walked to the door and opened it. Had she been holding anything at all, it would have clattered to the floor as a testament to her shock. There was her son, one of his eyes gone black where it had once been white and burn scars along the upper half of his face. To make the sight of him all the more jarring, his hair on that same side had gone white as paper.

Concern, shock, the whole gamut of what she felt must have been painted on her face, for Izuku couldn't bear to look her in the eye. "H- hi mom…"

Unable to cognize in the slightest Inko's arms flung themselves around him, pulling him in tight. "Who?" Wavering as it was, weighted with guilt along with the whirlwind of feelings she was already failing to conceal, her voice was only a touch more audible than his. "What happened?"

Her gaze was now a sharp glare, aimed at the two adults looming behind her son. One was a man, bedraggled, disheveled and worn with fatigue as one could be. Tall, sharp eyed and deceptively unimposing figure. The second was a woman, clearly a foreigner. Pale as the moon, slender, the posture of one brimming with confidence despite the shame on her face. Glowing blue eyes hiding behind a pair of dark sunglasses, long, flowing, black hair which seemed tinted with red wherever the light reflected off it. Giving her an unsettling air were the shadows cast upon her sunken cheeks, from the faint glow of her eyes.

When no answer was forthcoming from either of them, she spoke again. "Who are you, and what happened to my son?" Now her tone cut like a hot knife, intimidating as the cry of a warrior. She
knew not what a feat she'd achieved when the scraggly man had to swallow his unease.

"Apologies," her glare sharpened at the man's hastily given recompense, "I'm Shota Aizawa, your son's homeroom teacher."

The woman - though perhaps 'lady' would have been a more fitting label for her - reflexively raised her hand, offering a handshake, only to lower it again. "You may call me Vanessa. Vanessa Valentine." She inclined her head, hair falling from behind her ear and trailing down toward the ground. "We... owe you an explanation."

The following turn of events went all too painfully slowly for the taste of either Midoriya in the household. Izuku was sent to his room, tea was poured from the already singing kettle and the three adults gathered round the dining room table. A tale was spun, one that started less than four hours ago. While Aizawa hadn't been there for the events, he had enough first hand accounts from all involved to provide all that was necessary for a retelling. At the end of it, even with the grisliest of details censored as much as could be, Inko was mortified, furious, beside herself with trembling hands resting on her teacup.

After a tempered, slow sip of her tea, a long exhalation of air served as the only viable method to calm herself. "Years," she murmured. "That boy has been picking on my Izuku for years." Not once did her tone lilt from its steady, controlled pace. "And now, only after he was almost murdered by that boy, does anyone even begin to address it." She had to avert her eyes from them, tears were threatening to run freely. It made her angry, she wasn't sad she was furious. "What the hell...?" She could feel her teeth gritting. "Is this what I think it is? Some plea for me not to sue the school?"

Oh how tempting a thought it was... maybe then people would finally take her claims seriously. Maybe then something would finally be done for her son's benefit instead of just the same old, tired routine of ignoring him; like all the other quirkless in the world, it seemed all anyone wanted was to look away until they disappeared. Society's ugly little blemish.

If their loved ones were so disadvantaged, how then would the lot of them treat ones such as her little Izu? "Tell me," she turned her face back toward them, "why on earth shouldn't I? I left him in your care, under your supervision and this wasn't prevented!" She couldn't help the climbing decibel level of her speech. Over a decade of this was too much, and seeing people start to care only in a scenario where it potentially affected them directly? No. No more. "Give me one good reason why I shouldn't, and pull him as far away from that school as I can!" Shoulders shaking, tears glistening under the artificial light and glare that would have made a hunger crazed lion think twice before approaching. Incredible for one so unimposing in the faces of such company.

For a long time, both her 'guests' contemplated this. Neither of them had the nerve to speak. Arguing with such a declaration... how could they? To Aizawa's surprise, The Lady beat him to it. "How did your son get into UA?"

Inko had to suppress a growl. "What's that got to do with any of this?"

Valentine persisted, her tone soft. "Do you know?"

Another bout of gritting her teeth preempted any further reply. "An oversight, I assumed." She murmured, continuing to hold back her ferocity. "He's clearly not safe attending that school. Why you decided to humor such a suicidal endeavor is beyond me, but he shouldn't have had to pay for it."

Aizawa's eyes crept further open, his shoulders drooping lower. She didn't know... "You still think he's quirkless." The man breathed. Credit where it was due, young Midoriya was better at keeping
his identity a secret than he'd suspected.

The whirlwind of emotions Miss Midoroya had been keeping at bay flickered. "Of course I do," she looked at him like he was an idiot, "if he had a quirk he would have been over the moon. Happy, bouncing off the walls with joy," memories of her boy behaving exactly like that carried a bitter sting. He'd been like that once, so bright and full of life, smiling at almost every turn. But now... "but he's not like that any more." More tears, these ones giving her guests a dull ache in their chests for the sympathy it prompted. "He had it kicked out of him over the last ten years… Now he barely even smiles at me."

The teacher felt like a mountain had just been dropped on his back. It was on them to tell her what had become of her son. There really was no justice in the world at all… Breaking the momentary silence, Valentine tentatively began to speak. "Miss Midoriya," began she, earning the direct gaze of the woman she was intent on breaking the news to. "Do you remember the night your son wound up in the hospital? It would have been a month or so ago at this point."

"Of course I remember," she eyed the stranger curiously, warily. "That's not the kind of thing you just forget because it 'ended well'." Only words so true, or perhaps less so, had ever been spoken. "What's that got to do with anything?"

It took another moment for Valentine to find the right words. "Everything…” a slow going endeavor, for this was not a topic hastily delved into. "That night, I saw your son try to save that other boy," Inko's finger tightened around her mug, "and I saw him get hurt. Saw him flung from the alleyway and found him dying." The mother's gaze averted, blinking back another round of tears.

"When I got to him," Said Vanessa, "he had maybe minutes left to live."

Some of Inko's ire gave way to a fearful curiosity, unsure where this woman was going with her story.

"Make no mistake, I called an ambulance but… not before I made him an offer." Now, all that was worn on the mother's face was worry, the air this story held was one that would have made most anyone uneasy; never mind when it was being told in regards to one's family. "I offered him his life, a chance at being a hero." Inko's eyes went wide. "But it came with a price, a change in his very being that I've neglected to aid him in adjusting to." And she met the human's gaze allowing her fangs to peek just a touch past her lips. "In order to save his life… I had to turn him into what I am, Miss Midoriya: a Vampire."

She could scarcely believe it, even with one such creature staring her in the face. "Vampire?" she breathed, quite reluctant to accept this as truth. "Your taste in jokes is abhorrent." and her grip once again tightened around her. "My son's life isn't some-!"

"It's the truth…" Aizawa interrupted, doing her no small favor. This was not a conversation meant to be overheard and had he not interjected, she might have started yelling. Admirable that it took her so long to get to that point. "Most of my career, my… success is largely credited to hunting them down." He met the mother's gaze, finding her full of shock, terror.

It pained him considerably to be among those responsible for such grief. "Vampires… officially they're extinct, Valentine is the only one who was allowed to live and she… well, her life is essentially owned by the hero organization she's technically employed by." A slight shuffling could be heard from Izuku's room, surprised at overhearing such a thing. "She has to work as a hero, never turn another living soul, harm no innocents… It was the only way I could secure her continuing existence."
Now it was his fingers tightening their grip and he let out a long sigh. "You asked us why your son should still attend UA? I only have one answer," and for the first time, in he no longer knew how many years, his facade cracked. Lurking behind the face of this tired, unfeeling man was an old fool consumed by guilt; and it was eating him alive, "all his life, he's lived as an outcast, friendless and rejected by society," underhanded as it was to say, it was the truth, "but now... it looks like that's turning around for him."

He had to look away from her, eyes peering into his tea, yet untouched. "In addition to being the only place, the only path that might teach him to control himself and adjust to his new species, the hero world is the only place I can think of where he might actually fit in and have a chance at happiness." It was a conviction he held with the utmost sincerity, weighted by the accompanying guilt of such manipulation though it was.

Aizawa gave Inko an apologetic look, unable to mask it away. "I'm sorry, but I don't have another answer for you aside from this," he inclined his head, bowing to the woman who'd welcomed him into her home, "I will do everything I can to ensure his safety, and that his time is not wasted in my class."

"You may count on myself as well," Valentine put forward, following suit with the bow, "if it means sacrificing my time as 'hero', then so be it. I am responsible for him being as he is, and the consequences that shall befall me for being so."

For a time, they remained much like that. Teacher and a murderer, a monster and a hero, bowing before a humble single mother of one. In their collective hands rested not only the fate of one boy - a boy more important than all the world where the mother was concerned- and an entire species along with him.

So long as it was within his best interests, "...Okay." she would accept this course of action. "Just... keep your promises, please. He's been through so much already..." and their conversation was concluded.

Guests ushered to the door, apologies issued, farewells spoken, phone numbers traded, they bid each other goodnight. As Inko closed the door, gently turning the locks, she felt the world falling onto her shoulders, much as it had on that fateful day of her son's diagnosis. Numbly, she walked to his room and knocked on the door only to hear the sound of shuffling blankets. Him hiding beneath them. Bracing herself she entered his room, seeing curled up beneath the covers and doing his best to stop crying. The sounds of him struggling, grappling with his feelings... no, too much. She closed the distance between them and wrapped her arms tight around him.

Almost immediately, he tried to get away. "M-mom, no!" The panic in his voice... "I'm not safe! You shouldn't-"

"I don't care." she squeezed tighter.

He struggled more, doing his best to avoid hurting her as he tried to squirm away. "Please, when I cry I can't- can't-" he had to force words through a strangled sob, her eyes winced tight, tears pushing through them. "I'll just end up biting you!"

"I don't care..." and she pushed her face against the top of his head, petting him soothingly with one of her hands. "You're my baby boy." He froze, going silent in the process. "If you think some teeth are going to scare me away, after everything else, you are wrong." She could feel his shoulder shaking again. "I'm not letting go."

*I'm sorry, Izuku! I'm so sorry!*
The last thing on earth she ever should have said back then, echoing in her mind for how familiar this moment seemed. In time, she had come to regret saying such a thing to him. "I don't care what happens." And he gripped at her arms, burying his face against them as he started sobbing violently, shaking in her arms like a child.

A last moment to be human, before things would truly begin to change.

Outside the home, some distance away on the street, Vanessa stood and listened. How she hated what had become of this family, due to her meddling. But it couldn't be helped, her decision was no less correct than it had been that month ago. If was ever correct at all. To her left, and some distance further still, Aizawa drained the contents of his hip-flask into his mouth and swallowed. Coughing caught his attention, and he turned to see a frighteningly thin man with very angular features approaching.

"You're late." Aizawa almost growled.

"Sorry," said the living scarecrow, "Recovery Girl wanted to make sure I was alright. I pushed myself pretty far past my time-limit today." A fact that Aizawa had neglected to remember amidst all the day's chaos. "She almost didn't let me leave at all."

The scraggly man scoffed. "You can't hide behind that excuse and be the symbol of peace at the same time. People aren't only going to need you when it's convenient." This earned a rather curious, if not scathing, look from Vanessa, finally turning her attention away from the semi hysterical family.

At the exact same time, the scarecrow noticed her presence as well. "Aizawa," he spoke in a low murmur, "we're not alone..." but then... he recognized her. She was the civilian who'd gotten far too close to the slime-villain that day. "You..." he breathed, "what are you doing here?"

In reply she walked over to him, hand pulling a hero ID from her pocket. "Relax, your secret is safe, mister...?"

He extended his hand, always nice to meet a fellow do-gooder. "Yagi," he disclosed as she accepted the handshake, "Toshinori Yagi. I think you know my other name."

He offered a polite smile, one she graciously returned. "Indeed, and you'll be pleased to know our 'Young Midoriya',' she cast a mocking glance at Aizawa, reminding him of his accidental starting of that little naming trend, "will not be halting his attendance." And her hands went to her pockets as the skeleton sighed in relief. He hadn't let the boy down so entirely as he'd feared after all.

"This is hardly a time for relief," Aizawa commented, "if anything now we'll have to work twice as hard to compensate for all that happened today, thanks to our lack of diligence." Vanessa bowed her head, eyes drifting from the other two as she began to walk away from the home in earnest. It was getting late... Aizawa was about to follow when he noticed something from Yagi. He was looking at the home, regarding it seriously, one of his feet pointed right at the front door. An all too obvious tell... "Now's not the time to bother them."

Yagi sighed, smirked, then nodded. "You're right... it was a foolish thought anyways." In the end it wouldn't have served the boy as much as it would have served him. "That young one has enough burdens to carry."

"Heh," Aizawa chuckled, humorlessly. "If you're that impatient for a successor, I think Nighteye is right with his recommendation."
"I'm not so sure…"

"And I doubt you ever will be." He beckoned for the older man to follow. "Come on, let's find some food or something. After all this, I'm famished." Yagi chuckled, falling in step behind him. At least one of them seemed to have spirits that hadn't been wounded in all this.
Neither knew just how much time went by, with them so entwined as they were. All they knew was how tired they felt from all the crying. Inko sat on the floor, right next to the bed where Deku was perched. Knees scrunched up beneath his nose, he waited in silence for her to say something. Anything. When she finally did, he was almost surprised. "So you've been dealing with this, alone, for around a month now..." He buried his face behind his knees, she sighed. "You didn't think you could tell me?" The tone of her voice, she just sounded so wounded. Hurt by his apparent lack of trust.

"What could I have said?" He put forward. "It's not like I didn't think about it, didn't want to tell you..." His finger gripped at the blankets, fiddling with them in an attempt to draw his attention anywhere but this conversation. "But I was scared you wouldn't believe me, or worse that I'd scare you."

She scoffed, laughingly almost. "Scared of you? Izu, you're almost as harmless a newborn kitten. How could I be scared of you?"

"Because I barely have this under control!" Now he was turned toward her, no longer bunched up in a ball. "I've... bitten three people already, and I was doing everything I could not to!" He grimaced, eyes scrunched up in pained shame. "You'd be crazy if you weren't scared..."

"Guess I'm crazy then." Deku was about to protest when he opened his eyes. She had *that* look on her face. That look which said this was not an argument he was going to win, as her mind was already made. "I made my mind up a long time ago, Izuku. No matter what happens, I'll get through it for you." A sentiment that carried more of a sting than she'd intended, the weight of the potential guilt alone was enough to leave the poor boy tight in chest; almost fighting for breath. "After all," she smiled, putting a hand on her son's face, lightly holding that ghastly scar, silently swearing Bakugo would never again get away with hurting her boy. "That's the kind of thing people do, when they care. Isn't it?"

...Now that was a hell of a question, one he'd never really been able to find an answer to. Even by the time he'd arrived at school, the following morning, it was still bothering him. Amidst all the emotional turmoil, likely worsened by his having to rapidly recover from severe brain damage, both the previous day and this following morning had become a blur. So much so that when a reporter shoved a microphone his face, asking what kind of teacher All Might was, he blanked on what he should even say. He just blurted out, "I'm due in home room!" and fled.

When the same microphone was turned on Jiro and Akaguro he rolled his eyes while she merely ignored it. Under his breath, Akaguro muttered, "Putrid symptoms of an increasingly vapid culture... fools, the lot of them."

Jiro quirked an eyebrow, being the only other person with the ears to hear what he'd said. "The reporters or the folks who watch what their 'stories'?"

Akaguro gave this a moment's consideration. "...Yes." was his simply reply.

"Huh?" Apparently it was Uraraka's turn to get grilled. "What's he look like in front of the class?" She struck a bodybuilder's pose, half heartedly flexing while she awkwardly averted her eyes from the camera, trying to smile. "Um... Super muscly!" She giggled nervously,"yeah..."

Now it was Jiro rolling her eyes. Sighing, she muttered, "way to make our class look airheaded."
Deku blinked, turning to her, his fingers fussing at each other. "It- it's not like the three of us made the class look much better… Socially awkward and kinda rude, at best."

She had to hand him that one. "Mm, touche."

Then, much to Akaguro's amusement, someone made the mistake of asking Iida what All Might was like as a teacher. "Every day with him is a reminder that I am enrolled at the preeminent educational institution." Some of the camera crew exchanged very confused looks. The boy had quite the vocabulary, to be certain. "Beyond his dignity and presence, he's also quite humorous." Hmm… Deku must have missed some joke he'd told the other day. "As we students are privy to observing his many facets, we've been given an opportunity to discover just what makes a top hero a top hero."

The lanky Dhampire chuckled quietly. "Wordy bastard, isn't he?" He turned over his shoulder giving Iida an disconcertingly amused look. "Well, if you two were worried about the classes image, I'd say he just saved it."

Then, of course, they'd try asking Bakugo and they would recognize him from the slime-villain incident. "Fuck off." Was the warhead's only retort, as he ground his teeth.

Jiro sighed, shaking her head with a tired smirk. "You were saying?"

"Excuse me," Aizawa's voice cut above the din of the reporters and gathered students, "but you're interrupting our classes by delaying the students. Please leave." When he spun about, apparently incurring the ire of an all too impatient reporter, a massive, electronic steel door slammed shut and magnetically locked.

In that moment, though he could never be sure, Deku thought he'd caught a glimpse of someone in the crowd. Someone with a paper-white, disembodied hand clinging to their face and a cold, dead look in their eyes.

Uraraka yelped, jumping away from the door. "What just happened!?

"That?" Aizawa replied, careless as the wind. "Security system. Anyone who tries to cross the gate without a student or faculty ID or a guest pass triggers that gate."

"Seems a tad excessive…" commented Jiro.

Aizawa shrugged. "I never thought so," and he made a shooing motion with his hand. "Now go on, all of you. Head to ground beta and finish up with All Might's class." Deku was about to comly when Aizawa pointed right at him. "Not you. You're coming with me."

Deku blinked. "Um. Okay… why?"

"Quirk training." Was the man's simple reply, and Deku was fairly certain he knew what he meant. After another grueling round of Aizawa locking him in the shed -an opened container of human blood at the opposite end of the room, laser tripwires and all- almost everything from the last week vacated his memory. While he'd been subjected to another round of said humiliation the rest of the class was with All Might, completing their lesson left unfinished. But that was considerably distant from his mind, as at that moment he was presently gulping down the contents of the canister that had been tormenting him.

"Hmm…" Aizawa mulled, "one less laser tripped than last time." He frowned, putting away his touch-pad. "Not much of an improvement but I hadn't expected you to have improved at all just yet."
Gasping for air, involuntarily licking his lips clean, Deku stammered in reply. "G-guess that's g-good then..." had he always such difficulty formulating sentences? How he loathed his unrelenting hunger. Grabbing his uniform jacket -which he had been allowed to discard- he got back on his now unsteady legs.

Shrugging, Aizawa put the pad into one of his pockets. "It'll do." He spun on his feet, motioning for the young man to follow him. The last time this had been done it wasn't just some brief warm up, preempting another class, it had been almost the entire class. First days at UA were usually painfully brief. On that particular first day, Deku would have emphatically disagreed. "Is your costume repaired?"

The vampire blinked. "Um... I don't think so." Unsteady as he felt, he trudged behind his teacher, keeping pace. "Wh-" Only he finished his question. On his way out of the shed his hair snared in a spiderweb and flailed away from it, hands scraping at his hair and flinging the webs off his fingertips when he managed to claw it free.

As the boy shuddered, looking paler than usual, Aizawa gave him an almost amused, skeptical look. "...for a lesson later today it's encouraged that you wear it." As if to punctuate the end of his sentence, the scraggly man took a hefty swig from his hip-flask. "Though with the amount of damage it sustained, it's unlikely it will have been repaired." Capping the hip flask, he returned it to his pocket. "If you feel the costume needs anything changed, now would be the time to say so." And they crossed the threshold into the main building. As the teacher slipped his hands into his pockets, the student slipped back into his jacket. "The others should be back soon." Aizawa yawned as they entered the classroom, taking his usual seat at his desk. Hands resting just below his ribcage, the scraggly man leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes. True to his word, the rest of the class filed in not long after Deku had taken his own seat.

Uraraka and Iida waved at him as they entered the room, "Hey, Deku!" she called over the mild din, earning a nervous smirk and a wave from the boy.

A wary glance was thrown his way from Yaoyorozu, which she tried to mask with a smile that even one such as Deku could see through. Kaminari and Mina wandered in, business as usual, chatting about something and snickering. That guy with the tail and the bird-guy just went to their seats silently, eager to see what came next. The six-armed one lumbered to his desk, doing his utmost not to bump into anyone. He wasn't very successful. Akaguro regarded the vampire sympathetically. As he walked passed him to his desk, he pulled out his phone and began typing at the keys. When Deku's pocket buzzed, the message simply read 'here if you need me.' To which he replied 'thanks. I'll remember that.' After they exchanged a friendly, knowing look -despite his best efforts, there remained that unsettling presence in Akaguro's eyes- Deku looked up to see Bakugo.

He was staring at him, something resembling shocked, terrified guilt plastered all over his face. Eyes fixed on the right side of the vampire's head, a cold sweat broke out across his brow. It was one thing to hear you'd hurt someone, someone you know; it was another to see the damage you wrought upon them firsthand, to know you'd marked someone irreparably out of blind fury. Without a word, his jaw slowly closing, the walking warhead averted his eyes and walked quietly to his seat, resigning himself to stare at the floor in silent contemplation.

For once, the aura exuded by his mere presence was almost too distant to read. If it hadn't come with a certain absence of an old fear, it might have been disconcerting. Last to her seat was Jiro who looked Deku up and down, scanning for anything out of place, before looking him in the eye. She waved almost nonchalantly, then sat down. What to make of that, he had no clue but stirring at the front of the classroom interrupted any chance at contemplation.
Sighing from the dashed hopes of having a short nap, Aizawa stood up and addressed his class. "Okay…” he said, fighting against the sleep trying to cling to his throat. "Today you're choosing a class president."

In an instant, the atmosphere exploded as the noise lever rocketed to daring new volumes. "I wanna be president!" Yelled the red-head with bountiful enthusiasm. "Let me do it!” He had teeth like a shark's, rows of sharp, triangular fangs lining his gums. To think there were people with more intimidating maws than he…

"I'd like to do it." That was Jiro, speaking at a reasonable volume with a raised hand. By far the most reserved of those making such proclamations.

Behind him Deku heard Akaguro snort, turning around he saw the taller student leering out the window in disdain. Curious behavior considering that such a position looked good to hero associations. For any other high school, the class president would merely take on menial tasks, the kinds of things most roll their eyes at. But in a hero course at a school like UA, it would entail leading the group in all manner of scenarios. A position suited for a top hero in the making.

Ayoyama's hand rocketed up. "The position was made for me." It seemed his calm, level speech and his body were at odds with how he was to express himself.

"I wanna be a leader!" Ashido cheered, standing up and materializing at the front row. Deku silently wondered where she got those reserves of energy from as he also considered the obvious. Should he go for position? He barely had control over himself at this point, assuming yet further responsibilities could tax his mental faculties beyond their already straining limits. Ahead of him, Bakugo was raising his hand, though he made no attempt at vocalization. Though initially disorienting, it did afford him some room to think. Wanted every advantage though he did, this seemed a bad idea to go for. He already had enough to keep his mind occupied with his screaming hunger, a hunger that never quieted. Pursuing the position would only place those around him in further danger from himself. So he avoided raising his hand and drew his eyes upon the surface of his desk.

Taking this moment of calamitous outcries to center himself, he focused on his breathing. While the rest of the class went about its discussion, the noise seemed to draw further and further away. Sensation of his body, motionless beneath his clothing as his autonomous functions carried on, registered as a warm, radiating pulse. The sound of rushing liquid, buried beneath his skin, filled his awareness along with his shallow breath. Then, as a form of calm seemed to linger at the border of his mind, he felt it: the raging hunger in the pit of his stomach. It screamed like the wind of a hurricane, tearing through flames. Twisting its way up through his core, snaring its fingers in his conscious mind and snaking their way past his free will. A vice like grip held on the center of his very identity, pulling at it like the reins in a horse's teeth. So this was what he was wrestling with, every waking moment… So his enemy had a face, so to speak. Now he could single it out and the path it took to get a hold on him. If there was a next step to this process he was interrupted before he could figure out what it was.

"Say you abstain."

Deku blinked, peering over his shoulder at Akaguro. He was sitting in his seat, much like before, only now he was looking at him. Side of his face leaning into the curled fingers of his hand, knuckles digging into his own cheekbones somehow accentuated the blase look in his eyes. "W-what?" Stammered the vampire.

Akaguro sighed. "Voting, for the class president. If you want out of the running, say you abstain."
He made some half-hearted gesture to the rest of the class, getting out pens to scribble down the name of whoever they wanted to vote for. "Blame Iida, he's the one that suggested it…"

After raising his hand, albeit hesitantly, he'd drawn the attention of Yaoyorozu, who was at the whiteboard with a marker ready. "Yes, Midoriya?"

Gulping, he did his best to speak up. "I uh, I'd like to withdraw from the running."

At his request, somewhere near the back of the class, he heard at least one person crumple up whatever they were writing on. Uraraka, from the sound of it, and that pulled at a heartstring. Yaoyorozu could only blink in reply. "Are… you sure?" her eyes darted between he and Akaguro. "You know what holding this position would do for your academic record, don't you?" At his nod she in turn made the same gesture, erasing his name from the running.

Turning over his shoulder again, Deku whispered to his dhampiric friend. "How'd you know I wanted out?"

He shrugged. "Your body language looked more timid than usual, like you were trying to disappear." He made some motion toward the front of the class. "If you care about this kind of thing, probably best you write something down." Nodding, Deku reached for his pen and notebook.

The matter of who to vote for, not something he'd considered having to care about any time soon. To make matters somewhat tricky was the fact that he knew none of these people very well. The only classmates he was at all familiar with didn't seem entirely suited for the position or didn't want it. The way Iida had answered those reporters's questions was impressive, definitely eloquent enough to warrant a point in his favor; even if some of his over abundant, serious enthusiasm was a but much.

Uraraka was nice but… If she was just going to vote for him anyways then she might not want to be class president. Deciding to respect that, he next considered Jiro. Level headed, determined and not lacking a certain fire, though that could be said to be a point against her. If passions were running high, she did have a temper… damn it, he couldn't vote for her either.

Ashido maybe, but she might not take it seriously enough. Although, she cared about her classmates, so said everything she'd done to help him during yesterday's ordeal. Kaminari was still something of an unknown to him as well, though he wasn't a bad guy. Hell, Deku had almost bitten him and he more or less hadn't cared.

Well, it turned out to be an easier thought puzzle than he'd anticipated. Scrawling down his vote, Deku walked to the front of the class and submitted it. Surprisingly, Akaguro submitted a vote as well. At the questioning look he threw his way the Dhampire merely grinned. 'You will see' the smile chillingly said. His near constant exudance of that unsettling aura made one wonder just what had happened to make him like that.

Over the next few minutes, after- Deku had to do a double take. There was someone invisible in the class? How long had that been the case? His mind started racing, considering the numerous ways in which her quirk must have functioned, but this was ultimately cut short by her tallying up the votes and exclaiming that they had a winner. "With four votes in total, we have Yaoyorozu!" Some cursory congratulations were given, grumbling from those who'd failed blending in with the noise, but not long afterwards the invisible girl had another announcement. "And it looks Ashido got second place with three." After a celebratory cheer from Ashido, the invisible girl added, "guess we have our vice president then."
Walking to head of the class, smiling with as much reservation as she could, Yayorozu said, "thanks for the confidence, everyone."

At her side, her own joy completely unrestrained, was Ashido thrusting her hand up in a peace sign. "We won't letcha down!" Deku did his best to avoid smiling. He didn't want to give away that he'd been at least one of the votes she'd gotten.

"Zero votes…." A barely noticeable murmur from the crushed spirits of one Tenya Iida. "I suspected as much! This is the harsh reality of this sacred office…." The poor boy looked so crushed, downcast by his compatriots lack of faith in him.

"Wait," Yayorozu blinked, regarding the engine-calved in disbelief, "you voted for someone else…?" at her incredulous murmuring Kaminari slowly spun around with a very skeptical look on his face, looking right at Iida.

"You were the one who suggested this," said a very large boy with puffy lips, "what were you trying to prove?"

Before any sort of reply could be issued the lunch bell rang, rousing the slumbering Aizawa promptly. Groaning he stood up, and addressed his class. "After lunch, suit up and head to the parking lot. We'll be heading to your next lesson from there." Then he motioned for the door, a non verbal order to leave and head for lunch.

Seconds before Deku was out the door the teacher poked his shoulder, prompting him to turn around. Handing the young man a thermos, something that was becoming a daily ritual, he said, "See you after lunch." Raising a finger, pointing right at Deku's face, he added, "And no more eating on the roof. We have rules against that."

The vampire was puzzled for a moment. "Plural?"

"I know what I said." Once again he pointed to the door. "Drink up. You're going to need it."

Nodding, now feeling a tad apprehensive, Deku wandered out the door. Hands gripping at the thermos with his dreaded nourishment inside. Well, if the roof was off limits there had to be somewhere else no one would go. The benches outside, littered among the sparse trees around the school, were sure to be packed on a day like today. He could try wandering out to the perimeter wall, near the gate, but the sunlight there would doubtlessly be rather intense right about now. Maybe he could just go to an empty classroom, the only reason Aizawa discouraged his students eating lunch in home room was because he slept during lunch. In fact he slept so much Deku suspected he had some sort of sleep disorder.

Yanking him from these musings was a voice he might have been starting to get used to. "Hey, Green." Jiro's nickname for him. Looking up and seeing her walking with quite a few other students. Yaoyorozu, Iida, Ashido, Kaminari, Uraraka and Akaguro. The violet eyed girl flagging him down made him smirk. "You should sit with us this time."

Considering the number of classmates headed to one table, he was hesitant to think there'd be room. "Is- would that be okay?"

"Totally," Ashido said, waving aside any worries he might have, "they've got a lotta tables. If we need more room we'll just bunch a couple of em together. No biggie."

Kaminari chuckled, as one does when trying not to remember something unpleasant. "Yeah, cuz that went so well last time we did that…"
Ashido stuck her tongue out at him. "You're just mad that one guy tricked you into saying you were a 'mutant pikachu'." At that comment, Jiro had to suppress a snicker.

"And like I keep saying," Kaminari fumed, more embarrassed than anything, "I don't even remember saying it." By this point the group was resuming course down to the lunch room.

Teasingly, Ashido held up her phone. "I still have the video~" she almost sang under her breath.

"Is that truly necessary?" Iida remarked, feeling sorry for the yellow-haired boy. "That seems like it would be humiliating enough without such evidence existing."

"It does seem a little mean spirited…" Yaoyorozu had to agree.

Hearing this, considering her actions, Ashido almost looked hurt, guilty. Holding her phone in both hands, fussing with the device, "You think so?" she looked at the video file in question like a belonging a child was told they had outgrown. "I just… it was so cute…"

Seeing that look on her face, Kaminari's head slumped forward and his palm dug into his forehead. "Fine…" relented he, "you can keep it." Shaking his head and frowning even as she beamed at him, he added, "just don't show anyone."

With a grin and thumbs up she exclaimed, "I promise!" Then, quieter than before, she said, "You're the best, Kami." smiling with something that almost looked like warmth.

That damn smile threatened to give the poor boy diabetes. "...let's just go eat." He grumbled, doing his utmost not to look at her, shoving his hands in his pockets.

That earned an enthusiastic nod from Uraraka. "We're probably gonna need all the extra energy we can get." She commented off handedly to the group. "Mister Aizawa telling us to get into our costumes and all."

Akauro grumbled, ponderously as they approached the buffet line. "We don't seem to spend much time out of them I've noticed…"

"That's where your mind is?" Yaoyorozu quirked an eyebrow, "I'm curious about why they told us to go to the parking lot. They might be sending us off campus for next class."

Such a thought had Deku gulping. "Already? But it's only our third day…” he mumbled through clenched teeth, "I thought classes like that didn't come until much later in the school year."

"He makes a good point," Iida mused aloud, "it's likely we're just heading somewhere else on campus."

An idea Jiro was hesitant to seriously consider. "Somewhere we'd have to drive to?" Remarked she. "Like where?"

Uraraka shrugged, finally getting the chance to grab some rice when a thought occurred. "You know… I think I saw a huge dome structure on the school website. If I'm remembering the geography right that should be about that far away."

A large dome… Thinking back to when he was navigating the website himself, he thought he might have recalled seeing something like that. No name or description of what it was for, just another high tech facility to show off the envious public and prospective students alike. But it was the only facility anyone seemed to know of that was so segregated from the main building. As the group took their seats among their fellow students Akaguro cast Iida a questioning look. "Nothing
to say?"

Somewhat taken aback, the bespectacled teenager hesitated at an answer. "I'm... not sure what you mean." His tone was far from convincing.

Deku almost narrowed his eyes at him, sipping at his thermos - how he hated his tongue for relishing the flavor - when he noticed Yaoyorozu deliberately avert her eyes. She almost looked sick, biting at her lower lip and squirming a little. Not sure what else to do Deku just gulped the rest of it down in a flash. When Uraraka gave him a quizzical look he shrugged, playing it off as nothing. Still, there a certain twist in his gut prompted by the class president's reaction.

"Your older brother went to school here, if the rumors are to be believed." Blinking, taken from his ponderings Deku looked up to see Akaguro smirking, almost darkly, at Iida, and the all too serious of the two was looking quite nervous.

That comment caught Jiro's attention. "Older brother?" Iida looked as though he wanted to shrink down a good four feet and run away.

"Iida..." Kaminari mused aloud, though it was little more than a whisper. "That does sound kinda familiar."

"Oh!" Yaoyorozu said, finding some of her pep. "Are you Ingenium's little brother?" And Iida deflated into a defeated, sighing slump.

Deku's eyes went wide, "The hero who's organization employs over 65 sidekicks!? That's your-" and a sudden twitching of his jaw, one he was quite familiar with by now, cut him off. Clamping his teeth back together, trying to keep himself under control. He almost hadn't felt the urge coming, were it not for that bit of meditation - for he knew not what else to call it - he might not have recognized it in time.

Adjusting his glasses, he seemed almost a little better for it as he sat back up. "I don't like it when people find out, so I try to..." looking back toward the group, his usual demeanor returned, he carried on with his answer, "But yes, mine is a renowned hero family. I am the second son." At such a statement, he almost looked proud.

Beaming, their reaction almost synchronized, both Ashido and Uraraka blurted out with, "That's so cool!"

"It's true," Iida said frankly, "he is rather someone to look up to." From nervous humility to joyful pride in seconds flat. No setting between off and high for his emotional state, it seemed. "He leads people with unwavering adherence to rules and regulations. It's my admiration for my brother that's inspired my own desire to become a hero." Then, with a genuine, calm smile, he concluded his little speech.

His fingers fussed at the opposite wrist, trailing over a small bracelet he wore. A metallic band with what looked a 1950's pin adorned at the center. A black and blue outline of a cartoon face, two swept back protrusions off the top of the head resembling horns. Wait... the Astro Boy logo? "Though I realize I'm not yet ready to lead anyone, this class presidential election is just the most recent evidence of this." Iida's eyes flashed to Deku, thinking back to that moment during the entrance exams. He'd been ready to just flee in the face of such a behemoth when Kaminari had shouted at him, saying they couldn't just leave their fellows behind. Ashido hadn't even bothered shouting anything, she'd just started running toward it, Ayoyama not far behind.
"That's not true," Yaoyorozu put forward reassuringly, "part of being a leader is the ability to see the potential and talents of others," she said, stirring idly at her tea, "and you've already gotten pretty good at that." She was, of course, referring to the moment had confessed his shortcomings in the entrance exam to Deku. "Recognizing that in addition to your own flaws is essential for working effectively with a team, you're already on your way."

Faltering, taken aback by such an analysis, Iida could only stare blankly for a time. "I- Well, I'm not so sure," he said, adjusting his glasses, yet again, "but thank you for the vote of confidence."

Kaminari laughed, "Ahhhh… that pun was awful."

The bespectacled boy's face flummoxed further with confusion. "I made no such attempt at humor..."

Agakuro snorted, "so that's your reason for being a hero..." the note of disapproval was thick in his voice, "striving to be like someone you're not."

Every face at the table turned to Agakuro, somewhat shocked at his brazen comment. "I beg your pardon?" Iida managed. "But what's wrong with that?"

Agakuro growled out a sigh, mulling his answer over as he licked at the straw between his teeth, between sips of his drink. "It's so... disingenuous." he concluded. "The more I look to the world we seek to plunge into, the less I see our 'betters' subscribing to the true idealism of being a hero."

There was a certain clarity to the words he spoke, something definitive which was difficult to ignore. Not one iota of doubt lingered in the air, not as he spoke these words. "It's just another festering distraction of neon lights and fools seeking fortune and fame. To prove some valueless thing to those around them."

And he polished off his drink. "Granted... at least you're aspiring to be better than you are. Not many do."

"Where the heck is that coming from?" Ashido frowned, almost angrily. "I dunno what 'world' you've been paying attention to but heroes aren't like that! A lot of them are just out to do the right thing, kicking supervillain butt!" Her fist clenched, pulled up to shoulder level as she flashed a determined grin.

"Um..." Uraraka mumbled, hands wringing over each other. "Is it really so wrong to go into it for the money?" Agakuro turned toward her, expression clearly disapproving.

"A bit?" Jiro quirked an eyebrow. "Dude, you just killed the entire conversation a-la outright accusing folks of being 'symptoms of an increasingly vapid culture,'" she scolded, "that's not cool."

A lopsided frown on his face, Agakuro relented. "...Sorry." Not wanting to belittle the apology with an excuse he gathered up his tray, preparing to leave. "I'll... return in a few moments."

Waiting until he was gone, Yaoyorozu mumbled, "something happened to him." with a serious frown. "No one is that blunt and borish without some reason behind it."
"Hmph!" Pouting angrily and crossing her arms was Ashido. "Excuse if ya want, but I don't like it. You don't just act like a jerk like that, I don't care what reasons you have."

"Well," Iida sighed, "it's not like he was entirely wro-

"Oh my gosh!" Uraraka shrieked, leaping in her seat, startling Deku most of all; being the one she was sitting next to. When he jolted she immediately held up her hands in a warning gesture. "No, Deku! Wait!" ...what was she so afraid of? "D- Don't move, okay?"

She was shaking, looking at the side of his head in trembling fear. "What are you-" and then he felt it. At least three, almost hair-thin protrusions touching at the edge of his eye. Body going rigid as stone, his gaze slowly shifted toward the thing crawling on his face.

"Whoa!" Ashido's face lit up in alarm. "What kind of- that's a big spide-

Yaoyorozu flung a hand over the pin girl's mouth. "It's not that big!" She cried out, not convincing anyone in the least.

"Nevermind the size," Kaminari said, just as Deku's eye reached the offending arachnid. It was staring him right in the eye, motionless. "That's a black widow. Bites from those things suck."

"That's not helping!" Iida shouted, looking about frantically for his glass, which had unfortunately been knocked off the table. "We need something to carry it with…"

"Screw that!" Ashido protested, aiming one of her palms at the thing. "Hold still, I'll just melt it."

"What!?" Uraraka cried, unable to believe she'd heard such a suggestion. "Don't do that! What if you hit Deku!" A sentiment somehow less frightening than the creature staring him down. This… thing was the most unsettling of all creatures. Its cold, black eyes, its fangs, ravenous appetite, the way it drank its prey... to… death.

His expression shifted. It wasn't just the spider he was dreading, loathing in this moment, was it? He'd done his best to not to think about that conclusion he'd come to, watching those documentaries. That all too obvious parallel between what was now his species and arachnids like this one. Fearing this thing, hating this ghastly creature, was becoming as second nature to him as directing such an attitude at himself. The fact it wasn't biting him, sitting there -now cleaning itself-content with where it was left a feeling leaching into his heart: a feeling that he and the spider were more kin than he and humanity. Much like the spider, hiding in plain sight or just plain hiding was his key to not being killed by humans.

Such a feeling of kinship made him wish Bakugo had finished burning him alive the day before.

"Oh for fuck's sakes…" Leaning over the table hand outstretched was Jiro. When her fingertips ghosted across the skin of Deku's cheek he felt goosebumps prickling up. Well, new ones anyways.

"What are you doing?" Yaoyorozu shrieked, hesitating at reaching toward her to pull her away from the spider, now crawling onto her hand. "It could bite y-

"It wont." Jiro declared, slowly pulling the spider away from Deku's face.

"But-"

She turned and looked right at Yaoyorozu. "It wont." She held it up, for her to see. "Look." Slowly hesitantly, everyone gathered round and peered at the tiny thing. Once again, it was cleaning itself, trying to rub the oils from Deku's skin and hair off of itself. "See how calm it is? They only bite
when they're threatened, scared." Shocking everyone present, she reached out with a fingertip and pet the thing. "She must still be pretty young… they're not usually this small."

Ururaka, despite her earlier outburst, smiled at it. "Ya know… it's not so scary, once you get used to looking at it."

Kaminati shuddered, "hey as long as it doesn't rot my skin off? I'm cool with it."

Ashido snickered, "wow, didn't know you had such low standards there, Kami." She gave him a very playful look, eagerly waiting for his reaction.

He just glared at her, a very wide frown on his face. "...I don't like you." And she started snickering again. "You're a bad person." Then she was laughing.

"Just… be careful." Yaoyorozu managed. "It's still venomous enough to seriously hurt you."

Deku gulped, finding the nerve to move again. "It- It's missing a leg…" When I was scraping the web out of my hair… It was a miracle the thing hadn't bitten him.

"Poor thing," Jiro murmured, making for the door, "I'm taking her outside." looking at the clock she added, "...and I guess I'll meet you in the parking lot after that. Lunch is pretty much done."

Nodding, breathing her tension away, Yaoyorozu gathered up her tray. "Guess we'd better head back, get ready for this field trip we're heading on." More brightly this time, she added. "Meet you all out there?"

"Works for me!" Uraraka chirped, forgetting all about the fright they'd just shared, all the others gathering their own trays and following suit.

Suit… Oh crap! Breaking into a run, Deku made for the door. He hadn't remembered to see the support department about his costume! If nothing else he needed that mask, the rest of the costume wasn't important. It took him a few minutes to find the department he sought, a workshop with someone working tirelessly with loud power tools. Knocking raptly upon the door he waiting, tapping his foot nervously. Moments later, a girl with large goggles over her eyes, pink… dreadlocks flopping over the band.

Had he not been so distracted he might have noticed the her tank top hugged at her ample shapes… "Yes?" she spoke plainly, with the smile of a mad scientist: a look needing no other description.

"Uh sorry to bother you!" He bowed. "I just need a costume for my class!"

"Oh, is that so?" Not that he saw, but she'd removed her goggles at this point. "Name?"

"Izuku Midoriya!"

"oooooh…. " she winced vocally, "I'm not done fixing that yet… I've only got the underlayer finished and the mask is still marked from-"

Jolting back up, Deku exclaimed, "I'm sure it's fine, ma'am!" Did… were her pupils and irises shaped like targeting reticles?

Shrugging, she remarked, "your choice," with an odd smirk, "but I'm throwing something else in too. Wait a sec!" Door slammed in the throws of sudden inspiration Deku heard her frantically throwing things around. Moments later she emerged with a costume case, thrusting it into his arms. "Here you go! Let me know how it works!"
"Thank you!" He bowed with near lightning speed before making another mad dash for the nearest bathroom.

When the lunch bell rang he almost squealed from the pressure he was feeling. Tearing open the case, mask pulled on -it still smelled like explosion...- his hands flew, discarding piece after piece of his uniform. Clawing his way into the costume was markedly simpler than before. While it was little more than a simple shirt it had weight, clearly made of some durable material, whatever it was, he'd find out later. Same deal with the pants, to his surprise she'd thrown in shoes too, but they were thin, slender. A note was attached that read 'thin enough for wall crawlin :D ', so on they went. Essentially, it was the underlayer of his costume, sans the actual armor plating. There was another surprise waiting for him in the case: a pair of finger-less, armored gloves and some sort of jacket.

Lifting up the jacket he was surprised at the heft it held. Heavy... Made of sturdier material than the rest of his costume with ballistic plates and mesh worked into the interior as well as the exterior. Like the jacket of some space faring ship captain, almost. Even Bakugo would have a hard time damaging this. But there wasn't time for such musings. Throwing his uniform into the case he ran back to the classroom long enough to drop it off at his desk. Sunglasses adjusted, eyes squinting, he burst through the doors.

Strangely, upon exiting the building, he could have sworn he saw members of the school security team arguing by the front gate. A curious sight, but Deku had other things to worry about. Whatever it was, it was probably nothing.

Finding the parking lot was a simple matter, what with how hard to miss his classmates were. Flagging him down were none other than Urarka and Ashido. "I was starting to think you wouldn't make it." Said the brunette, happy to be proven wrong.

"Aizawa isn't even here yet," Kaminari remarked, "I wasn't worried."

As if on cue a large bus lumbered its way into the parking lot, doors pulling open, Aizawa in the driver's seat and looking as unenthused as always. Jiro turned and gave the electric teenager a wry smirk. "You were saying?"

"Well he wasn't."

Clapping her hands, Yaoyorozu called out to her classmates. "Alright everyone, let's not keep our teacher waiting." Like ducks in a row they climbed onto the bus, taking seats wherever they pleased. After not so much as a grunt directed toward his students, Aizawa began driving and the chatter resumed.

"Say, Midoriya, can I ask you something?"

Deku blinked, turning to see that ribbiting girl who'd taken a seat next to him. "Y-yes, um... Asui?"

Her face... didn't seem to move much. "You can call me 'Tsu'," though the ease with which her tone shifted seemed to make up the difference. "I was just wondering how you've managed to keep a lid on being a vampire for so long." His eyes scanned the compartment of the bus, expecting to see someone uncomfortable or afraid. "You must have felt pretty isolated growing up like that."

Somewhere else on the bus. Akaguro let out a low, chuckling laugh. "What's he laughing about?" Said the kid with the spiky red hair.

Gulping, his nerves slightly at ease with his mask over his mouth, Deku managed an answer. "I uh,
only became a vampire about a month ago. Up… until that point I was actually quirkless."

To his right, that guy with the puffy lips grunted. "So that's where Bakugo's rambling about that came from…"

"Here I thought that was just some crazy insult." smirked the redhead, who wasn't very far off with the assumption.

Asui hummed, contemplatively. "Well, that was probably worse in a lot of ways… maybe it was insensitive to bring it up…"

"N-no, it's okay!" Deku did his utmost to be reassuring. "Although, I'm kinda curious as to why you brought it up now…"

Asui shifted in her seat, "It's a long story, but if you ask me later I'll tell you about it."

"Yeah, better to focus on what's ahead!" Said the redhead. "What are we doing anyways?"

"Rescue training." Came the monotonous reply of Aizawa.

After a brief awkward pause, Bakugo -who had grown rather sick of being quiet- shouted. "Why didn't you just say that before!?!"

"You didn't ask." And that was his final word on the matter, leaving Bakugo to fume and growl to himself. Poor Kaminari, being the only one willing to sit next him, sat there and looked at him as though he were a time-bomb that had been dropped one too many times.

Laughing, the redhead broke what passed for silence. "Still, even with that thirst for blood that's one heck of a quirk." He said, holding up his arm and showing off his own. Skin going hard as stone, taking the shape and texture of a craggly cliffside, he almost frowned at his limb. "Cooler than this, good in a fight as it is."

"I dunno," Asui shrugged, "looks like a great quirk to me, Kirishima."

"Yeah, but it's not as useful." said he, "Midoriya here has a swiss army knife of powers to use. This is just good for... collisions?" He thought that was the word.

"Don't sell yourself short," ribbited the frog girl, "I'm sure you'll find all kinds of ways to make that useful as a hero." And that earned a warm little smirk from the redhead.

"But don't forget," Said Ayoyama, "heroes also have to worry about popular appeal!" and as odd a moment as it was to brag: "My navel laser is both strong and cool. Perfect for a pro."

Putting a hand on the blond's shoulder, Ashido remarked, without a hint of malice, "As long as you don't blow up your own stomach!" Unintentionally casting a grim shadow over the boy's face. Once again, toward the front of the bus, Akaguro started laughing.

"You want to talk strong and cool?" Kirishima said, making a gesture toward those he intended to mention. "That'd be Todoroki and Bakugo."

...Who was Todoroki?

First to reply to that was Asui. "Yeah, but Bakugo's so unhinged he'd never be popular."

"WHAT'D YOU SAY, FROG FA-!?!?" Only he never finished his retort. As he'd lurched to his feet, to better shout at the offending girl, he caught sight of Deku's face. Stomach tightening in a vice,
strength and spirit sapped from him almost entirely, he slowly slumped back into his seat, eyes directed anywhere but toward his classmates.

Pointing right at him, Asui added, "See?" sticking out her tongue, almost as though she were trying to mock him.

"Yeah," Kaminari mockingly laughed, "cuz his yelling is what makes him unhinged… his violent outburst yesterday showed us what a flaming turd his personality really is."

Grabbing his shirt, Bakugo pulled him up as he loomed over him yelling into his face. "DO YOU WANT TO FIGHT?!!"

Rather than tremble, Kaminari just sighed. "Tell me: have you ever had a friend who wasn't afraid of you?" And Bakugo went still, expression shifting to something resembling shocked consideration. ...Had he ever had a friend like that?

Hand over her mouth, a rather nauseous looking frown on her face, Yaoyorozu mumbled, "What a vulgar conversation…"

All the while Uraraka was laughing. "I dunno, I think it's kinda fun." Slowly, Jiro turned and looked at the brunette like her brain had just fallen out of her mouth.

"If you're quite finished," Aizawa grumbled, "We're here."

A facility of such enormous size had never been observed by the eyes of anyone present. That was, everyone except for the teacher. Deku's jaw had dropped, hanging open in shock under his mask since they'd pulled up to the building. Now that they were inside he thought he might actually faint.

"Wow," Jiro remarked, awe creeping into her voice, "straight outta 'The Truman Show'..."

"...What?" Said Kaminari, still processing the sheer size of the place.

"A Movie." Akaguro stated.

This answer did little to ease the boy's confusion. "Then… why did they call it a show?"

"This is what you're on about right now?!" Exclaimed the boy with the puffy lips. "Look at this place! What is this? Universal Studios Japan?!"

"It's a facility of my own design," said a voice as heavy footsteps clanked their way up the stairs leading to the overwhelmingly vast center of the building. "There's the flood zone, the downpour zone, the inferno zone, mountains, landslide and of course the ruins." Stepping into view was what appeared to an astronaut, fallen from the sky. At the sight of them Uraraka's face lit up.

"Simulations for every disaster and accident you can imagine. I call it…" they spread their arms wide, as if to gesture to the entire facility all at once, " 'The Unforeseen Simulation Joint'."

The guy with the puffy lips blinked. "So… it really is 'USJ'..."

"Space Hero: Thirteen!" Uraraka jumped for all her excitement. "The Lady who does all her best work in rescue scenarios!" Beating Deku to the punch with the hero knowledge. "She's the best!" Earning yet more excitement from the girl, was a thumbs up from the hero in question. Uraraka could barely contain herself.

It's worth mentioning that Thirteen's voice bore an odd similarity to that of Oliva Wilde's.
Glancing about, searching for something, Aizawa approached his fellow hero. "Thirteen… where's All Might and Valentine? They were supposed to be here with you."

"Ah," she started, "About that…” she held up three fingers, a gesture that bore an odd emphasis. "It seems between his class earlier today and some impromptu hero work today, he's reached his limit." As Aizawa groaned under his breath Deku blinked. "As for Valentine, she tried to enter the school in the middle of a possible security issue at the front gate. She's presently held up with that."

Wait, Vanessa was going to be here too? And since when did All Might have a- "The height of irrationality." The disapproval in the scraggly man's voice was such an emperor would feel he’d failed his subjects to hear it. "So be it. We'll get started without them." Hand over his chin, finger sliding over his lips, he leered at the ground, running adjustments to his lesson plan through his mind in silence.

This left Thirteen to begin the lesson herself. "Before we begin, there's a matter we should discuss…” Holding up a hand, one of her glove's fingertips opened. "As I'm sure some of you may know," She seemed to direct that comment toward Uraraka in particular, "my quirk is called 'Black Hole'. Just as the name suggests it pulls just about everything into it, tearing to to shreds in the process."

"And you've used it to save people in all sorts of disasters," Deku put forward, while Uraraka nodded with incomparable enthusiasm.

Thirteen faltered for a moment, "True…” Clearing her throat, she spoke louder this time, "However, considering the destructive nature of my quirk, if I were to make a mistake it could easily kill someone." The mood of the class dropped from enthusiastic to grim apprehension in mere seconds. "I've no doubt there are some among with similar abilities." Unseen by most, Bakugo raised an upturned palm, and gazed at his hand before clenching it softly.

"Fuck today… Thought he.

"In our super-powered society, the use of quirks is heavily restricted and regulated for a reason.” Thirteen went on, closing the cap of her gloved finger. "It only takes one wrong move with a powerful quirk for people to die." Pointing directly at her students, Thirteen declared. "In this class, I will teach you how to save lives without making such mistakes." And some of the optimism started creeping back into their hearts. "Your powers are not meant to inflict harm, I hope that you leave here today with the understanding that you are meant to help people."

As the class had found their spirits, determined to give this upcoming lesson their all, a sound reached their ears. Clapping, off in the distance. There, at the bottom of the stairs and at the closest end of the USJ's central plaza, was a man. Tall, lanky, thin as could be, a mop of light blue hair on his head and wearing a disembodied hand on his face.

Echoing from his throat was a raspy, chilling laugh. " 'Powers meant to help, but not kill…' ahhhh…” and he spread his arms palms outstretched toward the ceiling. "What a foolishly naive statement." Flicking his wrist, a pen whisked from his sleeve, perching betwixt his thumb and index finger. "Tell me, Thirteen,” his tone was challenging, amused as Aizawa's body shifted.

Yellow, vented goggles on his face, he dropped into a combat stance, staring this newcomer down. "What's a man to do," a final twirl of the pen, "if a quirk like this," and at the touch of all five fingers to the pen, it turned to dust, "isn't meant to hurt people?" At his mockingly voiced inquiry a swirl of purple energy came into being behind him and people began stepping through it. "Because I'm just not sure." Thugs, easily a dozen of them, poured out into the USJ, bloodthirsty looks on all their faces, looking at the students.
"Thirteen," Aizawa's tone was sharp, fierce, "get the students out of here, now!"

Before anyone could so much as move another portal opened up in front of the door. Stepping through was a man seemingly made of the same stuff the portals were. Glowing white eyes, tinted with the purple of his own energy, standing between them and the exit. "Leaving so soon?" His voice was calm, commanding and imposing. "And after all we went to to arrange this meeting." He scanned the group, searchingly, "hmm... All Might isn't here, Skigaraki. It seems we miscalculated."

"If only we had more time to plan this," said the man with disembodied hand on his face, "This was so... spur of the moment we didn't have time to find ourselves a white mage before initiating combat."

Stepping, with earth shaking footsteps, from the portal behind him was a creature with a truly ghastly appearance: A razor sharp beak lined with shark-like fangs, standing at almost eight feet tall it was a purple, limbering mass of pure muscle. Dead, lidless eyes stared unthinking and hungrily at the students, somehow more terrifying than the exposed brain atop its head.

"But we brought the mother of all Tanks with us, to even things out."

Aizawa hesitated. Surrounded, no time to formulate a plan and dangerously outnumbered and almost certainly outmatched.

"Ah well!" Shigaraki cackled, "All this won't go to waste! Kill as many students as you can! Maybe then we'll draw out All Might!"

The dark, haunting laughter of the thugs was enough to make his skin crawl in revulsion.

But these were odds he'd survived more times than he would dare admit. These bastards had stepped into an arena he excelled in at every turn. "Thirteen..."

Her eyes were locked on the amorphous purple villain between the class and the exit. "Yes?"

He turned over his shoulder, looking right at his students. "Get them out." And he lounged, headlong down the stone steps, scarf snaking through the air as he charged the idiots who dared call themselves villains. To stupid to live, but stupid enough to attack his class.

"Aizawa!" Deku called after him, taking an unconscious step forward his foot failed to make contact with the ground. A portal had opened under his feet and he'd fallen straight through it. He had just enough time to see his teacher break a villain's legs with one kick to the knees, elbows another in diaphragm so hard his lungs stopped, before he found himself falling into fire.
Unforeseen Consequences

Vanessa rolled her eyes for the umpteenth time. Drumming her fingers on her arm, she regarded the security personnel with limited patience. She was running late to a class she'd agreed to assist in teaching -with a man she held less than no affection for, she might add- because they'd screwed up. From the sound of things, something had glitched with front gate. A student had entered through the front gates twice in one day.

Clearly not possible, so it must have been a glitch with the system itself. Vanessa didn't know much about technology but she knew enough to know that, most of the time, problems occurred due to improper maintenance. Not updating the OS, not seeing what that rattling noise your car was making before it was too late, ignoring weird glitches your phone was making before it shut down completely. All due to human negligence, or user error.

Unless someone had attempted to breach school grounds -and considering the lack of alarms and police present, they hadn't- there was no excuse for this delay. Sitting on a bench by the entrance, one leg over the other, she reached into her bag and pulled out a canteen. Rather than one of her usual dresses she'd shown up in what she typically wore out in the field. A form fitting, black and red fiber-mesh bodysuit and a simple, matching domino mask with red lenses. It did little to disguise her identity of course, but that wasn't the point. The point was elegance, which she prided herself in maintaining at all times. At least she assumed so, one could never be certain what level of grace they held while asleep.

Aside from that, it shielded her eyes from the sun, which was always a good thing. Contents of her canteen partially consumed, she returned it to her bag and checked her watch. Almost ten minutes late… Sighing cast a tired look at the security team. They ignored her. Oh well. By the time this was over, and she'd finally make it to the class, it would likely be half over. She took solace in the fact that in such controlled conditions, with Aizawa's efforts redoubled, very little could would likely go wrong.

Ash, soot, embers and smoke clouded his senses. Coughing and gagging on it all, his body hadn't braced at when it collided with wood. Crashing down through the smouldering shingled roof of a small house, he spun, spiraling for another few feet before crashing through the floor. When he finally stopped falling, he landed face first in a pile of rubble on top of cement. Wheezing in his next breath, Deku's limbs fought against his every attempt to move them. Fingers fumbling about, he managed to find his sunglasses amidst the debris.

He crawled to a wall, propping himself against it as he replaced them on his face. Eyelids seemingly glued shut, from the sting of the heat and smoke, it took him several moments to realize he was in the basement of a burning building. Searching frantically, he spotted a small window, just narrowly enough room between the bottom of the next floor and where the ground started. It would have to do. Standing up, some life back in him, he felt the entire house shake. Looking up, he saw the floors above him collapsing. He flew. Legs springing him off the ground he tumbled through glass, rolling to a stop on the street. Behind him, the building imploded under its own weight in a billow of embers and smoke.

Panting, gripping at his aching ribs he looked around. "Must be the Inferno Zone…" he mumbled, coughing into his mask.

"SHIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIT!" The screaming above his head snapped his attention to the source.
"Jiro!" He flung himself skyward, in an instant they'd met, arms clasping each other's forms.

They were spinning, almost out of control when he flung his hand out, clutching at a nearby wall. Hauling her against him, face protected by his scrappy form, as they crashed against metal and plexiglass. He clung to her like glue as they skidded, his skin scraping against the surface of the building he was clinging to. Luckily, it was only the fingertips of his left hand he'd damaged. They reached the ground with anything but grace, his legs smashing against pavement as they fell in a heap. They both groaned, stirring back to their senses with as much reluctance as children being woken up for school. He scanned her over, eyes searching for anything wrong but found nothing.

Just ash on her face, now smudged up her cheek from where she'd been held against him. "You okay?"

She nodded, "You?" He nodded as well, and she sighed in strained relief. Getting to her feet she grabbed his hand and hauled him to. He must have been dizzy, because she had to catch him once he'd stood up, he was so unsteady. "Hey, Green?"

Shaking his head sharply, trying to force his senses back to focus, he said, "Yeah?"

Making sure he was steady, she let him go, taking a step back to observe their surroundings. "I'd like to have a normal school day again soon."

Laughing breathily, feeling some of the adrenaline clearing his veins, he replied. "Me too." But their reprieve was short lived. Portals opened up all around them, groups of villains pouring through, From the looks of them, their quirks were perfectly suited for such an arena.

"Akaguro!" Jiro looked up to see Yaoyorozu and the boy who's name she'd called hurtling toward the ground.

While she'd sprouted a grappling hook and rope from her hand, using it to swing harmlessly to the ground, he had no such method available to save himself. Or so they'd thought. Deku was about to leap to him when he unsheathed his sword; lancing it into the wall of the nearby building and clung to the hilt. Dragging the blade through brick and mortar only slowed his descent enough not to break his legs upon hitting the street, falling on his face in a heap. Seeing a villain about pounce on him, some horrid, glowing green sludge dripping from his massive maw, Jiro leapt forward.

Her earlobe dragged along the ground, sundering pavement to dust and debris. Hand following the same path as her earlobe, she flung enough street into the villain's face to stun him as he sputtered and gagged, bits of it cutting at his eyes. Wasting no time she flung her body into spiral, her knee smashing into the villain's ribs and smacking his head into the brick wall beside him. An attack best suited to one who'd had years to practice it, as she clattered against the ground, having failed to stick the landing. Another villain would have smashed her flat, with limbs shaped like wrecking balls had Yaoyorozu not flung a length of wire around his throat and hauled him away from her. She pulled him into a very uncomfortable position before bringing her elbow down on the villain's face, rendering him unconscious as Jiro and Akaguro picked themselves up.

Deku, on the other hand, had narrowly avoided being incinerated. A pair of villains, one who could control fire and another who created it, had singled him out and attempted to turn him to cinders. Only by throwing himself as hard as he could in the direction of his friends.

"Heads up!" He yelled, watching them throw themselves out of the path of the incoming fire.

In a moment of error, the vampire found himself face to face with a mob of them. One opened their mouth, another raised his hand, another opened his eyes. A vortex of light, acid and wind shot
toward him, unable to alter course he flung his arms in front of his face and closed his eyes. Instead of searing pain, he felt arms around his middle and a change in the wind. His body crashed through a window, someone else snarled around him. Someone who's side and face were sizzling.

Deku's eyes shot wide open. "Akaguro, you're-!"

"Just go!" He hissed through clenched teeth, hauling them to their feet.

Tearing off his acid-soaked mask narrowly avoided him going blind. His ribs were not so lucky. As the two boys ran, through a burning building, more villains plunged in after them. Not hesitating for a moment Akaguro swung his sword through the nearest wooden support, and a section of the roof collapsed; cutting off their pursuers.

In his haste, the dhampire got a lung full of smoke and started coughing violently; too violently to finish running away. Deku grabbed his wrist and jumped, hauling him along with him as the building collapsed behind them. No villains nearby, they waited in silence for a moment before letting themselves breathe, one of them coughing his lungs clear.

Clutching his side, Akaguro fell against a nearby wall. "Damn it!" he hissed. When he saw the puppy dog worry on Deku's face he forced himself to stand up. "Let's go."

Deku's eyes fluttered rapidly. "But you're-"

"Let's go." he repeated, forcing his legs to start walking. "The others might need our help."

Falling in step behind him, Deku murmured, "If we don't need theirs…"

As if on cue, who would come hurtling into the alley but the their two classmates. Making motions for them to run the other way their eyes went wide as they screeched to a halt. "Behind you!"

Yaoyorozu shouted.

"Behind you!" Deku replied leaping forward and socking the fire creating guy square in the jaw. His body flopped, twisting like a slapped rag-doll as blood and teeth spewed from his mouth. Then, the four of them were standing in a circle, surrounded by villains.

One of them, a guy with a weird mass of flesh over his head, like a tent, caught Deku's with a savage punch. The force of the impact sent him flying a blur, through the corner of a nearby brick wall. World spinning, his vision clouded with fireworks that only head-trauma let you see, he was still incredibly disoriented when Yaoyorozu helped him to his feet. And the villain who'd hit him started laughing.

"Nowhere left to run, kiddies!" his voice was booming, deep, befitting of such a musclebound behemoth. Akaguro stumbled, gripping at his face, trying not to let the stars in his eyes drown out his consciousness. "Now you're trapped," he laughed, it was the kind of laugh that told all who heard it that they were about to die, "in here…" he took one more, earth shaking step forward, "with me."

Akaguro's shoulders started shaking, his face still aimed right at the ground, cupped in his fingers. "Heh heh heh heh heh…." Deku turned and looked at him, slowly. The grin on his face sent a chill down his spine. Why the hell was he laughing like that?

The behemoth growled, "what the hell's so funny, pipsqueak!?"

In a bone chillingly slow motion, the teenager's face turned upwards. The behemoth backed away. No human alive was supposed to have a smile that wrong, that wide and with eyes that beady. His
expression was that a man completely unhinged and in love with his own insanity. The look of a wild beast ready to turn you into meat. "That's my line."

All bets were off. The lumbering pink villain was done fucking around. He swung his arm downward in a blur, trying to snap the kid's spine in two before he had a chance to do anything. But his fist connected only with concrete. The other teenagers had thrown themselves out of harm's way. Akaguro had charged forward, sword lancing through skin, muscle and sinew and sending a spray of blood into the teenager's mouth. Like a boned fish, the villain went limp and the hero in training lifted up his boot and drove his heel into the temple of the paralyzed evildoer.

A villain's eyes went wide, Deku doubled over clutching at the sides of his head while Yaoyorozu and Jiro leapt to defend him. "What the hell-!?" he breathed, then more loudly he repeated, "That cut wasn't fatal enough to kill anyone!" Turning to face the screaming villain, his face wearing the textbook definition of creepy -wide open eyes, narrowed brow and hatter mad grin- Akaguro said nothing. "What did you do to Trapezius!?"

Yaoyorozu looked at the blade in Akaguro's hand, covered in blood, and then to his mouth. Her eyes went wide and face white as she connected the dots. Holding the sword to his lips, his eerily long tongue snaking forward and lapping at the blood on his sword, he replied. "Only what I'll be doing to you next."

All Yaoyorozu needed to hear. From her leg, sprouting into existence was a pair of swords. "Jiro."

Nodding, the violet eyed girl grabbed the hilt and aimed it at a nearby foe and the dhampire laughed, obviously approving of his classmate's plan.

Jiro grabbed Deku's shoulder, but he was still fighting against himself too much to think. "Green."

No answer, villains were starting to close in. "Midoriya!" She had to leap in front of him, slashing at the stretching arm of someone attempting to claw for his eyes. Last chance… "Izuku!" His eyes snapped to her, wide, afraid and crazed like a rabid dog. In a motion that followed her swing, she flicked the edge of her blade toward Akaguro's open maw, and he caught the blood in the air. Sure enough, the villain attached to that stretching limb collapsed. "Claws!" She shouted, and a look of comprehension spread on the rabid boy's features.

He moved in a blur, him and Akaguro, into the nearest group of villains and started swinging. Their motions, frantic and quick -too quick to follow almost- tore through armor, cloth and skin. A dance of blade and claw, coloring the air almost thick with the blood of their enemies as the dhampire caught what of it he could with his tongue. Deku flinging more of the same right at him when the chance arose. Jiro and Yaoyorozu leapt to, swinging for whoever they could, whoever wasn't currently running away.

In a matter of seconds, the fight, if it could even be called as much, was over. As the villains lay, straining against unmoving muscles, Akaguro went around stomping on their heads while Yaoyorozu spouted handcuffs from her skin; binding villain's wrists as she followed in his wake.

Jiro turned to see Deku on his knees, fingers tearing at his scalp, like he were scratching some crazed itch. Cautiously, she approached, kneeling beside him. "Green?" no reply. "What's wrong?"

She thought she might be sick. The skin around his right eye, the veins were… pulsing and black as his sclera, the eye itself completely bloodshot. A thick sweat had broken out over his brow, and his breathing was weak, shallow. "...Midoriya?" Slowly his eyes went to her, they were wild, unfocused. He seemed to be shivering on top of it all. "Can you talk?" Slowly he shook his head.

Yaoyorozu, having finished handcuffing the unconscious villains -binding their hands and feet together for good measure- walked over. "What happened to him?"
"I don't know," Jiro answered, looking him over, closely, "He's not acting right at all."

Taking a minute to breathe, hand clutching at his acid-burned ribs, the dhampire took a seat on the pavement. "Is it the blood?" his voice strained. Deku seemed to think about this, but then shook his head again, tapping at his skull and wincing.

Leaning close, Jiro realized his eyes were more than wrong. The one on the left was completely contracted while his right was entirely dilated. "I think he has a concussion." She frowned, "he must have landed worse than I thought…"

It was then that Yaoyorozu noticed the veins on the right side of his head. Moving his white hair aside she examined his skin. "Oh no…"

"What?" Akaguro and Jiro said together.

The creation girl turned Deku's face, so Jiro could see what she'd found. Two, tiny, red marks just below his hairline. "From our friend the black widow, it looks like." Black widows, spiders who produce a protein based venom that attacks their victim's nervous system.

"Shit…" Akaguro strained to climb to his feet. "I think Jiro's right… his landing, or that punch, must have hurt him more than we thought, otherwise his healing factor would be burning through the venom on its own." Looking around, frowning accusingly at their surroundings he added, "that and… vampires do not agree with fire. His body is likely working overtime to keep its temperature regulated."

Yaoyorozu gulped. "So… he could lose it and attack us?" she regarded him nervously, "if it's taxing him that much…"

Jiro glared at her, looking her right in the eye she grabbed Deku under his shoulders and hauled him up. He was shaky, unsteady, he leaned on her, other hand gripping at his skull as he got used to being back on his feet. He looked like a kid with a nasty illness. Eyes half closed, sweating, pale as snow and shivering. The unfocused look in his eye was almost disarming. "See how his jaw isn't shaking?" Pointed out the violet eyed girl. "The rest of him is, that isn't. What does that tell you?" Deku looked away from them, trying to hide his face, and the creation girl felt a pang of guilt stabbing at her.

Hesitantly, she answered. "He's still doing everything he can to fight that urge, even though it might heal him." Wincing, at her own selfishness, she felt an utter fool. "Midoriya- I… forgive me. I- I'm not used to-"

His answer was a hand, slowly placing itself on her shoulder, his eyes meeting hers. Labored, slow breathing pushed and pulled at his ribs, making them rise and fall. Motions that accentuated the exhausted look in his mismatched eyes. He couldn't speak, say anything to put her at ease, but he let go of Jiro -the one presently responsible for his sense of balance- to give her a thumbs up.

Yaoyorozu thought she might cry. "Can't we let him bite one of the villains?" She pleaded. "If it will help him-"

"No." Akaguro cut in. "We can't have evidence of his existence getting out, remember? If he bites someone, when he has every chance not to, it's over for him." The weight of the words felt heavy on Yaoyorozu's shoulders. Deku's hand left her shoulder, she turned to see he was still looking at her. He nodded, and she nodded back.

"And to be honest," Jiro put forward jokingly, "I think the idea of expulsion from the hero course
scares him more than death." Deku's frame shook once with the force of a solitary laugh. Somehow, the atmosphere felt a little less oppressive now.

Taking a few steps toward Akaguro, Yayorozu bent to examine his wound. "Can I help?"

He shrugged. "Can you make something that could heal an acid burn?"

Holding out her hands, an ointment sprouted into existence, which she spread over the wound. Open skin, bits of muscle peeking through the faint remnants of his last epidermal layer. Next, she pulled a rather large adhesive bandage forth and he opened his shirt enough for her to apply it. "Unfortunately I'm no recovery girl," said she, "but I hope that helps a little."

Nodding, stars still dancing in his eyes, he coughed, shoulders and chest heaving with the effort. "I'll do." And he started walking Jiro leading a bleary Deku not far behind while Yaoyorozu kept her sword handy. A few extra pairs of handcuffs hanging from her belt, just in case and her stomach growled.

Jiro looked between her companions. Two with one foot in the grave, another already taxing her energy just a bit too far. To make matters more harrowing they had no idea where the exit was. "I really hope the others are doing better that we are…"

Water. Not Kaminari's preferred environment. Not the best swimmer, even without an entire hero costume weighing him down. To make matters worse, he was currently staring down a man who looked a PSA against human-shark interbreeding. The villain in question was swimming right for him, mouth wide open and barrelling toward his throat. Kaminari was about panic when he saw a pair of green legs slam into the man's face. Before he could realize what was happening, Asui's tongue had wrapped around his middle and flung him out of the water. Much to his surprise, he landed on a ship. Coughing the water from his lungs, chest heaving from his efforts to breathe he could have kissed the frog girl for saving his life.

"You okay, Kaminari?" She croaked, hauling a water-logged Aoyama onto the deck alongside them.

Finally able to speak, he grumbled, "I'll live." Taking a seat against a nearby wall. "What happened to everyone else?"

"I don't know…" Asui answered, regret coloring her voice. "We all got swallowed by that purple mist guy's quirk, but I don't think anyone else wound up with us."

Kaminari peered over the side of the ship, out at the rest of the USJ. "So we all got separated…"

Asui nodded, "that's what it looks like."

Stirring by the frog girl's side, was one Aoyama rousing to consciousness. "Mon Dieu, je déteste les vêtements mouillés….." He groaned, shaking the water from his gloves. "What happened?" He asked daring to stand up and look into the water surrounding them. Swirling in the water, calculating their next move, was a group aquatic villains. "…Nevermind, that was a foolish question." Turning to Asui, a tinkle in his eye, he said, "Asui, ma belle fleur, thank you for the timely save." He said with a bow.

"You can call me Tsu," The frog girl croaked, "and I think your thanks may be premature unless we find a way out of here."

"Well," Aoyama pondered, "there are… more than I think we can safely handle by ourselves, no?"
Where the hell was this guy from and why was he speaking with a french accent?! "Can we evade them? Jump to shore perhaps?"

Asui gulped. "Not in one leap," she said, "not unless your navel laser can carry us the rest of the way." At the utterance of such a plan, Kaminari was starting to come up with one of his own.

"Ahh…" it was a plan Kaminari did not want to go through with, but he saw no other alternative. "perhaps but I will be worse than useless after such a display." Giving Asui an apologetic look, he added, "I'm afraid all I would do then is slow you down while the villains catch up with us."

"Do it." Kaminari said, standing up.

Asui's eyes went wider than usual, eyebrows jumping. "What? But you heard what he just said. We'd be defenseless." She stood up too, "You and me won't be enough to protect him from all them."

Kaminari gulped. "We won't have to," he smiled, fear showing through it clear as day, "I'm not going with you anyways."

"Ne sois pas absurde!" Aoyama exclaimed, making Kaminari roll his eyes. "Of course you're coming with us! We won't just leave you here!"

Asui nodded, "We're in this together, I don't see us making it out of here any other way." Villains below started swarming at the side of the boat, weapons and appendages scraping away at the metal.

Kaminari shook his head, "Except this one…" He pointed to the shore. "When you jump, just make sure you get there in one go."

Asui's voice sounded as though she believed he'd lost it. "While you do what? Go down with the ship?"

"No." Smiling, holding up a hand, fingers crackling with electricity, he tried his best not to look afraid. "I'm gonna throw a toaster into the tub." Gulping, he looked out toward the water. "Of course… you know what happens to the toaster." He muttered, already dreading what was doubtlessly going to happen. At the worst of times, overusing his quirk almost literally fried his brain. Overusing it on a metal boat in the middle of lake? If he survived, it would be a day to remember.

"Unacceptable," protested the other blond, "we can't just leave you to-"

"Do you have a better idea!?" Silence. Tried as they might, nothing was forthcoming from either of them. "Then just go." He leaned down palm spread over the surface of the deck. "When you get help, don't forget to send someone after me, yeah?" The boat rocked, villains clearly on their way aboard.

Asui reached right for him, "Kaminari-"

"GO!" The boat violently surged to one side, knocking them off balance.

After a moment's hesitation, she realized he was right. They really didn't have any other feasible way out of this. Too many to fight, even if it had been on favorable ground. Locking elbows with Aoyama, the two of them back to back, she gave Kaminari a last worried look before she launched them into the air.
"Well," he chuckled, nerves beyond frayed as he prepared to go full power with his quirk, "always wanted to try fishing with a big zapper…"

Clasping his hand down on the metal, he cut loose. Electricity surged from the metal, arching off the sides of the ship and shooting through every drop of water in the artificial lake. Kaminari's mouth clenched shut, his every muscle going convulsing and constricting violently. The water, both in the lake and on him, it was serving as a secondary medium for his quirk! Instead of frying out his brain like he'd predicted the electricity of his attack rebounded. His hair stood on end, clothes and skin cooked dry as his limbs spasmed violently. Jaw trembling open, he fell backwards, as the boat began to capsize. His back collided with the side of the cabin, head slamming into it a millisecond later, making his vision fuzzy. So this was what passing out felt like… it was strangely like falling asleep, only instead of your body following your brain, your brain followed your body.

Eyes fluttering shut, he was only dimly aware of someone landing next to him on the boat. They hauled him up into their arms before wind tore at his face, his hair. Before he blacked out he thought he heard someone cursing in French, as a beam of light danced in the periphery of his vision.

Aizawa's back slammed into the edge of the fountain, an exclamation of extreme discomfort knocked from his lips. Glaring at the villain responsible he forced his tired, aching body to leap into the air, narrowly avoiding another body breaking punch. No good, his quirk couldn't cancel out this thug's quirk. It never worked on quirks that were constantly active, changing the shape of their owner's bodies along with the enhancements provided. So it was his usual tack with such brutes that would save the day. Footwork constantly pedaling away, weaving side to side, he baited the goliath into charging in. Then, bait taken, he somersaulted over his head, scarf snaring at the fools feet and toppling him. After that, it was a simple matter to let gravity carry his knees into the back of his opponent's head. Getting up after that was a trick his body wasn't thrilled to be performing.

A slight stagger, lasting only a fraction of a second, marked his wavering vim. "He's getting tired!" Shouted one, as his hair yielded to gravity at long last. "Now's our chance!" Six of them charged in all at once.

Aizawa scoffed. "Such arrogance…" Hair floating once again, he lashed out with his scarf and coiled it around the neck of the furthest assailant. "All my career," he pulled with everything he had, ducking passed another villain's straightarm. "I've fought villains who could be described as true monsters," his knee lashed out, striking the fool he'd evaded right in the sternum, and a loud crunching noise was heard. "A bunch of punks here to pick on kids," he growled, spinning in the air and driving his fist into another thug's face. The number of teeth flying out of his mouth made his ally's wonder if he had any left, "have no chance standing up to me!"

With a final yank, he pulled the one he'd snared into the remaining two, leaping over them as the sprawled out on the ground. As they tried to collect themselves, one making it back to her feet, he charged. A strike to her neck, just below the larynx sent her back to the dirt. Driving his elbow down between the shoulder blades of the second succeeded in misaligning his spine with a loud pop. The third was still on the ground, with his face barely picked up off it. It was a simple matter to charge forward and swing his foot in an upward, like a football player aiming for opposite end of the field. A broken jaw and a few torn muscles in one's neck never killed anyone at least.

Shigaraki, the man with the disembodied hand on his face, seemed to growl. "You're rather ruthless for a hero…" he remarked, fingers clawing at his own neck. "I'd almost think you'd killed before, watching you fight." Even underneath that hand, the scraggly man could see the unhinged smile on
his face. "Are you capable of such a thing, Eraser Head?"

Dropping back into his combat stance, he decided to meet that taunt with a challenge. "Want to find out?"

To his credit, Shigaraki laughed. A laugh that could only be produced by a voice that sounded like moldy sandpaper. "Oh you are just so cool!" Exclaimed the villain. "As if taking out my minions wasn't single handed wasn't cool enough, now this!" He flashed a mad look at the hero, a look like mad dog about to break free of the chain. "Not many heroes have that kind of loose moral code." he chuckled some more. "Just who the hell are you, Eraser Head?"

"Not going to lie," he said, giving his eyes a moment to rest. Using his quirk gave him very serious dry-eye. Right now he was certain they were borderline clinically dehydrated. But there were more enemies yet left to fight, "you've caught me in the middle of a very bad week." He allowed himself a dark little smirk. "I'm not sure just what I'm capable of right now." At that statement Shigaraki's face lit up like christmas had come early. Hook, line and sinker, "Like I said," he beckoned him, curling his fingers toward himself, "Come find out."

"Ohhh ho ho ho ho ho!" He held up a finger, drawing the attention of the purple brute. "Wait there, Nomu, I wanna a turn at playing this game!" And he charged straight for the professional, unaware of the trap he'd just run headlong into. "As for the rest of you," he bellowed hand outstretched for Aizawa's face, "kill those brats by the entrance!"

"No!" Aizawa hissed, trying to break away from his new opponent and make chase. There weren't many, maybe seven of them, but he didn't like their odds. They were just kids, fresh into the school for god's sakes!

Seeing him so frantic to protect them, Shigaraki laughed. "Go after them, and I send the Nomu instead!" Aizawa chanced a look at the hulking beast called 'Nomu'. Formidable, and mindless, likely some sort of quirk experiment gone horribly wrong. That it was so large, and had yet to display what it's true power was… no. He couldn't chance that thing going after his students. For now he'd play this 'Shigaraki's' game.

Though he hopped to break a few of his extremities in the process.

Their collective efforts to subdue the man made of purple mist had only succeeded in thinning their numbers. Every student who'd leapt in to attack had been thrown to who knew what corner of the facility. At present, the only ones remaining by Thirteen's side Uraraka, Ashido, Iida, that puffy lipped guy and the guy with six arms. Staring down an enemy, whose location was constantly in flux, and trying to get passed him was a challenge the pro hero had not yet encountered. Considering the lack of alarms going off, the villains had likely disabled them remotely. In his efforts to contact the outside, Iida had found that cell reception was also being blocked. No way out, no way to call for help and a building full of villains threatening their classmates. Not an ideal scenario to throw a group of newbies into.

"Young Iida…" Thirteen's voice was quiet, sober. Weighted with something heavy her students couldn't discern. "When we clear a path for the door, get through it and get help."

Iida looked shocked, almost offended, "But… ma'am, I can't just abandon you all!"

Ashido was the first to reply, "you're the only one fast enough to outpace these guys!"

"How am I supposed to outrun a teleporter?!" He demanded, "I'm fast but not fast enough to
counter something that instantaneous!"

Uraraka chimed in, "once you get outside it won't matter! They can't follow you out without triggering the alarms!"

"It's true," Confirmed Thirteen, voice still unsettlingly grave, "all you have to do at that point is run and get help."

With a slight narrowing of his eyes, the portal villain gave a wordless reply. Opening a portal right under Iida's feet. Leaping to, Uraraka clapped a hand against his shoulder, and gravity no longer applied. "Good luck." Shoving him upwards, sending him right for the ceiling above the exit, she herself fell into the portal.

"Uraraka!" Hurtling toward the exit as he was, he tried to reach for her, but his fingers snared only air.

"Oh no you-" When the villain went to open another portal Thirteen was on him. Her gloved hand was opened on every finger, and the resulting pull of her quirk was that of a tornado. It was everything the villain could do not to immediately get sucked in. In fact he was forced to teleport behind her in the chaos. "You are beginning to irritate me." His voice carried a scathing bite.

Rather than say anything she merely turned her other hand on him, once again forcing him to teleport away. Taking advantage of the distraction, Iida blasted away with the engines in his calves, rocketing himself in a tailspin toward the glass above. When the villain next appeared, he was prepared. Thirteen's attack was redirected by two different portals, one in front of her, the other behind. When she went to siphon the man from existence, her attack instead tore the back of her costume to shreds and the flesh of her body along with it. Leaping to her rescue were the puffy lipped guy and Ashido. While the muscley teen landed a punch on his face -knocking him off balance- Ashido, palms outstretched, blasted acid all over the man's torso.

Shrieking in pain, the villain threw himself away from them, writhing on the ground. Instinct was an ugly thing if you pushed the human brain hard enough, and seeing the way the man convulsed in agony was enough to make Ashido wish she'd born quirkless. But there wasn't time for such thoughts. Up above Iida was fuming in frustration, furiously wailing his leg against unyielding glass. From the looks of him, he was barely holding onto the metal in his hands. Uraraka's quirk must have stopped...

Thinking quickly the grabbed her classmate's shoulder. "You have a strength quirk, right?"

He blinked, "yes?"

Ashido pointed toward Iida. "Throw me up there!"

Before he could protest the stirring villain was snarling, probably frothing at the mouth and forcing himself to his feet. Were it not for their six armed classmate tackling the purple man, he'd have been on them in seconds. So without a word, he reached for his utility belt, grabbed a packet of sugar and consumed it. Picking up the pink girl he curled his body like baseball pitcher and hurled her toward their armored friend.

"Iida, incoming!" She shouted, giving him just enough to brace himself for her impact.

Being thrown against a man in armor was significantly less pleasant than she'd ever imagined… wind knocked from her lungs, stars in her eyes, she managed to cling to a metal beam just above his head.
Hand outstretched she sprayed acid over the glass and metal. "Now, kick it now!"

He complied, sundering the glass and metal entirely. Unfortunately he'd also succeeded in destroying his hand holds. Luckily, Ashido's was holding strong. Strong enough that she was able to push him through with her legs rather than watch him plummet away back inside the USJ.

He landed on the pavement outside with a loud clatter, but with a few curses, he was on his feet and rocketing away. Ashido almost breathed a sigh of relief when she remembered just how high up she was. Looking back down below she saw the others had succeeded in subduing that mist guy, and three other students had made it back to the group. Asui, Aoyama and one crispy looking Kaminari.

"Kami…"

Adding to the list of 'bad', Thirteen was done for. Underneath that bulky suit it was impossible to tell if she was still breathing. There wasn't time to find out, however. Right behind Asui's group was another bunch of villains, heading right for them. Frowning, letting her demeanor slip to something somber, she let out some of her negativity.

"I hate today."

Then she dropped, bracing her legs for impact.

By the time they'd reached the exit of the Inferno Zone, Jiro was amazed that either of the boys in her company were still standing. The sweltering heat alone was enough to make her dread ever wearing a leather jacket as part of hero costume. Having to half carry one of her friends made it practically unbearable. When she struggled to wipe the sweat off her brow, the vampire who she carried looked at her apologetically.

"We're even." she said, prompting a confused blink. "From when you caught me." It took him a minute, but he nodded.

Up ahead of them Akaguro let loose with a rather violent cough as he kicked the door open. Walking through it, without breaking stride, he staggered to the water's edge -the sea accident zone- and fell in. Sighing in blissful relief he floated there for a moment before dragging himself out of the water.

"I don't think that water's sanitary…" Yaoyorozu commented.

"Don't care." The dhampire replied, his breathing finally equalizing. "Feel better." and the creation girl shook her head. At Deku slumping back like a lump, Jiro strained in her efforts to ease him to the ground.

Growling with her efforts not to drop him, she hissed, "Damn it, Green!" But he wasn't present enough to hear her. The vice like clamping of his jaw remained resolute, even as his eyes drooped closed. Rolling her eyes, Jiro pulled on the back of his head to lean him forward. "Selfdestructive lunatic…" she muttered angrily. "Do you ever worry about yourself?" No reply, even after she'd wormed him out of his- oh good lord. The heft of this jacket was a sin against reasonably weighted clothing. "Y-you idiot!" She all but shouted. "Would it have killed you to take this thing off?!" her voice strained as she let it drop from his shoulders with a thud.

Akaguro rolled his eyes shaking his head with a one sided frown. "I'm starting to think you were right about that concussion." Coughing again, groaning and gripping his side, he growled in frustration. "I hate smoke…"
Wiping some blackened sweat from her brow, Yaoyorozu murmured her reply. "I'm not fond of it myself..." While Jiro discarded her jacket something caught the creation girl's eye. "Looks like Aizawa's still fighting that-" her eyes went wide. "Wh- what is that thing!?" Jiro looked up and just about thought she'd lost it. No way in hell did nature produce a creature that wrong looking. But why was it just standing there?

Unaware of those now observing them, Aizawa and Shigaraki were fighting two very different battles. The hero was on his last wind, unable to keep himself from wobbling as he alternated between dodging and negating the villain's attempts to disintegrate his flesh. His eyes were screaming for any sort of liquid to undry them, his knuckles and joints were all bleeding from beating a mob of fools into the dirt. Even if he beat this guy, he was no longer sure he had it in himself to beat the so called 'Nomu'.

Meanwhile, Shigaraki was having the time of his life. Sure, he was getting more bruises and cuts than any other time in his life, but there was something oddly thrilling about fighting. As another blow to his gut knocked the wind out of him, as another knee to his temple made the world spin, he cackled.

"Twenty four..." still listing numbers, for what purpose the hero knew not.

Another strike to the lunatic's ribs, another hand clawing for face. A hand he hadn't noticed until it snared his goggles.

"Twenty..."

Lurching his head back, Aizawa narrowly avoided his face being turned to dust. It was almost sad, watching those goggles deteriorate to nothing in the man's grip.

"Seventeen..."

What was he on about? Aizawa glared at him, suppressing a snarl as he lashed out with his scarf and snared most of Shigaraki's upper body with it.

"Now it's all the way down to six." And he pulled the man toward him, flinging him into the air.

Lurching forward, tugging on the scarf with all he had, he brought the villain crashing down into the concrete water fountain. Ordinarily such a man would have shattered upon such an impact, but the water broke his fall just enough to prevent that. When the villain was out of sight, the scarf began disintegrating and Aizawa cursed himself for his error.

Bursting from the water, coughing up said liquid, the villain cackled breathlessly. "Your quirk, makes your float around whenever you use it." Grinned he, "I've been watching, calculating the amount of time you could use it," he pulled himself out of the fountain, looming toward the hero, whose breathing was heavy, labored. It had been too long since he'd had such a fight. "And now that you're down to the wire, facing the leader, you just keep mixing it up!" He pointed right at him with violent enthusiasm. "I can never predict a good time to try and use a finishing move!" Aizawa glared at him, growling disapprovingly at this man's appreciation for his tactics. "You really are just so cool..." Shigaraki sighed, happily. "I almost don't want to kill you."

Flicking his wrist, dagger in hand, Aizawa altered his combat stance accordingly. "The feeling is far from mutual." And Shigaraki couldn't help but snicker gleefully.

"Ahhh, " he sighed, stepping out of the fountain, "it's been fun," he flexed his wrists, snapping them more times in tandem than should have been possible, "but it's time for this game to end."
Then something caught his attention: that group of villains he'd sent up the stairs was having trouble with those kids. And…

oh no. "Shit..." Shigaraki hissed under his breath. "Kurogiri's out. Looks like the fun's over." Whistling, instantly drawing the Nomu's attention, he pointed up the stairs. "Finish them, and bring me Kurogiri."

When the lumbering monster went for the stairs, Aizawa felt the veil around the world drop, and he remembered what nightmares felt like. You think you remember, in your waking moments, after they happen, but you don't. Not until something beyond horrible is looming over your head, threatening to change your life forever for the worst.

All heroes have moments where their bodies moved on their own. Rushing them toward danger they couldn't possible hope to beat in order to protect those who were helpless. All heroes, no matter how jaded, never quite manage to resist this impulse. When Aizawa landed on the Nomu's shoulders, he drove the blade of his dagger into the monster's eye. When he dragged the blade through its brain, he expected it to fall. Instead it reached up, faster than he could hope to react, and grabbed his chest. Air was pushed from his lungs, ribs snapping like twigs in its grip, it just tossed him off like he was a mosquito. Nothing more than an annoyance.

"Impressive, isn't he?" Shigaraki mocked, "the best that old 'Sensei' could put together." Sputtering, straining through the pain, the Hero looked up to see the flesh of the creature putting itself back together. "He should be more than a match for All Might."

In a flash, defying his broken chest, Aizawa was on Shigaraki. One hand pulled at the hair on the back of his head, the other had the dagger aimed right at his carotid artery. "You really think I won't?" and for the first time, Shigaraki saw it.

The look one only got in one's eyes when one had taken lives and was every bit capable of taking them again. It was a look that chilled him down the marrow, not one that should ever be in the eyes of a hero.

Aizawa didn't care. "Then keep walking," he... he was talking to the Nomu?! "Your master here won't live past your next step." The Nomu stopped, turning around and staring right at the two of them.

Talking to a wild beast instead of the man who commanded it... one line too far. Shigaraki reached behind himself, and gripped Aizawa's broken ribs. With a strained outcry of pain, Aizawa's hand actually made the motion to stab Shigaraki. Had the villain not anticipated the reflexes of his survival instincts prompting him to attack, the dagger would have killed him. Instead he let gravity carry him backward and down, away from the blade. Gripping at rotting, shattered ribs Aizawa staggered backward, staring down the villains with naught much left but embers of his strength.

Now, the look in Shigaraki's eyes was anything but amused. "On second thought, Nomu..." he pointed right at the Hero, his entire left shoulder drenched in blood from the sizable cut Aizawa had just given him. "Kill him first."

There was no mistaking what she'd just heard. That... thing was going to kill Aizawa. "Oh no you don't!" Jiro shouted, hand on her sword in a flash.

The creature only had a moment to look up before her next move was made. Throwing the blade like a javelin it speared itself soundly in the creature's chest. In confusion it looked down at the thing piecing its flesh. It seemed confused, like it didn't recognize the look of its own blood. Like
seeing such a thing shouldn't have been possible any longer.

"No!" Aizawa shouted, "get out of here!" but it was too late.

The Nomu was already right next to her, a backhand hit her skull with greater force than a punch from god. Her body skidded across the dirt, bouncing and flailing limply into the air, spinning just enough so that when she next landed it was on her back. Wind and senses knocked soundly from her Jiro stared, groaning up at the ceiling while the world spiraled.

Lounging straight at the thing were Akaguro and Yaoyorozu. His katana skewered through the thing's entire torso, but it ignored it. It was by a hair's breadth that he avoided getting punched in the face, but the wind. The wind from the missed strike was enough to send him flying. Yaoyorozu's sword slashed through the thing's side, but she too -in the wake of that thing's attack, was thrown away from it.

"That thing…" she breathed, hurling herself back to her feet, "the force of that attack…” her eyes were wide with terror, even still she stood her ground.

In disbelief, the dhampire made the harrowing climb back to his feet, and marveled at it. "It's as strong as All Might." He said, almost reverently.

Yaoyorozu, standing between the thing and Jiro, refused to move. Two of her comrades were helpless, one was just about dead. She couldn't win, but she couldn't run. Gulping back her nerves, she aimed her blade right at the thing's face, staring it down.

"If I were a praying girl… I think this would be the time." she breathed, even as she quaked in her boots. It charged, she prepared to counter its next attack, only she never had the chance. She was knocked out of its way before it hit her, and someone else was on top of her. When he dragged her back to her feet, she almost screamed his name. "Aizawa? How did you-" His chest soaked in blood. Skin falling off, half rotted had torn open in his mad dash to save her life.

"I said," he strained through clenched teeth, tearing the sword from her grip, "RUN!" and he charged at the Nomu again.

She barely had time to register what happened next. It struck out, he narrowly dodged, the wind sent her flying, shoulders and head colliding with the wall of the Inferno Zone. It was a miracle the pain alone didn't make her black out.

Jiro was finally able to move again, but the pain from doing so made her wish she couldn't. Definitely a concussion. At the moment she was just thankful that thing hadn't broken her neck. Forcing herself to look up, she saw a truly hopeless sight. Aizawa, somehow managing to avoid a strike from it, slashed its side clean open. When she saw the massive, open wound on his own ribs she was no longer certain just whose blood he was drenched in. It reared up, ready to smash him into the dirt when Akaguro suddenly landed on its back. His thumbs forced their way into the monster's eyes, prompting it flail about. Jiro was on her feet, staggering, when it grabbed him. She was running when Aizawa impaled the thing's face. She was sprinting when it dropped Akaguro to force the blade from its grey matter. There just wasn't stopping this thing. Everything they did to it just healed itself and utterly failed to slow it down. They weren't strong enough to fight this thing, no human was save for All Might.

All Might wasn't here.

Someone who wasn't human, was here.
"Green!" She practically fell by his side, he was barely even breathing anymore. She reached out shaking him, trying to wake him to no avail. "Come on, get up!" Nothing. Between the heat from the inferno Zone and the venom was ravaging his body, Izuku Midoriya was long unconscious. "We need you!"

Even as she pleaded, the Nomu had recovered, swatting Aizawa aside just in time for Yaoyorozu to start launching... something at it from the backs of her wrists. Something thick, heavy and that solidified almost instantly. Whatever it was, it was only succeeding in slowing it down as its master started walking over to them.

"Midoriya..." Jiro breathed, as it smashed free of the solidified material, "I don't know if you really stand a chance of beating this thing," Yaoyorozu staggered, it reached out to grab her head and Akaguro was on it, forcing his sword up: the rest of the way through its body and lopping off its arm. "But without you, we all die before help can get here."

She undid her choker, letting it fall to the ground as the Nomu's arm re-sprouted from its side. In the next moment, she was pulling Midoriya's mask of his face, digging her fingernails into the side of her own throat with her other hand. "Don't hate me for this..."

As the Nomu struck Akaguro, straight on, right in his wounded side, she pulled Midoriya's face to the side of her neck and flinched. While the half blood was sent through the barrier of the Inferno Zone, the full blooded Vampire unconsciously sank his teeth into her neck. She felt incredibly faint. Between the head trauma and now significant and increasing blood loss she almost relented to unconsciousness. Behind her, the Nomu swatted Yaoyorozu aside, looking curiously at Jiro. It cocked its head to one side, like a curious crow as it lumbered toward her.

Aizawa, defy every screaming iota of his failing body, charged it again. Grabbing Jiro's sword, still in the thing's chest, he forced it up, vivisecting the Nomu's head. Before it had even finished healing it punched his already ruined chest. Its knuckles carried his body in an arc, smashing him through a section of the Inferon Zone barrier and he finally didn't get back up. At the sound of the violent crash, Midoriya's eyes sprung open.

Instinct took over. Flying from he'd been propped against the wall, claws at the ready, he tore the thing's face to ribbons. He'd jumped over its head, claws still in the thing's flesh he twisted his body and hurled as hard as he could. With a roar unlike any he'd ever unleashed, he actually lifted it up off the ground. With his other hand reached up to join the first, he smashed it back down to earth, clear away from his fallen allies. Shaking his head, staggering from the surge of adrenaline and sudden recuperation, he took a moment to process everything that had just happened. Chest heaving, suddenly able to draw in air at all he looked about and promptly realized he was the last one standing. Realizing the horrid thing he'd done. Yaoyorozu was stirring, albeit very slowly, back to her senses. Jiro lay on the ground behind him, her eyes narrow and brow furrowed from all manner of pain. The hand on her neck wasn't very effectual at staunching the blood flow, but it remained there as she stared defiantly at the Nomu.

"Good..." she strained, very light headed from the effort required to even speak, "good luck, Green..." and she couldn't risk another word.

If she passed out with a concussion, there was no telling when or if she'd wake up. When he looked over his shoulder, that look of horrified guilt made her want to scream. Stirring of the Nomu climbing back to its feet.

"Now that's unexpected..." That disembodied hand... and he thought it had been his imagination, back at the front gate. "You actually threw it..."
Deku looked at the hulking monster he'd apparently thrown. He was strong enough to throw an industrial steamroller, something weighting close to 20 tons, a good fifteen feet away from himself. Whatever this thing was, he'd only thrown it about half that distance; meaning that even while he'd grievously injured its brain -crippling most of its voluntary and autonomic functions- it was still strong enough to resist even that much strength. ...What kind of maniac created this thing?

"No matter," Shigaraki batted that thought out of the air, "you'll be dead soon enough." he clicked his fingers and pointed right at Deku.

Good lord that thing could move. Eyes going wide at this monster's sheer strength, he only managed to dodge it by falling over. When it tried to kick him, Deku twisted his body away, only narrowly avoiding that as well. The wind was still enough to send him flying. Body twisting in the air -with all the grace of a tortoise with wings- he only barely managed to get back to his feet in time to avoid another attack. No. He didn't have time to think about what he was doing.

If he wasted time with that, then this was over already. This time he was leaping over its head. That this tactic worked on it so well suggested it never expected anyone to be so crazy as to go over its head. It healed from this once already! Striking out with his claws, finally getting a chance to attack, he turned its exposed brain to jelly. It slumped forward, literal brain death stopping it dead as it started to regenerate. He sighed in relief. There was no way he could kill it, and that meant he didn't have to hold back with it.

"That's it!" Deku shouted, leaping straight for the creature. There was a way to beat it!

Leaping in front of it, claws swinging in rapid succession, he cut through flesh and bone like butter. It raised a hand to defend itself, but that was cut clean off for its trouble. In something akin to panic, it lashed out, striking his jaw in an uppercut and sending him flying into the air. He landed in a heap, his broken jaw and neck slow to reknit themselves, making snapping, popping noises as they did. He had to vigorously shake his head to retain his balance.

"You can't kill Nomu," Shigaraki's voice was his only warning before he felt an indescribable pain in his right arm.

Left arm swinging, this time in a punch, he swatted the villain's shoulder, making him scream. Deku staggered, clutching his rotting, disintegrating arm. Biting his lip and hissing from the pain he watched in horror as the skin and muscle turned to dust before his eyes.

Snarling, the villain carried on with his little speech. "Everything…" he strained, "you do to it will only undo itself thanks to one of its quirks!" Deku looked up to see that it was almost completely regenerated again. Only… was it regenerating slower?

A growl in his stomach halted that thought dead. The tax on his body, from healing everything he'd been through today on top of his most recent injuries, it was more than what he'd eaten could maintain. Looking at his arm he found it was still disintegrating, his healing factor barely managing to keep pace. It was only after that his stomach growled louder that inspiration struck.

"Funny thing about healing quirks…” with his good hand, Deku took hold of the rotting one, "your body can only keep it going for as long as it has the energy required." Claws extended, he braced for the pain he knew was coming. In one, excruciating motion, he used his claws to strip the affected flesh from his bones.

He nearly doubled over from the pain, screaming through his teeth as his blood splattered the dirt. His breathing was strained, muffling cries of anguish as he forced himself to look up at his enemies. The only reason they hadn't attacked was because one of them had been too terrified to
think of it. Deku held up his arm, letting the villain watch as his flesh regrew over his bones. Scared as he was, shaking from fear and pain alike, he knew his friends were counting on him. His teacher was counting on him. Presence of mind enough to comprehend the value of intimidating one's opponent.

Impressive that he had it, amidst the various screams of his ravaged body. "So I'll just have to keep hurting it," he took a step forward, "Until it's too tired to fight!" His quirk loving brain, ever to the rescue.

Shigaraki was at a loss. A kid, some brat with the quirk of a demi-god, was somehow managing to stand up his Nomu? No. Ridiculous. He pointed at the child in question. "Nomu," he said quietly, "pretend he's All Might."

In a blur too fast for any normal human to see, it was on him. Fist smashing him through the water fountain, careening into the stone steps. And Deku thought that injury from Bakugo had hurt… it took entire seconds for his body to register it was even in pain. His nervous system might as well have gone through a blender. Before he could process any kind of plan, it was over him again, fist ready to deliver a killing blow.

Body surrendering to pure impulse, he twisted out of the path of its attack by the skin of his teeth. No time to think. If he hesitated even for one second in this fight, he would die. The people he was defending would die. Feet making contact with some surface he kicked off it, claws moving in a blur. Its eyes turned to paste, he caught the blood flying in the air with his long, inhuman tongue. When he landed it swung wildly, fist blasting over his head like a rocket as he ducked.

Another lunge forward, this time he ripped most of its torso wide open, taking an arm with it as his open maw feverishly guzzled down the torrenting blood. Mid flight, it grabbed him, crushing his ribs and smashing him into the ground. Splattering him like a literal bug. But he'd easily had enough of this thing's blood to recover from it. Flesh reknitting itself in moments, he lunged upwards, spearing his arms deep into the thing's head.

He'd lost it, completely surrendering to his vampire nature his fangs drove themselves into its flesh. Hands digging, scrapping at the top of its head, keeping the brain from healing while he guzzled down its life force. A savage jab to his stomach, fingers spearing his flesh, rocketed him away from the thing. When he landed, he realized it had bit his midsection hard enough to burst it.

Coughing, senses returning to his adrenaline addled brain after such a strike, Deku saw the world above him spinning. He groaned as he got to an upright position. Off in the distance, even with its ruined head and missing arm, it was staggering toward him. You just couldn't keep it down… Forcing himself to his feet - a task easier than said than done with an open abdomen- he felt his own flesh and bone forcing themselves to reform. Still moving as it was, it was slow. Deku had given it a beating so bad its healing factor was ending the fight for him. Every inch of flesh regrown, was another hint of wobble added to it's step.

When the vampire turned to face Shigaraki he was stunned, speechless. "Like I said," the vampire repeated, literally holding himself together with an arm firm against his gut, "healing only work as long as the body can keep it up."

Shigaraki looked at him, almost numbly. Defeat worn plainly on his masked face, staring the victorious brat in the eye.

Deku quietly regarded him with something akin to sympathy. "Tell it to stop, before it dies." The Nomu had regrown its body, but its footsteps were beyond labored. It was like watching a man that was already dead as he tried to keep walking. But it was still heading his way, at the same pace it
always walked. "Please…” Deku's expression went soft, "No one's died yet, this doesn't have to end that way."

Those who were awake to observe looked on in awe. This… this was the power of a vampire? Yaoyorozu looked as though she were staring at a living, breathing myth: Afraid and filled with wonder. Jiro had no idea what to think. This fight clearly wasn't over. As long as that thing could still move, it could still kill all of them. Midoriya had managed to survive this long thanks only to clever tactics and savagery. But his legs were shaking.

He was on his last remnants of vigor himself. Even with the ample supply of blood, coursing through his system, a vampire was still an animal. There wasn't an animal alive that didn't need sleep, especially after putting itself through something so harrowing as the fight he'd only narrowly survived. From the looks of the bags under his eyes -so purple they were almost black- and the sinking of the flesh of his face, Midoriya was almost dead from exhaustion alone.

Green… her fist curled, frustrated at her inability to move. Don't you dare die! We're almost through this, we almost won!

"Lies…” Shigaraki hissed, fingers scraping at the skin on his neck, "Nomu… Nomu is strong enough to kill All Might… this isn't over, it can't be over!"

Deku gave the man a pitiable look, one of sympathy. He knew the feeling of defeat, in the face of everything he could do. It wasn't easy to cope with, in fact it was heartbreakingly painful. The vampire had felt it himself more than often enough to recognize it on someone else.

"Shigaraki…” he murmured, "this 'Nomu' was almost outright murdered by me." Shigaraki's eyes drifted to his, those mismatched green orbs. "If someone with almost no combat experience and barely any control over his own quirk could beat it: what chance did it have against All Might?" Gently as the question was asked, it was still enough to make something in the villain snap. "This is over."

Frothing at the mouth, face contorted with fury he charged at this impudent brat. "NO!" he screamed, hands digging into the boy's chest. "IT'S NOT OVER UNTIL ALL MIGHT DIES!"

He felt it. The icy hand of death wrapping around his heart as his flesh turned to dust. Hands pulled at Shigaraki's wrists, hauling them aside and pulling his throat to Deku's mouth. There was a large gash in the villain's throat; one he forced his tongue into enough to drink from. His body was in agony. Healing from another injury just about made him black out, but he muscled through it. When the game was 'stay awake or die', you stayed awake.

"NOMU!" Shrieked the villain. "NOMU!" Deku hauled Shigaraki's wrists together, feeling the earth shake as the monster hastened its approach. "KILL THIS LITTLE BRAT! KILL HIM NOW!"

It only lasted for a second.

He went to throw Shigaraki out of the way. His fingers snared on villain's sleeve, their feet were pulled from under them. They feel sideways, the Nomu's fist flying straight at them, almost at a downward angle. Shigaraki had enough time to let his eyes go wide before the fist of the Nomu hit him. In an instant, the villains body was impacted into the ground and a loud, wet crunch was heard.

When the dust settled, Deku was at the Nomu's feet. It wasn't moving. It just… stared. Following its gaze, the vampire's eyes went wide with horror. Shigaraki… wasn't moving. He wasn't
breathing. His life had just been snuffed out.

He was dead.

It was so quiet you could hear an ants footsteps. The Nomu's hand twitched. Then, shaking, it pulled away from the corpse of its master. Jaw quivering it took a trembling step back. Eeking ever wider open, its jaw began to spasm violently, its entire body following suit. Then, as it began to tremble like a traumatized child, it screamed. Screamed so loud Deku and Jiro had to cover their ears. Even Yaoyorozu couldn't help but try and shield her eardrums as it wailed in anguish, its massive hands gripping at its malformed head.

Flailing its body about, howling like the souls of the damned, it lashed out at the ground, pummeling a small crater into it. It slipped, falling onto its back and began spasming, flopping about like a beached fish as its horrid screaming continued. A commotion near the exit went entirely unnoticed. Vanessa and All Might, smashing through the door, arrived in time to see this spectacle being and then, abruptly, end.

With the force of surface to air launching, the Nomu sent itself skyward. Crashing through the plexiglass of the ceiling, it flew into the distance. Wherever it landed, they were certain it hadn't stopped there. The Nomu was running to some far off corner of the earth, and it wasn't looking back.

It had just done the one thing its brain could never let it do: it had killed Shigaraki.

Getting to his feet, an arm held to his battered chest, Deku walked numbly to Shigaraki's corpse. He fell on his knees, a look of abject terror on his features. He couldn't process it. What had just happened? What the fuck did his just do? Was it even him? Who held the blame?

"I don't…" Deku's hand gripped Shigaraki's cold, motionless shoulder. "Why didn't you just-!?"

His palms shot to his eyes, shoulders shaking violently his body strained against every possible emotion. An internal struggle that only ended when he curled back his head, facing the heavens, and screaming like he had the day he'd first bitten that thug in the alley.

Worst of all, he had no idea if it was himself he should even be blaming.
The Calm

Nemuri Kayama, otherwise known as the professional hero "Midnight". Teacher of Modern Hero Art history, it was her job to teach these rowdy teenagers the subtler side of determining one's identity as a hero. Symbolism and naming conventions, two aspects of the name so intricately entwined one could mistake them as being one and the same. At present she stood at the head of Class 1A, a more forlorn group of faces she could not have found on school grounds.

This class in particular, she noticed, seemed more tightly knit than the others. Whatever the reason for this was, whenever one of them was adversely affected by life, the pain permeated to all of them. Such was the comradery born of surviving the things they had already, so early in their careers as heroes.

Though that was presently irrelevant, save for understanding the present mood lingering in the air. They all knew what had happened, what had shattered the heart of one of their classmates in particular. Today, almost painfully too soon after recent events, was the day they chose their names.

"A hero's name," began she, "is perhaps more important than the costume," this earned her some odd looks, but nothing she hadn't observed before while teaching this lesson.

"It's the label that people remember us by as well as something that usually carries a special meaning to the hero who chooses the name, though this isn't always the case." Opening a small case, she procured a set of small dry erase boards and markers from within. Placing them in the hands of Hagakure -class 1A's resident invisible girl- she said, "for the next fifteen minutes I want you to consider who you are," one vampiric student in particular flinched at that, "your life, your values, your journeys to this point in your lives." All in the room had eyes on her, she met their gaze with warm confidence. "Choose the name that fits all of this," she said raising a hand and pointing at them all, "choose a name that tells the world 'who you are'."

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Two weeks earlier....

UA High School: USJ Facility

Dust began settle in the wake of the Nomu's retreat. Deku remained on his knees, head hung low and face twisted in confused, shamed grief. His hand remained where it lay, resting on the corpse of the crushed man's shoulder; clinging to the ratty fabric.

A name that defies everything you've been through...

There was a hand on his shoulder, gripping gently, not prompt enough to turn his eyes away from the body. A man he barely knew, a man who'd come here to kill him and his classmates, teachers. Dead by some grievous miscalculation, a feat of clumsiness and poor coordination of those inexperienced in combat. But this was still a human being, not just some cackling fool in a mask. Someone with hopes, dreams, twisted as they might have been. Horrid as his intentions there were reasons behind them, thought put into what he was doing. Monster though that made him, it also meant he was aware: Human.

Something he could no longer claim to be.

"Little one..." he winced, breath choking in his throat. "It's okay. You can let go." Vanessa put a
hand over his, the one on Shigaraki’ motionless form.

Shuddering breath, voice cracking, he rasped, "but I-

"Did everything you could," softly as she spoke, the words cut through him like a lance. Everything he could, and this was the end result. "It wasn't you..." she had to draw in a beath, holding it for a few moments, "I know it doesn't feel that way," Slowly, one finger at a time, she peeled his hand off of the dead man's shirt. "And that it may never feel that way," she pulled his hand back, away from the body which was growing colder by the second, "but we need to get everyone medical attention, and... him seen too." Deku just stared helplessly at the body, as Vanessa pulled him away, to his feet.

"Come on," she murmured, turning his face away at long last. "We need to go."

When he was asked what he remembered about the USJ incident, the vampire would later say one thing. It ended with silence. In the wake of such a violent, traumatic experience your brain doesn't expect the world to go back to that familiar noise level. The rush of your own blood, your heart rate racing in your ears, the ringing of adrenaline, it all harmonizes in moments of chaos; creating a dissonant chorus of frantic energy, need to escape, survive. When those moments end, and the silence comes back, the world feels wrong. Like that living hell you were just in replaced reality, forcing you to adapt to it before throwing back into the realm it just stole you from. That familiar, peaceful quiet, after all that, just feels so alien.

It was very quiet when the rest of the faculty arrived. When the medical staff arrived along with one ambulance and a whole army of Musutafu's finest police officers. Dozens of villains were collected, taken to be locked away for decades. Aizawa, Thirteen, and Akaguro were completely unconscious when they were carted away to Recovery Girl's office. Jiro wished to have been so lucky, for the screaming pain she was in. She had resigned herself to watching the world spin, stars dancing in front of her eyes at the slightest attempt to move.

"Are they going to be okay?" Deku mumbled, watching them as they were removed from the scene of the incident.

As the last of them were carted away, the elder Vampire's lingered on Akaguro's unconscious form. For a moment, a flicker of recognition appeared in her eyes. Ultimately, however, she ignored it and so Vanessa replied, "From what I hear this school has a top notch medic," from his prior visits to said nurse's office, the younger of the pair could indeed confirm this to be true, "they'll be fine."

Stooping to pick his sunglasses from the ground -somehow making it through the encounter unscathed- Deku let out a long breath. "Guess that's something..." and he replaced them on his face before making the walk outside.

Funny, he hadn't remembered walking to be quite so draining before all this. It wasn't long before his legs were too weak to carry him, and his eyes fell shut, as though they were weighed by lead. Scooping him up onto her back, Vanessa carried the poor boy home.

His things would be waiting for him in classroom when he returned.

Sleep was about the only thing she wanted right now. That or about the most extensive full-body massage one could give; after as near a lethal dose of painkillers you could get without permanent damage. If nothing else, Recovery Girl's quirk had repaired most of the damage, and gotten the planet to stop spinning like a hyperactive child on caffeine. All the same, Jiro was impatient about getting back on her feet.
"You seem irritated." Violet eyes turned to meet onyx ones, sitting by her bedside. Sighing, closing said violet eyes, Jiro did not reply. "Don't want to talk about it?"

Slowly, her eyes reopened, staring at the ceiling. "What do you think would have happened if that villain hadn't died?"

Shifting uncomfortably in her seat, Yaoyorozu considered this reluctantly. "Honestly?" said she, now considerably downcast, "that… thing would likely have killed us all." Jiro winced, hearing her own pessimism spoken aloud by someone else was not what she wanted. "For as much as Midoriya did to it, you saw how much energy it still had when it…" she gulped, shuddering at the vivid memory of the Nomu's psychological breakdown. "Had that panic attack and fled," she continued, "if it had come to the fight re-ensuing…"

"Yeah," Jiro sighed, "So you noticed, Green just didn't have it him…" She glared up at the ceiling. "I hate that we were that helpless." Her fist clenched. "Relying on someone just like us, fish out of water, to save our skins." It wasn't often that Jiro felt shame stabbing at her so ferociously. "Nevermind being damsels in distress, throwing a classmate to the wolves like that makes me feel… dirty."

Groaning from another bed in the room prompted the violet eyed girl to look to the source. "Under the circumstances…" strained the voice of their teacher, Aizawa, trying to sit up, "One could hardly fault you for such a decision." Hand on his now thoroughly bandaged ribs, he used his other to haul himself up, back against the headboard. "But when class resumes," he pointed right at the pair of them, "we are going to have a very serious discussion about the word 'run'."

At that, the girls actually smiled. Well, one of them smiled. "You're a tough old bastard." Jiro quipped, turning her whole head to face him. "Should you even be moving?"

Growling at her fowl language Aizawa did his utmost to let it go. "When that concussion clears, your free ticket for swearing expires."

Wincing at a sudden urge to laugh, Jiro smiled through the pain. "...Deal." Managed she.

Swinging his legs over the side of his bed the battered, ragged man took a moment to breathe. "Oh no you don't." Opening his eyes, an eyebrow raised, Aizawa was most displeased to see Recovery Girl's cane pointed right at his nose. "Get back in bed this instant." The nurse demanded. "Your not getting up and undoing all that progress on healing your injuries." When he went to protest she actually went and pressed her cane against his lips. "No. No protests." She pointed with her other hand, her order unmistakable. "Down."

Stubborn as he was, Aizawa wasn't about to argue against such insistence on her part. "Fine." He muttered, complying with great reluctance. "Just tell me what happened to my students."

Coughing from the couch against the opposite wall preempted an answer. "They're fine," Akaguro wheezed, "No one but was seriously hurt." and his breathing devolved into a rather violent fit of coughing. Getting punched in the chest by the Nomu -right after breathing in all that smoke- had done him no favors. Even with the broken bones repaired his lungs continued to protest.

Aizawa raised an eyebrow. "...so I see." He turned his gaze to the two girls, to his left, and awaited further explanation.

"It's true," Yaoyorozu confirmed, "the only other student who was injured was Midoriya." She turned pale, clearing her throat before she continued. "Although… thanks to his healing factor he's still on his feet, somewhere on campus probably." A staff member at the door caught Recovery
Girl's attention. For a moment Jiro swore she had yellow eyes but it turned out to be a trick of the light. Blue as could be. "In truth… he was a force to be reckoned with against that 'Nomu'."

"Is that so?" Aizawa turned toward the door, making sure that staff member and Recovery Girl were out of earshot. "Did he…?"

Jiro nodded. "Yeah," the guilty look on her face was rather telling, "he lost it, but… I think he knew he was losing it. Like…" she winced, wracking her brain for the words. "If he hadn't gone feral and bit the thing, no way this would have ended the way it did."

Aizawa sighed. "Just so long as evidence of what he is doesn't get out…"

"Don't worry," Jiro tapped the side of her neck, "claws aside, the only person his fangs sank into is right here." After some thought she added, "...at least who didn't immediately heal afterwards."

His next sigh was one of relief. "After all this… I'll take it."

After a moment or two of silence, Yaoyorozu piped up with a question. "Any idea what happens next?"

The teacher scoffed. "You mean apart from the media frenzy? I'll be getting you ready for the sports festival."

Akaguro looked at Aizawa like he'd just grown a second head. "You can't be serious…"

"Can and am." He declared. "If you want to make it as heroes, doing well in the festival is important." That… thought he and we likely have to save face in front of the world. Can't let the public think something like this will stop us, or future heroes from rising.

The dhampire growled, sitting up and rolling his eyes. "Such pointless, showboating frivolity…" his body shook with a few more haggard coughs, "give me a murder to stop or a villain's plans to thwart any day, but spare me the damn cameras."

That earned a smirk from the wounded professional. "Couldn't have said it better myself…" he exhaled, "but for now: suffer through it. Once you become a hero, do with your image as you please." For once, the first time since they'd begun sharing a classroom, Aizawa and Akaguro looked each other in the eyes. "It's only for the grades, kid." In response to this, the teenager nodded.

Straining to stand, Akaguro growled out his next words. "If you don't mind…" said he, trying and failing to sound non hostile, despite his lack of anger. "I'm heading out." He flashed that all too wrong smile of his before leaving the room. "See you in class tomorrow, if it happens."

As the others waved, Yaoyorozu couldn't help but eye him warily as he left, prompting an odd look from Jiro. "What?" said the violet eyed girl.

Remembering the fight in the inferno zone -just how utterly unhinged Akaguro had behaved- the creation girl swallowed. "Nothing." She lied. "Just… glad this is over." Silently, she hoped never to see that boy revel so in violence again.

It was a good thing she hadn't bothered to start praying then, as it only would have been ignored.

"Yeah," Jiro murmured, not sharing the feeling in the least. If that gnawing feeling in her gut was right, this whole thing was just getting started. "over…"
When Kurogiri next awoke, he was met with the uncomfortable sight of an ambulance's interior. Slow to start moving, so soon after nearly being melted to paste by that… whatever that girl was, he felt his skin tearing at his slightest effort. The acid burns on his skin were extensive, stretching his muscles enough to move produced incredible pain. What little remained of his shirt and vest were likely drenched in his blood. If nothing else, the pain was a source of relief for one reason: they hadn't bothered to give him painkillers or anesthesia. That meant it was only his injuries impeding him, and those were easier to function with than drugs in his system.

Fighting against the searing, tearing pain in his body, he searched the interior of the ambulance for the attending EMTs. Both were at the front of the vehicle, talking shop from the sound of it. Medical terminology he knew nothing about, small talk about the other villains in custody. As luck would not often have it, the boy was not far from him.

"Shigaraki," whispered he, reaching out and taking hold of his shoulder, giving him a shake. When no response came he assumed the young one to be unconscious, "worry not, young master," murmured he, "I'll handle our escape."

Difficult as it was, he did manage to produce a portal sizeable enough to ferry them to safety. Their entrance to their hideout -a bar long abandoned by its previous owner- was far from graceful, clattering of gurneys and handcuffs echoed throughout the dust ridden hovel. It was only when Shigaraki's body fell, limp and motionless as an empty shirt, that panic set in. Only there was no time to act on such a feeling. A sudden creaking of the floorboards, the sound of a portable respirator -the kind used in hospitals, tubes sent directly into the lungs via the esophagus- sent an icy chill down the teleporter's spine. "Kurogiri," the lifeless voice, feeble as it was, carried an insignificant hint of rage. That barest of hints, was enough to make even the most hardened of warriors, heroes, go cold with a realization -a reminder, really- that death was only ever one moment away. "What. Happened. To my ward?"

feeble limbs, shaky and bearing skin that cracked and flaked into dust like old paper reached for Shigaraki's body. "Who did this?" a shuddering breath punctuated the ghost of a snarl. The bony fingers of the man on life support curled around the boy's lifeless head. Kneeling, he pulled the dead man's face to his knees, cradling his body like a sleeping, wounded child.

Kurogiri took a long look at the man holding the boy's body, petting at his cold hair. A skeleton, draped in the roting remnants of human skin. He wore a threadbare suit with a red tie, little more than string around his collar. But that mask… a helmet over what remained of the man's face hid a sight most ghastly from view. Housed within the metal workings of the head-wear was the respirator, roiling away to keep this husk of a man alive.

"I don't know, master." He breathed, head held low. "I was… incapacitated." One of the husk's hands clenched into a fist. "Until we landed here, I believed he was still alive myself." The fist, reluctantly, unfurled, returning to petting at the dead boy's sky-blue hair.

Sighing, the shards of his broken spirit scattering to the wind as he breathed, he closed the poor boy's eyes. "This will not go unpunished, Kurogiri." His tone was weighted, cold, like steel. "I want the one responsible."

"Yer gonna be disappointed."

The pair of battered men looked to the doorway of the hideout to see a familiar face, a mess of blond hair tied into messier buns with yellow eyes blew a pink bubble with her gum. After the bubble burst, she walked into the room -laid back as you please- and dropped onto a chair. Crossing one knee over the other she took a knife from her pocket along with a whetstone, setting
to work sharpening the rusty thing.

"From what the teachers were goin on about yer Frankenstein rip-off went nuts and..." when she felt the unbridled rage pouring off the man on life support, the girl seemed to shrink, carefully reconsidering her next words. Clearing her throat, she went on. "Well... after that happened it hightailed it away."

This time, the growl that came from the husk's throat was the real deal. "You're telling me the Nomu did... this?" Hissed he, through the modulator on his helmet.

"Yup." She shrugged, "I wasn't there, couldn't tell ya fer sure." and she went back to sharpening her blade. "One other thing got tossed around though... while I was snoopin around the school grounds?" At this new revelation she pointed her blade, along with her eyes, up at the ceiling. "Some o'tha wounded in the nurse's office said somethin about a kid with claws who stood up to the thing? I dunno," she shrugged again, refocusing her efforts on her knife while the shoulders of her boss trembled with fury. "From the sound of it, it was a battle of healing factors. Seeing who's would stop workin first."

"Toga..." The husk shuddered out the word, barely containing his fury.

"Hmm?" she looked up, "Wassup, bossman?"

Taking a deep breath, calming himself what little he could, he gave voice to his question. "This boy with multiple quirks," he let the breath go, "you're going to tell me everything about him."
United we Stand

II: Brewing Storms

She knew immediately that something had happened. The look on Vanessa's face, as she carried her sleeping child inside, told a great deal. Perhaps more telling was the bedraggled, ghostly state of the teenager on her back. The skin around his eyes had sunken, putting the orbital and cheekbones prominently on display. And the color… so purple the skin had almost gone black. He'd never been the soundest sleeper, that he was tuckered out enough to sleep while she carried him put a knot in her throat.

"What happened?" quiet as Inko spoke, her voice still managed to waver.

Vanessa hesitated at an answer while she laid the boy out on the couch. "That's… still being determined." Inko glared at her while she spread a blanket over her son. "I don't have the specifics, just the summary if even that." She took a step back, hands drifting behind her back, fingers interlacing. Inko's stare was sharp, colored with an angry worry.

This tense silence could only last so long. They relocated to the porch, voices kept quiet. Vanessa's retelling of the story was brief, barely covering all that had happened. What few details she'd gleamed on her way off the school grounds were vague at best. In the end, it was enough to satisfy Inko's need to know. Though it was not met without harsh criticism. "One day after you promised me…" her hand was gripping at her face, thumb and fingers gripping around one eye and along the bridge of her nose.

"Aizawa nearly died trying to keep it," Vanessa murmured, clearly perturbed. "From what I heard, if he hadn't been there it's unlikely that no one would have died."

While it did little to put Inko's mind at ease, it wasn't by very much. "And yet my you bring son home looking like he hasn't slept in a year." Considering the strain put on his body by the encounter, that wasn't far off from the truth. "More side effects of the change?"

Vanessa shook her head. "Our abilities take a lot of energy to use." She held up one of her hands, claws slowly extending from her fingertips. "Though we are creatures of legend, most got us all wrong. We're not supernatural beings, just… exceptionally powerful ones." Claws retracting, shifting to a more comfortable position, a pair of her teeth nibbled at the corner of her lower lip for a moment. "When we need to heal, our bodies draw directly from our reserves; extra weight and all that," something Izuku had remarkably little of, "it puts our metabolism into overdrive. While just about any wound can and will heal while this is happening you run the risk of fatally exhausting yourself if you overuse the ability."

"So his greatest advantage could also be greatest weakness under the wrong circumstances…" Vanessa nodded, prompting a frustrated, tired sigh from Inko. "Any other wonderful complications I should know about?"

She gave this some Thought. "That depends: has he mentioned anything about water?"

Inko grimaced, face resting in the palms of her hands, elbows on her knees. "No…"

Guilty as could be, the vampire elaborated. "Well… once upon a time we lived exclusively underground. It's very cold in the underdark," Inko, cheek and jaw resting against her palm, turned to look at the creature currently speaking. With her face unmasked, eyes uncovered, her ghostly
pallor was almost haunting; illuminated by both the moon and her own eyes. "So our bodies had to be very efficient at keeping out internal body temperatures level." She shrugged, "So, when one considers the properties of water -that it absorbs a great deal of heat before its temperature rises- it becomes fairly evident what happens."

Inko was almost speechless. Almost. "So... when a vampire is submerged in water their body overexerts itself to try and maintain its temperature?"

The vampire currently present could only smirk at her deduction. "It's exceptionally worse with running water, as none of it remains in contact with the skin for long, it leeches heat almost indefinitely. If I fell into a river, I'd boil alive in my own skin."

"And when it rains?"

Vanessa, once again, shrugged. "I'm not fond of the rain, but it's far from harmful."

That much was something to be grateful for, she supposed. "Running water and his own abilities..." she shook her head, palm pressing against her forehead, fingers lacing between the strands of her hair. "As if sunlight and his hunger wasn't enough to worry about."

"You should be proud of him," Vanessa offered, "with all the boy's been through he's handled things very well, considering." Inko turned to glare sharply at her but Vanessa kept right on talking. "From what I overheard he was able to hold his own in a very serious encounter, saving lives in the process." Meeting the glare with a gentle smile, she went on. "Not long in the hero world and he's already making a difference."

Inko turned, looking over her shoulder into the house and at her son. Even in his sleep he looked so fitful and nervous. "Even if he doesn't feel overwhelmed with guilt at that man's death, I doubt he'd see it that way." Vanessa could only give her a skeptical look in response. "He never did give himself enough credit."

The vampire frowned, thinking back many a long year. "Considering what little I know of his childhood, that makes sense. It can be... difficult to give oneself proper credit when those around you never seem to."

That managed to catch the mother's attention. "You had similar experiences as a child?"

In reply, she smiled with somber nostalgia. "I was born quirkless too."

The following few nights, nearly everyone in class 1A slept unsoundly. Victory, for all involved, had not come so easily as in their childhood daydreams. Though, really, at this juncture they were all still children. Inexperienced, unprepared, reckless and still unmarked enough by the world at large to be left unphased after facing such odds so early. In seeing such eagerness from those villains to inflict harm upon them perhaps they had been marked. Seeing such gleeful excitement on their faces, at the prospect of murdering children they hardly knew, is not the sort of thing one easily disregards. So it of with such contorted visages that they all, collectively, dreamed. One in particular was especially unable to shake the memory during slumber.

Her old middle school, an arena she already dreaded with considerable aversion. Towering halls, even the smallest doorways and lockers looming overhead and curling toward her. Like snakes dangling from old branches, fangs reaching for your face. Backpack huddled to her shoulders, shoulders drawn up as close to the base of her skull as could be, she tried to appear as small as she possibly could. It was the one tack that held any actual record for success when avoiding
confrontation. All the same, even this failed from time to time. As she would learn later, turtling up, trying to hide in plain sight among the crowds, only makes you appear all the more a vulnerable target.

"Hey," snickered some testosterone laden brute of an adolescent, "check out the new freak."

Her. They meant her.

They always meant her…

"Where ya goin, freak?" Another voice, likely a 'friend' of his. She picked up the pace, trying to find her first class of the year before they could catch up to her.

In her expediency she'd accidentally navigated into a dead end.

"Rejects like you have no place here." And there was a hand, tangling in her long hair and yanking ferociously down. Yelping, she felt the sharp pain in her scalp of far too many hair follicles being ripped from her skin as her face was forcibly upturned to the ceiling.

"Get lost while the gettin's good." Spinning around, falling to one of her knees in the process, she looked up and saw their faces. Twisted, wide eyed grins, colored with almost lust infused malice eagerly expressed some dark desire.

The dark desire to snuff the life from a fellow human being. "Gonna cry, freak?"

All around her, as her eyes pulled themselves wide with fear, the darkness took on a life of its own. Morphing, oozing about like some sapient form of slime, black hands stretched like melting, dripping flesh right toward her. Inky fingers snaked into her long hair, ripped at her clothes, and pulled. Laughing of the boys, those that seemed hell bent on tormenting her, echoed like cackling hyenas in the cramped, linoleum halls as the darkness that puddled around her began to swallow her up. She lashed out, thrashing her body in some vain attempt to escape the snaring fingers, the liquid darkness clinging to her flesh as it enveloped her. Letting out a fearful, frustrated, helpless scream, she curled her hand into a fist and struck out for the face of the nearest bully: the boy who would be her rival through all of middle school.

Her hand hit the wall, she yelped with sleep congested vocal chords, waking to find herself thrashing in her waking state. Now sitting up, chest heaving with fright her hand reached up to the back of her head. She let out a loud sigh of relief, feeling the strands of her purple hair at their appropriate, short length. To her left she saw her old bunkmate, a plush moose she'd had since she was small: Moosin, the best moose.

"Shut up…" she muttered, "I'm fine. Just… it was just a bad dream." She'd sighed those last words out, petting the old, faded plushie's face. "Bad memories."

Without another word, she got to her feet, stretching and pulling fresh clothes over her slender form, and walked to her dresser. Instead of reaching for the hairbrush her fingers gripped a pair of pill bottles. Opening one she took a lone pill from within, then from the other she took two, breaking the second of the two in half and setting it aside. Throwing them into her mouth she downed them with a glass of water, a swirling mix of transparency, ivory and blue. Suck it, nature. She stuck her tongue out at her reflection -a very old habit- and wandered to the kitchen.

"Hey sweetie." Jiro almost jumped out her skin. "Sleep well?" How her mother managed to be so quiet was a mystery that eluded them both.

All the same it was difficult not to feel amused and annoyed at once. "Yeah, think I'll skip the
caffeine today." Remarked she, dropping some bread into the toaster and putting the kettle on before plopping down on the couch beside her mom. Putting down her book, Mrs Jiro wrapped her arms around her daughter, cheek pressing against the top of her head. Jiro pouted huffily at the affection. "Mooooom…." she whined under breath.

"Oh alright," and she went back to her book, "you used to be such a cuddleduck."

"Yeah, back when I was five." Remarked she, sighing as the toaster ejected her breakfast. "Want any?"

Her mother smiled. "Already ate." she patted her belly, making a couple of gentle thumps with her fingers.

Jiro shrugged and went about buttering her toast. When the kettle started whistling rather than use her hands she reached over with her earlobes and used them to pour the water into a mug. Reaching for some lemon zinger she saw the oldest photograph her parents still had of her. It was both her and mom, matching haircuts gotten just before middle school -despite the then tweenager's adamant protests- and sticking their tongues out at the camera.

It wasn't as bad as looking at older pictures of herself, but she couldn't tolerate anything older. Remembering the dream, hating every second it made her skin crawl, she reached forward and glowered at the photo as she plucked it up. For a while she just stood there, staring at her twelve-year old self, she tried to focus on how she felt now about herself.

If only bitter memories didn't linger like smoke.

A hand on her shoulder pulled her again against her mother, who kissed the top of her head. "You're not a freak, my little Kyo-kyo."

Deflating a little, she nibbled at her toast. *Liar...* an old reflex of a thought, whenever she heard such a thing. "I know." And she gathered up her breakfast, heading back to the couch to watch the news as her mother read by her side.

The train ride to UA was unusually quiet that day. Most everyone looked tired, hung over from the kind of sleep one only got on nights when it rained. Only last night was no such night, so that was a bit confusing. Shrugging off such musings Jiro fought back a smile when she saw her friends waiting by the school gate.

"Hey, Green, Crow." Waving to Midoriya and Akaguro she trotted right over to them, glad to see they were both okay after what had happened a few days ago. Relatively okay, at least. "You look so tired, both of you."

Akaguro suppressed a yawn, patting his ribs. "I'll live..."

Midoriya acknowledged her with a mumble, clearly not in the mood to talk as he hid behind his sunglasses. "Fangs got your tongue?" She quipped, trying to sound good natured as she teased him.

He gave her a wounded expression, eyes turning directly to hers as they rarely did. "...yeah, I guess."

Suddenly feeling guilty over her attempt at banter, Jiro fumbled with an apology. "I- ...sorry, I- I wasn't-"

"It's fine." Midoriya numbly pushed himself off the wall he'd been partially leaning against and
trudged toward the main building, hands in his pockets. "Glad you're feeling better."

While she kicked herself inwardly she and the dhampire followed after him. Not quite the reunion she'd wanted after the days following the USJ incident…

When they finally got to the classroom, everyone taking their seats as usual, a very haggard looking Aizawa stepped in. His left arm clutched at his ribs, bandaged beneath his shirt, as his breathing came in sharp, short rasps. Without so much as a word addressing questions relating to his health he delved into the day's lesson. He had them all brainstorming ways in which to best use their quirks in battle. Coming up with new tactics, thinking of new support items they might want and the like. It was a lesson that allowed for half the class time to be conducted in relative silence. Taking advantage of this decision, Jiro got out her notebook and pen along with-

...Where the hell was it? Her brow furrowed, turning to actually look into her school bag. Raking her hand through the assorted contents she failed to turn up the item she sought.

Where the hell is my MP3 Player?! It was only after and angry clearing of Aizawa's throat, directed at her, that she gave up and did her best to concentrate on the lesson. Only she kept getting fidgety. That her MP3 Player wasn't right where she always put it was bothering her. Had she dropped it on the train? Back at home, maybe? Or… She sighed at her own stupidity, remembering she'd been listening to it on the bus to the USJ.

That meant it was likely in her costume's jacket pocket. With that knowledge tucked into the corner of her brain she did her best not to worry about it. There was no replacing that MP3 Player. Not with single other model the world over. Antsy tapping of her foot garnered a few irritated remarks from nearby classmates. When Bakugo dared to complain she actually told him to shove it. Truly, there was no salvaging any sort of positive relative relationship between the two of them.

Eventually, after what felt like forever, the lunch bell rang and she practically sprinted for the door. The support department felt like it was leagues further away than usual, but she got there with an almost skidding halt. Knuckles rapidly tapping against the door she waited with jittery anticipation. Peeking out of the room was a girl with pink dreadlocks, giving her the evil eye with a raised eyebrow. "Yes?" she said, wondering why she was getting so many visitors lately.

"Kyoka Jiro, from class 1A." she introduced herself in a hurry, "do you have my costume here?"

The other girl shrugged. "Yeah, but why?"

"I need to check the pockets for something." Another shrug later and the pinkette was rummaging around for the items in question. It only took a few, agonizingly long minutes before she handed Jiro the costume case. "Thank you." She tore it open, yanking the jacket free, hand into- Crinkle.

Never in her life had the feeling of broken plastic and metal brought her world crashing down quite like that. Slowly, heart in tatters, she drew the item out of her costume. Her MP3 Player… destroyed. The case had been cracked open, loose bits of circuitry rattling inside it -some bits clearly much larger than others- and a smell of smoky ozone. Everything about the battered object splintered her heart to shambles.

"No…”

Arriving at the scene, worried after seeing his friend run off like that, was Deku. Now that he saw her looking so distraught, his mood wasn't much better. "Jiro?" She was holding a broken electronic in her hand, the way her face was contorting… was she about to cry? He stepped closer. "What happened?"
Gonna cry, freak?

She turned away from him, hands covering her face, palms shoving against her eyes. No, she wasn't going to cry. She wasn't going to let anyone see that kind of weakness, she knew full well what that wrought.

"H-hey!" the concern in his voice gnawed at her, made her feel repulsively vulnerable. His hand overlapped hers. Her breathing stopped, eyes going wide, warmth spread across her face, down her neck. "It's okay to cry but you- you don't wanna cry into that thing, do you?"

She yanked away from him, face hidden as best she could. "It can't be fixed, you-" Oh god, that look on his face. Confused, shocked, worried, clueless as what to do in this scenario.

Like a damned puppy, and it was too much. She shoved the remains of her Mp3 Player against his chest, forcing his gaze to drift away from her. "You care so much, you fix it then!" Shame and nausea hit her like a kicking horse as her feet started running.

Shoes clattering against the tiled floor, abandoned as the hallway was she felt eyes and shadows on her. A clawing sensation of prying eyes and ears, laughing at her and plotting some form of punishment only the most depraved and asinine could conjure. Between this, her nightmare and looking at that damned picture with mom she'd had too much. The past just wouldn't let her be.

Staring like a stunned rabbit, Deku barely moved as she fled. "I…" She rounded the corner, disappearing from view as she desperately tried to hide her face. "Sorry…"

His attention was then directed elsewhere, to the item she thrust into his possession. This thing was an antique from some by-gone era of technology. It wore a logo of some company that had long since- Wait, this thing was called a 'Zune'? What the hell was a 'Zune'? Turning it over, musing what was going through Jiro's head that made her react like that, he saw something else. Etched into the antiquated plastic was an inscription.

*When the world gets you down, just play a song and give it space.*

There was a name that followed it, initials really. "K.H.?" He whispered, finger tracing over the old lettering. "Who's K.H.?"

"You askin me?" Deku almost screamed. Standing in the doorway of the workshop with a sour expression, collecting Jiro's costume, was that girl with the pink dreadlocks. "I have no idea, but I'll tell you this much." She pointed right at his face. "That thing's not going to be an easy fix, even if you know how to."

"I- I don't even-"

"So," she interrupted, tossing Jiro's costume case back into the workshop and grabbing a scrap of paper. Scribbling furiously she almost muttered at him, "not sure how much this will help…” she handed him the scrap of paper, a list of websites scrawled on it. "But here. I'd do it myself but I've got too much to do with the festival on the way." She sighed almost contentedly. "everyone and their grandmother wants me to make babies for them." Deku's entire spine went rigid as he eyed her suspiciously. "Speaking of which," she got a mischievous smile on her face that put a swirl in his guts, "do you need anything made for the festival?"

He had no idea what to think. "What the hell are you-?"

"Gadgets, support items, you goose," she said, tone unchanged, "what'd you think I-?"
"Absolutely nothing!" he all but shrieked. "Thanks for the websites bye!" The speed at which he ran for his life he wouldn't have been surprised if he'd left clouds of dust in his wake.

Blinking at his sudden departure, she scratched at her cheek before shrugging to herself. "Weirdo. Hope everything's alright." And she shut the door to the workshop, getting back to her projects.

Were all women so terminally confusing? Chugging down the contents of the usual metal thermos, Deku did is best to compartmentalize that bit of interaction. His usual feeling of self loathing and disgust at meal time worked like a charm in moving that process along.

"So then Bakugo just scoffs and says 'if the others are dealing with idiots like these they can handle it themselves!' It was kinda cool to hear him say something like that." Kaminari gave Kirishima an odd look. "Didn't think he had it in him, believing in his classmates like that."

Kaminari rolled his eyes. "Sure, that's… totally what that was." And he sipped idly at his drink. "So was that before or after Uraraka fell on your head?"

While Uraraka huddled down, lower into her seat, Kirishima blinked. "She didn't fall on my head, she floated over it. After that she-" At the mortified, shy expression of the brunette in question, Kirishima quickly rethought what he was about to say. "ah… roundhouse-kicked a villain square in the face! All while still floating! Must've been exhausting using her quirk like that, uh… you saw I had to carry her out, right?"

Giving Uraraka a questioning smile, she met his gaze with an appreciative one. Of course, Deku figured what had really happened. Her quirk had a way of making her throw up if she over used it, so the events of the entrance exam seemed to suggest. Closing the lid to his thermos, he decided to remain quiet, giving Uraraka a questioning look. Sheepishly, once she noticed him, she nodded and then averted her gaze.

"So," Yaoyorozu said to Ashido, "what happened at the entrance?"

Ashido chuckled nervously. "Well… not much." She said, completely failing to be convincing. "Kicked some villain butt. What about you? What happened in the inferno zone?"

"About the same, honestly," lied the other girl, "I remember being very thankful for my costume being designed the way it is during the encounter."

"I kinda figured," Ashido smirked, "temperatures that high musta had you sweating the walls of a fast food joint." Yaoyorozu did her best to swallow a bit of food without looking too green. It didn't work. "Poor Jiro must've been roasting alive."

The creation girl nodded, washing down her nausea with some ice-water. "Indeed she was." Glancing about the table, she suddenly looked upset. "Where is she, anyway?"

Kaminari, glowering at the table and crossing his arms, kept a hand on his drink. "She uh… she's not feeling well. Lady's probably gonna be distant till that passes."

... he calls her 'Lady'? Deku thought.

"Aww, why?" Uraraka frowned. "Illness or…?"

"That's for her to say," he batted the idea out of the air, "whenever she gets like this it's best just to let her be. Learned that one the hard way in middle school…"
Ashido pouted, "that's silly. She doesn't have to suffer alone, she has us."

"She does," Yaoyorozu offered, "but she might prefer it this way."

One of Ashido's hands reached up, as she leaned her cheek into her other palm, and her fingers traced along the outline of one of her horns. "Even still..." that tone of voice, just then, colored by bitter memories. "Whatever's bothering her friends always help. Suffering in silence and solitude just isn't the way."

Gulping, staring forlornly at the table, Uraraka seemed unsure of what she wanted to say. "Maybe..." she murmured, "maybe she's not used to having friends." All eyes at the table went to her, and she seemed all that much smaller for it. "I- I mean... Growing up I was kinda... we moved around a lot, so I never really held on to friends for very long." Deku felt his heart twinge at those words. "So, when something's bothering me I don't think to ask anyone else for help." She put down her own drink, now not really having any appetite at all. "Maybe she's the same way."

To Deku, that made a certain degree of sense. From what her mom had told him about her childhood...

"Screw that noise," He was almost shocked to hear Jiro speak up like that, "you're still a person under all the fangs and claws, aren't you?" She offered him a smirk, and Deku noted -thanks to what her mother had told him- that it did seem a little awkward. The same kind of awkwardness that his own fake smiles bore, from his lack of practice dealing with other people. "Don't sweat that nonsense."

Was she bothered by something related to that, the bullying she went through? His fingertip traced over the pocket her 'Zune' was tucked away in, triggering another train of thought.

"see, when she was in elementary school, going into early middle school, something... changed." Judging by her tone, this was not a topic lightly broached. "She started getting more and more closed off, standoffish with people." One of her hands gripped at a portion of her pantleg. "It was so... jarring. Watching my sweet little girl turn into something harsher, seemingly out of nowhere."

Her expression fell completely, taking Deku's heart with it as it sank. "The change in hairstyles, the clothing, the swearing, never smiling, always sounding growly... It wasn't until much later that I learned there'd been something going on with a bully at her school." Something clicked, "she and one of her friends were targets of their's," and clicked loudly in Deku's brain, "I didn't find out until after... well, it didn't make much difference by then."

K.H. … His hand clenched tightly. An inkling that all this was somehow relevant took root in his mind, yet he was presently powerless to do anything about it. If he brought it up she might just run off again, if not worse. Unless...

He sighed. "Damn it." He stood up, putting the thermos in his pocket, earning curious looks from Iida and Uraraka. "See you back in class."

They nodded, waving goodbye as he trudged away. While it wasn't ideal, hardly what he wanted at all, this was a decent distraction from his own issues. Anything that kept his mind off of Shigaraki, that gave him something to focus on, was something he'd welcome dealing with. Just so long as he could do something about it.

Footsteps, falling in behind him, pulled him from his thoughts. "You weren't at lunch." His tone almost sounded accusatory, but Akaguro merely shrugged.
"You remember how it went last time last I was."

"You chose to talk to him like that." Deku muttered.

The dhampire nodded. "True, but I'd like to give it some more time, let things simmer down."

Deku sighed. "I don't think they care that much, but I'm no good at dealing with people. Up to you."

"All the same, thanks for the advice. Maybe I will be there tomorrow." For another few moments the pair of boys walked in relative silence, not wanting to broach sensitive topics. However, Akaguro being Akaguro, he did precisely that after enough moments had passed. "Are you okay?"

Deku's face lowered, eyes wincing shut for a second. "Can we not?"

"I just wanted to make sure you knew his death wasn't on you." Deku stopped walking altogether, shoulders squared up tense with his fists clenched, head hunched forward. "You did everything as best you could, better than I managed."

Gritting, grinding his teeth, the vampire replied as calmly as he could. "I know."

Akaguro blinked. "What? Then… why are you so upset?" Deku's shoulders slumped, head pulling back to stare at the ceiling in quiet, straining disbelief that this conversation was still happening. "If you know it wasn't your fault-"

"That's the point!" Deku spun around, his voice climbing higher in volume than he'd meant to let it. "I didn't make a single mistake with my powers, did everything as best as I could and someone got hurt- some one died anyways!" His arm gestured off the side, to who knew where, before slapping back against the side of his leg. "It doesn't seem to matter if I get a handle on this or not…" he murmured, fingernails digging into his palms. "Things just seem to go wrong no matter what I do and I'm getting worn out of it." One of his hands reached up to his face, palm pressing into the space between his eyes as his fingers dug into his scalp.

For a long while they both stood there, saying nothing. Then, Akaguro being Akaguro… "Then you may have chosen the wrong future to pursue."

Deku's face shifted to an expression that begged the question why he would say such a thing. Turning to look his friend in the eye he saw not the look of a know-it-all, trying to convince himself of his own thoughts, but one of sympathy. Like he knew exactly what Deku was going through and knew there was next to nothing he could do to help him through it.

"Without bad things happening no matter what we do to stop them…” Akaguro continued, "there's no world where we need heroes." Deku scarcely even breathed, expression disbelieving as he stared at his friend.

Akaguro just met his gaze as softly as he could. "All things considered, a villains death is a small thing to worry about, for anyone to even care about." At those words, Deku felt he might actually throw up. "That it bothers you this much? ...I applaud you." Akaguro smiled, turning on his heels to walk away. "I'm sorry I don't have anything comforting to say, but… I gave up sugar coating reality before I was even ten years old." His hands drifted into his pockets, eyes away from Deku. "Shit happens. I'm just sorry you're blaming yourself for it, when you never would have let it happen if you could. I'll leave you to your… distractions, as you need them." *Lord knows I did, once upon a time…*

As the dhampire started trodding away, Deku finally let out a long breath, deflating a little.
"Akaguro?" The other teenager turned over his shoulder, casting him a sidelong glance with a raised brow. "Thanks… for understanding." With a smirk, 'Stendhal' nodded before walking away.

Sighing, Deku kept on his course back to class 1A. Phone from his pocket he set about some much needed research and started taking mental notes. Thanks to everything that had been happening since the beginning of his attendance here, Deku had been in a near constant bad mood. Hopefully, he could do something to mitigate that spreading to someone else.

To say that tensions were high on the dawn of the festival was a drastic understatement. Even getting through the front gates just to enter the school was a challenge. News reporters had gathered by the dozen, flocking around the gate and -once again- arguing with a certain perpetually tired teacher. Seeing him attempt to avoid snarling at them almost put a smile on Jiro's face. If that hadn't managed to bolster her spirits, what followed next surely did.

While the class had gathered in a sound proofed waiting area, with snacks, drinks and their support items laid out. Jiro almost cursed under her breath. She'd completely forgotten about the upgrades she wanted on her costume. Somehow or another, she got the feeling she would regret that absent mindedness. Strangely, as she looked about, she saw no sign of Midoriya.

That was disappointing, disheartening even. She'd hoped to get the chance to finally say something to him. She hadn't really been able to since that day. Whenever he'd look at her she just… hid. He'd seen her in a moment of weakness, tried to help and she'd lashed out almost viciously. Maybe it was best if they didn't talk at all just yet. She didn't want to distract him before such an important event.

Speaking of distractions, something was about to happen that would put a smirk on her lips. "Bakugo." A demanding, quiet voice cut through the quiet, nervous discussion. All eyes in the room turned to see Todoroki -their heterochromic classmate with the white and red hair- staring down the walking warhead. "Objectively speaking, I am stronger than you. More capable than you."

Now all but three pairs of eyes in the room were wide open, Todoroki's, Jiro's and Bakugos. One of them was determined, another was curious and the third looked extremely angry and offended. There was quiet waver to Todoroki's voice, an almost uninflected rage all but Jiro were unable to hear. She quirked an eyebrow at him. This was one classmate she'd never had the opportunity to observe using his quirk. But, Kirishima and Asui had both commented that he and Bakugo were the strongest members of their class.

Considering the way the walking warhead hesitated, she thought there might have been something to that claim. "What the fuck are you-"

"Throw whatever you want at me out there," His gaze sharpened, like a hawk narrowing in on its prey before the dive. It made Jiro very curious as to what exactly prompted this, "I am going to beat you."

"Cool," Kaminari whispered to her, "a declaration of war between the strongest in the class." She paid him no mind, instead opting to focus on the interaction between the two boys.

"Hey man," Kirishima pleaded, tugging on one of Todoroki's sleeves, "why pick a fight now? We're about to go on!"

"I really don't care," seethed Todoroki, "I'm not interested in pretending to be anybody's friend here." Somewhere in the corner of the room Akaguro glowered, beholding the spectacle with
obvious disapproval.

Uncharacteristically, Bakugo seemed to be hesitating. The corners of his lips and nostrils were twitching, eyes screaming hatred at the heterochrome in his silence. But there was something else there, a hint of some pain in his eyes as he stared at Todoroki's face. His face... Oh. It only made too much sense, if he was human after all. Something about the walking warhead had been different since the incident in heroics and now she was puzzling together the cause. His hesitation, his behavior, it was affected by something akin to guilt. He might not have been looking at Deku, but he was staring down a classmate with a serious burn scar over his eye.

And just maybe, not that she had any proof, that scar had something to do with why he'd singled out Bakugo.

"Bring it the fuck on, eyepatch." Bakugo snarled, standing up in a furious huff. "Just don't go crying to mama when you lose the fight you started." At the word 'mama' Todoroki's calm flickered. A twitch of his face signaled that he'd barely held something beyond even the most unholy anger at bay.

"Come on, guys," Kirishima pleaded, "we're in this together, aren't we? There's no need for-"

"That's not true." Several people turned to see Iida, clearly contemplating something that weighed heavily on his mind. "Like it or not, in this endeavor to become heroes we're are in direct competition with each other to achieve our goals." He turned his own eyes to his classmates, considering them as softly as he could for what he felt needed saying. "That's just the situation we're in."

Rolling his eyes, shaking his head, Akaguro growled out a sigh as he stood up. "Pragmatism and pessimism aren't always wisdom, Iida. Sometimes they're just plain stupid."

Bewildered, clearly offended and making no attempt to hide it, Iida guffawed. "This from you again? I thought you'd agree this time!"

The dhampire afforded his classmate no such recognition. "Competition between heroes, between those trying to do good in the word, is needless division; distraction from the common goal." Hand waving to the side, cutting through the air in a decisive motion, Akaguro delivered his closing statement. "We cannot be competitors, even to the slightest degree, if we are to one day stand against the tide of evil loose in this world." Then, without another word, he cast his glare at Bakugo and Todoroki. Though perhaps, thought he as his eyes lingered on the walking warhead, not all present should one day be heroes.

Searching for someone to agree with him, Iida looked to Uraraka and Jiro. Unfortunately for him, the brunette simply said, "You know... they say nothing ruins a friendship like a good competition." She fussed with the hem of the shirt of her gym clothes. "I gotta agree with... Stendhal?" Akaguro nodded. "With Stendhal on this one."

Jiro sighed, "Sorry Iida, but they're kinda right this time around. You remember how things went during the USJ incident." Indeed he, and all the rest, did. "No matter what happens out there, whichever of us we may end up against for this, I'm not dropping the idea that we're in this together." Kirishima gave her the biggest smile for saying that.

Bakugo could only roll his eyes. "Whatever, long ears. Grow up. This isn't some dumb comic book where we all work together as some 'Justice League' or some dumb equivalent."

Growling, Jiro stood up and stared him down. "Okay, in this together except with you, you ass."
"Right back at you!" Snarled he, "You've had it out for me since day one! If I get the chance out there I am going to kick your ass!" This time, when Jiro's earlobes stopped just millimeters away from his throat, he didn't even flinch.

Really, she would almost have been impressed if she didn't hate him and everything he reminded her of. *Rejects like you have no place here.* "Try whatever you want," declared she, "I'm never losing to you."

And the bell rang, signalling that the events were about to begin. Shelving this for a later date, a few last icy glares cast at each other, they strode outside. "It's UA's Sports Festival!" Screamed Present Mic, into a microphone no sane being would have ever given him. "The one time each year when our fledgling heroes compete in a ruthless grand battle! First up," a pause for dramatic effect, "you know I'm talkin' about! The Miraculous rising stars who brushed off a villain attack with their steely willpower: The first years of the hero course!"

After what was likely the longest introduction possible, the stadium erupted into cheers. The sight and sound of so many people… it was positively overwhelming. While a few did their best to act as if they didn't care, that it merely exhilarated them, most were not beyond admitting their nerves. Catching Jiro's sight, making her blush fire-engine-red, was the one standing on the center stage, "And now for the athlete's oath!"

What the fuck was she wearing? Why was it the same flesh tone as her own skin!? *Why did it look like S&M gear and why was that sexy!!*

"That outfit should come with a warning label…" Remarked Todoroki.

Overhearing this, pointing at him with a wink, was the one wearing said outfit. "Funny you should say: it does." It was at that moment that Jiro made her first and only vow to get herself into a nunnery at some point in her future. She was so red by now she had to be glowing practically in neon. "Now, as for the first year representative, who placed first in UA entrance exams: Katsuki Bakugo!"

Right, they *would* pick the worst person possible.

"Somehow, that's not surprising."

Jiro almost had a heart attack. Leaping, head spinning around, she caught sight of none other than Midoriya. When the hell did he show up!? He was wearing his mask, now even more badly scuffed up and marked since the USJ incident. Why he didn't have it replaced was anyone's guess. When he noticed her looking at him he tried to wave but she ducked away, hiding behind Sato, the guy with the puffy lips.

*Damn it, damn it, damn it…* She still couldn't face him. The most harmless thing on the planet, second to actual puppies, and she couldn't talk to him. If only the idiot hadn't seen her crying, only for her to run off like that…

Taking center stage was Bakugo, microphone in hand. Once again, he was hesitating, eyes lingering, flickering between Midoriya and Todoroki. Growling at himself, he raised the microphone to his lips. "You idiots better do your best, if you want to avoid being crushed by the competition." ...Huh. That actually wasn't totally awful, surprisingly. "Hold nothing back, I certainly won't." Dropping the microphone, he stomped off the stage back amongst his peers.

"Without further delay," said the S&M-gear clad heroine, "let's get the first event started!"
Uraraka giggled, "At UA, everything's always without delay."

"These are the qualifiers!" she went on, "It's in this stage that many are sent home crying every year!" Jiro gulped, "and the fateful first event this year is..." in that moment, she swore to god, she actually heard a drum-roll. "The obstacle course!" Jiro's heart sank. "A four kilometer run around the stadium itself! So long as you don't go off course," she had to pause for a moment to snicker, "anything is fair game! Now take your places!" At her closing words, a gate unfolded itself to both sides of what was to be the entrance to the course.

Of all the things for it to be... even her experience with gymnastics wasn't going to be much use here, save for the provided endurance. Her quirk wasn't entirely suited for this, but she was no stranger to making due in that regard, by this point. Still... racing against eleven classes of first years was no small challenge. It meant she couldn't afford to take even this first event lightly. When the bell sounded, signalling the start of the race, the entrance turned into a meat grinder of bodies.

Rather than run through it, Jiro opted for a different tack. The gate itself was configured of multi-shaped, interlocking objects that almost resembled tetris blocks. Climbable tetris blocks. While Todoroki skated into the lead on ice, generated by his entire right side, she clambered and then jumped over her fellow students. Midoriya and Iida weren't far behind him, even Uraraka and Ashido have managed to hurl themselves into a chase after their peers. From the looks of it, Ashido was using her acid in almost the same way as Todoroki.

Cursing under her breath, Jiro sprinted ahead. Failing to surprise her, her classmates all rocketed after Todoroki. Even as their feet began to be enveloped by the ice that still spread. "Dirty trick..." she hissed rounding the next bend and immediately wishing she hadn't. Ducking, she narrowly avoided Akaguro's sailing body, careening past her like some poorly launched projectile. "What the hell?!"

"Multiple targets acquired." She knew that droning voice, faux villains from the entrance exam.

"Pft," she scoffed, "getting their money's worth outta them." As Akaguro clambered to his feet, his eyes went wide.

"Holy..." the behemoth Zero-pointer from the entrance exam. ALL of them were present, standing between them and the next rung of the race. One of them in particular looked to be in disrepair, almost like some beast had slashed it to ribbons.

Wonder who might've done that...

"So," Todoroki droned, "this is what everyone was up against during the entrance exam." Somewhere behind him a student from another course screamed something about this being unethical. Clearly, they hadn't had to go up against these things during their own entrance tests. Todoroki sighed, lowering to a stance that resembled some form of martial art. "Kinda wish they'd prepared something a little more threatening."

Jiro stared at him in shock. Had he lost his mind? How the hell were these things not threatening enough? The horde of them closed in, the other students were busy fighting off the smaller ones or scrambling to the front of the race. Todoroki on the other hand, had other plans. As the Zero-pointer charged he struck out with his right hand. Jiro could only watch in stupefied awe. A veritable tsunami of ice erupted from his hand, encasing the entirety of the robot horde in mere seconds. In the seconds that followed the attack -as Todoroki ran through the frozen forest of machines- a wave of cold wind washed over her. This was what her classmate was capable of? Maybe Bakugo had more to worry about than she thought.
But now was hardly the time for such thoughts. Finding her courage, she and Akaguro raced after Todoroki. Only they soon wished they'd done no such thing. Crumbling to pieces, crashing down around them, the robots became a very different sort of obstacle. They scrambled, narrowly avoiding instant death beneath their titanic hulls. The shockwave of wind and dirt made further maneuvers impossible as they coughed and choked on the air itself. Arms flung above her head in a futile attempt at defense, Jiro braced for the inevitable snapping of her bones.

Only it never came. Something, long sticky and grossly warm snared around her middle. Before she could fight it off she was hauled further along the path, out of danger. She was almost rudely deposited on the dirt in a heap, hearing someone make a noise of disgust. "Dirt tastes awful, ribbit." Opening her eyes, Jiro saw Asui, helping Akaguro to his feet and giving her a thumbs up. "In this together."

Jiro, with a beaming grin, returned the gesture and the sentiment. "In this together."

Clapping them both on the back, signalling that the moment had passed, Akaguro started running. Nodding to each other, the girls shot after him. Somewhere, god knew where, up ahead were the obvious winners of the race. Todoroki, Iida, Ashido, Bakugo, that elbow-tape guy and Midorya, all fighting for first place. Their quirks gave them obvious advantages in terms of speed, it really didn't come as a surprise that they were the top bunch.

"It's almost unfair," Remarked Yaoyorozu, now running by their sides with a smirk, "but that's the name of the game."

"So let's beat the game!" Uraraka declared. "Anything's fair game, so let's win this thing!"

"Amen to that!" Kaminari grinned, moments before checking over his shoulder for Kirishima. When he found no sign of him he reluctantly resigned to hoping he was already further ahead.

What followed next was a literal pit. Tightropes tied between pillars, sticking up out of the depths, were their only viable way across. Uraraka and Jiro exchanged a look, nodding. Uraraka tapped her shoulder, removing the oppressive pull of gravity, and then each of her classmates. Next, Uraraka threw Jiro as hard as she could over the ravine. Spinning around mid air, Jiro extended her earlobes as far back as they could go, taking hold of the gravity girl. As she hauled her to, weight of her classmate removed, she and Uraraka flew to one of the stone lily pads on their path.

Meanwhile, Yaoyorozu used her quirk to push herself off the ground. Asui acted as an anchor that kept her from drifting off into space; using the weightlessness of her classmate to further her own leaps and bounds along the way. Akaguro and Kaminari had… a similar tactic. The dhamprire carried the other boy on his back, leaping and running as hard he could. Occasionally they'd miss their mark, and Kaminari would clutch at a tightrope to throw them back into the air.

It wasn't as quick as they would have liked, but it put them ahead of the others. Including that one girl who was so decked out with support items it had to be some kind of crime. Then there was that one boy with the crazy, purple hair, being carried to victory by half a dozen other students. What kind of bribe had he bequeathed to earn such a favor?

Then, came the last stretch of the race. Rounding the next bend, the six of them came face to face with… nothing? No obstacle, no trick, no nothing. Not even some kind of minefield shoehorned in to create some last minute drama. Just a straight shot to the end, their classmates fighting each other for first place. Bakugo and Todoroki almost looked like they were trying to kill each other. "This is it!" Jiro shouted. "Run like hell!"

"Right!" Said everyone else, Akaguro and Tsuyu half carrying an exhausted, nauseous Uraraka.
Breaking into an all out sprint, giving it everything they had, they came to end of the race a good ten seconds behind the real winner.

"And stealing first place at the last second is Iida! Followed closely by Midoriya!" The crowd erupted into a deafening cheer. "Tied for third place are Todoroki and Bakugo! Maybe if they'd played nicer they might have finished closer to first, eh?"

"OH SCREW YOU!" It was somehow entirely expected that Bakugo managed to scream over even the audience's clamoring.

Staggering, the six of them tailing behind came falling to a halt. Panting, catching their collective breaths they listened in ragged silence to Present Mic. Smiling, Kaminari reached out with a closed first toward Jiro. Smirking in reply, she tapped the knuckles of her own closed fist against his. "We did it, lady."

Jiro sighed, "it's been-" air, "three years already. You don't hafta-" oh god her lungs, "keep calling me that."

Kaminari gave a breathless chuckle. "Wouldn't be the most annoying person you knew from middle school if I did." She could only roll her eyes in reply. Regardless of anything else, they'd made it.

"Hope you youngsters saved some energy, cuz you've only got a few minutes before the next event!" Slowly, helping each other up, the six of them made the arduous climb back to their feet. "Brace yourselves for the event we've worked so hard to keep a surprise!" Surprise? Jiro raised an eyebrow, wiping sweat off her forehead with the back of her hand. What are they...? "It's UA High," Present Mic shouted, his enthusiasm bordering on insanity, "versus Shiketsu!"

While the crowd erupted into the loudest cheer yet, the leading winners of class 1A felt their eyes go wide. "...what?" Jiro, Murmured, looking up to see two lists of names appearing on the leaderboard. Sure enough, victors from UA's race on one side, and victors from Shiketsu -whatever that was- posted on the other. "WHAT!?"

Panting, gasping for breath, Uraraka suddenly puzzled something out. "Ya know... I was kinda curious as to why the waiting area was sound proofed..."
Divided we Fall

According to old stories, you can't put the devil somewhere he doesn't want to be. Now these 'old stories' are mostly hearsay and rumors passed around through word of mouth over many a long year. Whispers made by frightened folk, those tasked with defending others, the every day people, from those who go bump in the night. Even the most stalwart and vigilant of knights have things that they are afraid of. To give these fears such a label as 'the devil' is to do these servants a discredit.

No, these public defenders are afraid of something far more sinister and twisted. A creature so devious and cunning that it hides among even the most clever of us in plain sight: Humans. Ask an officer of the law, ask a hero, a soldier, a doctor what they fear and the most sensible will tell you 'other people' every time. For human beings are, quite simply, beyond their own understanding. Animals, mythical creatures of evil are alike in that they are simple and pure. Comprehending them takes no leap of logic, no great bound of the mind to achieve understanding.

Humans are not like that. They think, and plot and map ideologies in their minds to justify all that they do. So dizzy and taciturn can these justifications be that they, simply, require the touch of madness to truly know. Circular logic, loops of thought that feed into themselves forever.

"The beginning is the end and keeps coming round again." Sang a song on the radio, and the darkness thought it funny. But... it was not always darkness, was it? No, it was something else once. Some one. A name lingered, like the scent of pennies in a dusty fan. Near enough to know it was there, distant enough to fail in discerning it.

But it had a name, and it would know it again.

*The beginning is the end and... keeps coming round again.*

Lips of a mangled maw, held open by restraints, made some cursory attempt at speech. "The loop..." rasped the darkness, "closes..." but how does one destroy angels?

If you think, for a moment, that madness is made by ideology then you'd only be half right. Half right at best. In some cases, some far darker than bedtime stories allow, madness comes first.

You can't put the devil somewhere he doesn't want to be, even if that somewhere is the underworld: Tartarus, the prison meant for that which valiant lived in fear of. Devils like this living darkness.

This 'devil' wants to be where the most 'flesh' is.

**Clang, clang.** Covered eyes looked up and saw nothing. A covered nose wiggled, sniffing at the air, and knew all. Dust, undisturbed for some time caked wall and floor. Old, plastic trays piled in the corner, remnants of old 'meals', if one was generous enough to call them such. A steel door, windowed with Plexiglas that even the strongest teeth could not puncture.

Leather and metal, jingling around it, suspending it above the floor and restricting the movement of its arms. "Meal time, Moony."

Ahh... yes... "Moon..." rasped the darkness, "fish?" Wasn't that its name once? Long, long ago.

"Yeah, yeah," grumbled the unseen man, "have at it."
One might have forgotten to mention: you also shouldn't tempt the devil.

When he said 'have at it', he neglected to specify what 'it' was. So long, tendril-like teeth lanced forward in the dark and pieced what the devil sought most of all coveted things. Screaming filled the halls, teeth snaked out like seaweed made of razors and spread through the man's flesh and bones like the roots of a tree. He was pulled, first against the door, then against the small hatch, then over the strange thing that always opened the door.

A few, gargling screams later and he was pulled into the darkness and its drooling maw. A foul noise polluted the air, a blaring, pulsing noise of a machine screaming. Once, the darkness might have called it an alarm, but that was so long ago. Wonderful sounds, sounds of munching, splashing of flesh against teeth, could not be heard over that annoying klaxon.

So much for the fabled security of Tartarus.

"have I... closed the loop?" Staggering, unsteady footsteps reached the hall, but it was still so dark.

People were shouting warnings, telling it to 'go back'. But go back where? It had always been in the darkness, it hadn't yet left. So there was nowhere to go back to.

"Is the beginning..." it licked its dripping teeth, voice now clear as summer skies. "ended?" More inane babbling, madness by these fools. It couldn't go back to the darkness if it hadn't left. Perhaps they were saying that they needed to go back to the darkness.

"As... you desire." Teeth like lancing branches, loud noises booming from what he assumed to be thunder -that metal thunder they carried in those funny pockets on those belts of theirs-screaming. **Flesh.** It tasted so **good**...

Meat, wet, blood, sweat, salt, hungry, **kill**, taste!

Slobbering, ecstatic humming -almost moaning- as it ate them, brought them into darkness. It was only doing what it was told, after all. No one could get mad this time.

Sharp pain, tearing at its face, and it screamed. The thunder, it had been cut by the metal thunder. Clearly it wasn't being fast enough for that one, so it decided to eat him now. Odd... why was he screaming if he wanted this? But then, they all screamed, so, that was only normal wasn't it.

Light... color. Could it see? Blurry images, shifted about as eyes darted to and fro. Lidless eyes, saturated from blood dripping from its brow. That thunder... it had cut the darkness off its face.

"...Light?" it tilted its head, confused. "It sees... light... it is no longer darkness." it looked up, over itself and into the blaring, flashing red lights. There was a screen of moving pictures. Or perhaps very small people in a box? It, the darkness now light, didn't know. Staggering toward the screen, it cocked its head to one side.

"This creature," said a voice inside the box, "this thing with the exposed brain," and it stared at the 'creature' with lidless, bloodshot eyes. Oh... how beautiful. Its muscled, purple flesh, those wide and terrified eyes, that beak lined with jagged teeth... the light had never seen such wonderful flesh. "was last seen rampaging through a supermarket very near Hosu, devouring the store's entire stock of **Meeeeeeeeeeeecut.**" How the light loved that word. Whenever someone spoke it, the world just seemed so full of joy. Hungry joy... "If encountered, do not approach it: call the police and run." **Run.** Footsteps were rapidly approaching, though they were distant yet.

"Hosu..." said the light, staggering as it peered away from the screen. Then, just there on the wall, it saw... itself. A picture of itself, only it had no eyes but that must have been a lie. It could see,
couldn't it?

There, under the picture was a word: Moonfish. "My... name?" it looked down at itself, saw that its arms were bound. "Moonfish..." its teeth lanced out, carving through the straps and cloth and suddenly, it had arms again. It had hands. "Moonfish... creature..." it staggered toward the door, the exit. "Hosu..." Moonfish, not the light, not the darkness, began moving forward.

And from the desk, the music kept playing.

*The beginning is the end and...*

"Keeps coming round again..." Moonfish sang.

*The beginning is the end and...* Approaching, running footsteps were louder now.

"Keeps coming round again!" Moonfish sang louder, the footsteps, flesh, were nearly there.

*The beginning is the end and...* Then the flesh was right in view.

"Keeps coming round again!"

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Shiketsu High, located in western Japan, arguably just as -if not more- prestigious a school as UA itself. Twenty one students from UA against 21 students from Shiketsu. School vs School, Red vs Blue, UA being the blue team. "You've got to be kidding me," Ashido groaned, "this was stressful enough going up against people we knew, but the only thing worse than that is facing total unknowns!"

"I hate to say it, but she has a point..." Yaoyorozu wiped some of the sweat off her brow, she wandered over to the refreshment stand. "Going up against classmates almost would have been easier, considering how much we know about each other and our abilities." guzzling down as much water as she could she took advantage of the calm the next few minutes had afforded.

Kaminari groaned, stretching his legs in a vain attempt to work the soreness from them. "Well," strained his voice, "going up against the unknown isn't anything new, really..." he grabbed some water for himself, passing some along to Uraraka while he was at it.

Meanwhile Jiro had remained fixed, staring at the leader-board.

1: Tenya Iida
2: Izuku Midoriya
3: Shoto Todoroki
4: Katsuki Bakugo
5: Mina Ashido
6: Hanta Sero
7: Tsuyu Asui
8: Ochako Uraraka
9: Momo Yaoyorozu
10: Denki Kaminari
11: Kyoka Jiro
12: Chizome Akaguro
13: Shiozaki Ibari
14: Itsuka Kendo
15: Eijiro Kirishima
So these were the people in her school who'd made it to the top. Admittedly, less of a spread that she'd anticipated. Eleven out of twenty one students were from her own class, something Present Mic wasted no time pointing out. "Cream of the crop..." she muttered, giving the board an almost disapproving look.

"Deku!" And only one person with a voice that feminine called him that... "I can't believe you got so close to first place, I'm jealous!"

Jiro sighed, for multiple reasons. One, it was to be expected that he'd do so well, they all knew what he was capable of. Two, for how out of breath she sounded it was outright silly that she'd run over to him in order to say that. They'd all just run a semi-marathon for fucks sake.

Hiding behind his arms, red as you please, the boy with the black eye mumbled. "Uhm... it was nothing..." with a shaking voice. And there was the third reason she sighed.

Those two, the way they carried on it was a wonder that some rumor about them being an item hadn't started making the rounds. That was just how they acted, that adorable couple you know is gonna get together some day. The one that defies those stupid odds, making something so unlikely to work last well beyond the point anyone saw coming.

...This wasn't what she wanted or needed to think about right now. Turned on her heels she trudged over to the refreshment stand. Downing several glasses of water and cramming some granola bars into her face she started brainstorming. Without her boots -technically a support item- she was restricted to what she could do with just her earlobes. Not that those brick-heavy things had been useful yet. Come to think of it, having something so far away from her head which depended on her quirk to be of use was very impractical. Her boots were literally the furthest point from her earlobes without being her toes themselves. Quite the oversight, in that initial designing process. She'd need something lighter, easier to get to if she wanted something like that.

"You're not gonna choke, are you?" Jiro cast her glaring eyes at the owner of that voice, Kaminari. "Something got you upset?" He smiled in an effort to be supportive. "You don't usually maul granola like a rabid bear."

"I'm fine." she lied.

Of course, he would see through it. "Like hell you are," he half frowned, stuffing his hands in his pockets. "Look, I've been trying not to say anything but... you've been 'off' for the last couple of weeks." Brow angling down, giving an impression of anger, she bit her upper lip as she looked away. "Jiro..." his voice notably softer, "did something happen?"

Eyes winced shut she drew in a deep breath. "I..." made a total ass of myself to a friend I'd already complicated things with at the USJ? She thought, but did not say. Ultimately that was something of an afterthought compared to what she did give voice to. "...K's Zune broke at the USJ." The electric boy's heart sunk, rather than say anything else she let that be enough.

Not that he was inclined to agree with such a thought. "Shit, I..." he faltered, "are you okay? Why didn't you say something before?"
She gave him a knowing, patient look, which was very unlike her. "You know why I didn't say anything." Better than anyone else she knew.

"Still..." his words were more scarcely breathed air than speech, "I figured if you could talk to anyone about what happened with her-" she spun around, facing away from him, her body language shifting rapidly. Arms crossed, hands clenching to the underside of her elbows with tense, drawn-up shoulders and face turned toward the ground. "...I was there too." Her face scrunched up, eyes shut tight as could be. This was not the time. "I might not know exactly how you feel," There might never be a time, "but... that whole sucked for me too."

Sighing, shoulders dropping along with her arms, her face upturned toward the sky. Slowly, she turned around, her expression was... it screamed of heartbreak. "Past tense, Den?" As did that little smile that perched itself on her face.

"Alrighty, folks!" Present Mic's voice cut through what passed for quiet with a thunderous boom. "Get comfy and ready to scream, cuz after Miss Midnight tells us the rules to this next bit-" he really did like those dramatic pauses... "it's time for the battle royale!"

Clapping her hands, into her microphone, Midnight -as the S&M-gear clad heroine was evidently called- got to divulging the rules of combat. "First of all, you're all gonna be wearing special vests!" 21 of the vests, bandoleers really, were laid out on a table near the center stage. "Each one has three 'hit-boxes!' The students started putting them on, familiarizing themselves with their 'weak points'. "When all three of them get hit: you're out!"

She threw a rubber baseball into the air then swung her hand vertically as it fell, catching it with dramatic decision. "Of course you can't just tag or with anything, ya gotta use these or it won't work! But no friendly fire or you're out!" One index finger pointed to the sky, indicating the final point of her exposition. "And lastly:" not that she needed to. "Feel free to use your quirks, but if you draw blood or injure someone you are immediately disqualified! Save that stuff for the next event."

"Oh god dammit..." Akaguro growled.

"Thanks a bunch, Midnight!" She gave an almost ludicrously low bow as the Voice Hero returned to his own declarations. "Brace yourselves folks, this is about to get chaotic!"

Above their heads, plastered on the leader-board, was a countdown. Jiro drew in a long breath. "Here we go again..."

"Once more unto the breach, dear friends." Kaminari nudged her while Ashido, by his side did her best to bolster herself. "Once more..."

"Right..." breathed the Pinkette, "we've got this," her tone was more inquisitive than declarative, "not like we're strangers to combat by now." and the consequences of going too far with it...

Bracing her body, dropping to something of a stance as the center stage disappeared, Jiro rekindled her resolution. "Let's show these Shiketsu guys what we're made of." By her side Akaguro slammed a fist into his palm. That determined face he had on was slightly intimidating.

"Hey, Midoriya," at the dhampire's addressing of their friend Jiro turned away from the conversation. Hiding behind her hand, disguising the effort by fiddling with her hair in the process. "Punch Bakugo's lights out for me."

In reply the black-eyed boy raised an eyebrow while the warhead snarled. "What the fuck did you
"LANGUAGE!" Somewhere, obviously in the crowd, was All Might; shouting just before the airhorn, signaling the start of combat.

The sound of the respirator filled the dusty room. There was a lull before that last teaser, prelude to the main event, and the silence wasn't doing the old husk any favors. He sat there with drumming fingers awaiting some sign of anything happening, glaring beneath his mechanical helmet. Cutting through the oppressive, rage building silence was the sound of his most competent pupil's quirk. The lone pair of footsteps -limping to a seat- filled him with ire.

"You're alone." Ire he made no attempt to conceal.

"Apologies," Kurogiri grimaced, clutching his ribs as he slumped into a chair, "after disabling the Tartarus's security system it was... impossible to reach the target."

The husk sighed, "And Nomu?"

"Long gone by the time I arrived. No trail to follow."

His temper had just about been broken, turning to stare down Kurogiri he hesitated, however. The ribs that his pupil was clutching were bleeding rather profusely. "Did someone attack you?"

The teleporter shook his head, "merely the security guards at Tartarus. I'll be fine, sir."

His shoulders lost some tension, deflating along with his rage. Impressions of a small child, alone in an alley colored his mind. Alone, scarred and malnourished, crying into hands stained with ashen blood. An older boy wearing disembodied hands all over his arms and face. His boy, hating All Might for doing this to his 'Sensei'. A young man, stepping into shoes he couldn't fill, to keep his dream alive a little longer. A lifeless body on his floor.

Funny thing was, he wasn't the first boy he'd found like that. The first boy, much the same in his own way, now wore a suit and a metal brace on his long, long neck. Seeing him push himself like this to amend some wrong he hadn't made... "I see." was not allowed. "In that case... just rest. Let that wound heal."

"But, there's more to be done and I can still-"

"That will be all, Kurogiri." His voice, that time, matched his exterior in its entirety.

It pained the suited man considerably to hear it. "You'll... you'll be happy to know Toga's in place."

The Husk hummed out a single laugh. "Our infiltrating friend? I hadn't realized she'd divulged a name."

Kurogiri felt himself relax, as he only could when 'Master' was feeling at ease. "Only this morning," confessed he. "When I sent her on her way she said 'count on yer girl Toga', for what it's worth."

A pleased sounding hum resonated in The Husk's voice synthesizer. "Considering our number is only three? A great deal." Blood was still flowing, freely from his ward's side. So much so he could smell the iron in the air. "Is that wound not bandaged?"

"It's fine, sir."
"Bandage it, Kurogiri." There was no mistaking that for anything but the order it was, so the teleporter complied.

He'd always been like this... even as a child he had to fight tooth and nail to get that boy to treat his own injuries. When it came to serving his 'Master'? All was done without question. At times it was difficult to see Kurogiri as anything but what he projected himself as: the help. He made it so easy for others to disrespect, disregard him entirely with that all too polite demeanor of his. In this world, especially as one deals with villains, showing respect to all -those who've yet to earn it- marked you as someone not worthy of it.

The Husk had gotten used to putting people in categories. People like Kurogiri were... minions, 'the help' and people like The Husk had once been were the Masters. A lesson that Kurogiri had taken literally and exactly the wrong way. Rather than shift into someone more commanding of respect he doubled down on this butler motif of his, thinking it was what his Master from 'his lowly minion'.

It truly had been the quite the opposite, and their entire dynamic now was precisely why he'd tried to teach that lesson. "I think the next event is starting, sir."

"Good," and his attention returned to the present, "now... did the girl say who she was going to be?"

How had things gone to hell so fast? Deku's eyes could scarcely keep track of the mess of motion that had unfolded in the last thirty seconds. First, a blast of wind tore up any loose dirt and pebbles, forcing everyone on the battlefield to scatter. At least that was everyone he could see, his compatriots from UA. The battlefield he was presently lost in was an odd array of artificial hills, crags, trenches and canyons. Some flat expanses existed but those were presently occupied by gale force winds. Some one, or multiple some ones, was making sure the currently separated enemy stayed that way. At least that's what gathered, all other thoughts were rather silly.

"So much for teamwork..." he grumbled, keeping his ears open for what or whoever came next.

"GOD DAMMIT ROUND FACE, GET OFF ME!" Okay, so, he wasn't alone but this was not ideal to say the least.

"I'm trying!" came her all too nervous reply, "but my vest thing is stuck on yours!" Deku could only sigh, gulping back his nerves. Only one thing for it. Leaping into the air, jumping from rocky outcropping to rocky outcropping he soon arrived at their location. "Hey, Deku!" Uraraka beamed, flagging him down. "Can you help for a sec?"

Even with Bakugo looking every bit the rabid animal that he was, Deku couldn't help but smile. "Sure." It was a relatively simple fix, a snag of the buckles that he corrected with a second's worth of effort.

"Tell me it wasn't that fucking easy..." Bakugo snarled.

Deku, eyes fixed on the warhead, felt his gaze narrow a fraction. "It wasn't." he quietly declared. "But the position you were in wasn't helping."

Bakugo jolted his face to look at him, to snap some sort of reply, only to lose his anger completely. Even behind those sunglasses, he could see what he'd done to his face. Looking away, he bitterly remarked, "Know it all..."

"Psychopath." Both Deku and the warhead were surprised by the sudden outburst. Bakugo couldn't
even speak he was so taken aback. Further to Deku's surprise, he made no attempt at an apology. As he'd decided back on the day his reflection was forever changed, his old 'friend' just wasn't worth it. "Don't yell at Uraraka like that." And Bakugo's jaw dropped. "She doesn't deserve it."

For a moment, Bakugo thought he might have something to say. Some retort to go screaming back with, caution and decorum to the wind, but ultimately did not. "...Fine."

"Guys," Uraraka said, snapping their attention to her, "I don't think we're in good company..." she was looking at the closest 'mountain-top'. Someone, evidently observing them, had just dropped back below eyesight.

A loud chime of some electronic bell went off. "And that's Hanta Sero along with quadruple Tetsu out of the running!" Present Mic's voice boomed, making Deku's ears scream. "Guess we know who's being sidelined like supporting characters! I certainly know what that's like!"

From the same audio feed came a voice the three heroes-to-be knew well. "You're being rude, Hizashi." Aizawa grumbled, "those two were up against eight people. Just about anyone would have lost that fight."

Deku sighed, "Well, at least we'll know who's left in the fight."

Bakugo was not so patient as to think the ramifications of the announcement through. He, as one should expect, was flying headlong at the person who'd just fled from their sight. "GET BACK HERE!" the force of his explosions, propelling him through the air, knocked both Deku and Uraraka flat to the ground.

"GAH!" Deku winced his watering eyes shut. As he fell, slamming into the earth, his sunglasses went flying. Between the sun and Bakugo's quirk he was almost entirely blind now.

"Is he always like this?" Uraraka half groaned half yelled, pulling herself back to her feet. "No... wait... dumb question. Sorry." Then she noticed his lack of sunglasses. "Oh no..." While Present Mic announced that Bakugo had in fact eliminated whoever that person from Shiketsu was Uraraka helped the vampire to his feet. "Are you okay? Can you see without them?"

"Yes and no," he replied, straining through the stinging in his eyes.

Another announcement, this one stating that someone named Itsuka Kendo was now out of the running. Something was said about 'giving her a hand on her way out' that vaguely sounded like it was supposed to be a pun. "

Can you see where they-" and then his ears detected another noise. Amidst the cheering, screaming and explosions that told Bakugo was still in the game he heard something flying at high speeds. Reflexively, like a cornered animal evading a hunter's arrow, he threw himself and Uraraka aside, narrowly avoiding whatever it was.

"Eep!" Uraraka squeaked, completely taken by surprise and flushing deep red. Deku had just tackled her, sprawling them both out across the ground with himself -accidentally- on top of her.

Going red himself he started stammering, "Ah- no that- I'm so sorry!" as he leapt right off her, nearly loosing his footing in the process.

"No no, it's fine!" she assured, getting up herself, "But why did you- OH MY GOSH!" She saw them, he heard them.

It must have been a dozen of those projectiles sailing right at them, carried by more of that wind. In
their efforts to dodge Deku wound up tumbling face first down the rocky terrain while Uraraka floated down. By the time she reached safety she was about ready to pass out from using her quirk so much already.

"Ugh..." she gripped both hands at her abdomen. "De-" No, she scolded herself, not on live tv. "Where did you-?!" She barely had time to throw herself at the ground before another onslaught of rubber balls whizzed over her head.

The vampire was having similarly bad luck. He was sore, had ringing in his ears and couldn't see. On top of it all, he had no idea where his sunglasses were. Note to self: goggles or straps on the sunglasses. Picking himself up he was fortunate to find their attacker had either lost interest or lost track of them. Maybe it was just a random strike rather than something more coordinated. Either way, another announcement went out. This time it was Asui and someone else from Shiketsu being removed from the running.

"This is bad..." he breathed, "they just keep picking us off." Wiping dirt, gravel and stray pebbles from his brow he listened intently.

This was by no means going to be easy. Without his eyes he only had his nose, ears and sense of touch to guide him. So it was very slow going when he started climbing up the rocks toward what he thought was the direction of his sunglasses.

"Wait, not this way!" Uraraka's voice, she was... wait, how was she up that much higher than him already? "There's a bunch of- AH!" Crumbling rocks, rushing of air, her frantically flailing about to get a hand-hold on something.

But he could hear it all, and tell where it was. "CRAP!" he hissed, launching himself right at what he hoped was her. He almost sighed in relief when he caught her. His relief was short lived as he then slammed face first into stone. "GOD DAMN I-" he tasted blood in his mouth, and from the pain in nose it was fairly evident where from. As they crashed down to the ground, Uraraka on top of him this time, his world spun in the darkness he saw. "Nng... give me a break..." he groaned.

Propping herself up on him, she said, "Thanks Midoriya," ...what? "I got kinda careless there..." why... doesn't she sound flustered? And since when does she call me- "here," she grabbed his hand, hauling him to his feet. "I gotcha."

"Th-thanks." He immediately refocused his hearing, trying to get a sense of where they were and what was going on. All he could tell? He was outside in the middle of an arena being watched by a huge, screaming crowd. Great... "Any idea where we are?" mumbled he.

"Not really," admitted she, her hand moving behind herself, "can't you open your eyes now?" And that settled it. Face snapping to look right at her, hearing focused completely on her, he just narrowly avoided her hitting him with something. Only he dodged right into a wall, leaving himself wide open to her next attack. "Gotcha now!" He jumped. Sailing right over her head he was knocked completely off balance when she hit his back. BEEP!

"No!" he hissed, slamming face first on the ground. One of his hit boxes!

"Surprised you didn't catch on sooner, luv." That was definitely not Uraraka's voice. As she continued talking he heard... it sounded like... boiling jello? What was this girl doing? Changing shape, not that he was able to see. "Don'tcha know your own lady-friend?"

Deku blushed, not sure if she meant what he thought she had by that. "That's- we'er not-" She giggled, taking another swing at him that he only narrowly avoided. "Who are you!?" his efforts to
evade her onslaught left the thought of self-composure clean and far away. When he took another tumble down yet another rocky hill, he landed face first on a familiar object.

Wasting no time, he scrambled and returned his darkened spectacles to his face. *...Whoa.* Standing at the top of the hill he'd just fallen from was... she was beautiful. "Camie Utsushimi, fam." She blew a kiss right at him, sending his brain to some far corner of the earth. *'please as punch to meetcha.'*

Shaking his head vigorously, getting his brain back, Deku climbed to his feet. "How'd you know who I was?" his gaze sharpened, meeting hers. There was something... odd about her eyes. "There's no way we've met before today."

Another bout of giggling. "Sweetie, everyone knows about class 1A by now." She wasted no time resuming her assault, sliding down the hill right at him. "You all made headlines for the last couple weeks." She swung at another of his hit-boxes, narrowly missing. The speed of this girl...

"Fair point..." he murmured, pushing memories of Shigaraki as far away from himself as he could. "What happened to Uraraka?"

As he backpedaled, leaping away from her, she took a moment to shrug, "Iunno. Ran off, maybe?" She didn't seem to stop smiling this one... "But that's not important," she was in front of his face almost too soon for him to react. He slipped, letting out a very undignified yelp as they both toppled backwards. When they landed she was, once again, right on top of him. Straddling him, in fact and she seemed to get a kick out of how utterly flustered he was at this. "So, Izuku-Izuku," if nose hadn't already been bleeding, he wouldn't have been surprised if it started right then and there. "What's yer story, luv?" And she smiled a vaguely crocodile-like smile.

Present mics voice boomed above everything else once again, "Ooooooooh! That's Kirshima and Monama out of the running! You did well makin it this far fellas!"

"What the hell is going on!?" Kaminari shouted amidst the howling wind and flying debris.

"I don't know!" Ashido shouted right back.

"FOCUS!" Jiro's voice carried above even theirs. Forcing her eyes open, against the wind and dirt flying into her face. There had to be somewhere they could run to. "There, cover!" she pointed at a trench, as much shelter as they were going to find without further searching. "Come on!"

The others fell in step with her, trying to keep track of where she was as they made some attempt to keep pace. Somewhere behind them Jiro heard a multitude of footsteps racing in pursuit. From their lack of outcries, she knew her friends hadn't noticed them. Diving into the trench she wasted no time running further away, motioning frantically for the others to follow her.

"What?" Ashido said with a quirked eyebrow, hesitating a moment before she race right after her. "Why are we still running?"

A barrage of rubber projectiles hailed down into the trench around them. "Oh, ya know," Kaminari remarked, feeling rather fed up with this entire scenario by this point, "it's probably nothing!"

"Can it and run!" Jiro shot back, swearing under her breath when one of her hit-boxes went off. "We need to get somewhere where we can counter attack!" Of course it wouldn't be that simple. The very earth beneath their feet sprang up, flinging them into the air. As they flew, another barrage of projectiles soared right at them. "SHIT!"
"I got it!" Ashido shouted, palm outstretched.

Just as she was about to cut loose with a torrent of acid, disintegrating the rubber missiles, she caught sight of someone behind them all. Some tall, muscular boy with a massive gauntlet over his left hand, channeling a small hurricane at them. She froze. Images of that one villain, the one covered in that blackish purple mist, screaming and flailing about in agony because of her quirk, flashed in front of her eyes. Even then, soaring in the air as she was, she swore she heard his flesh sizzling. It was only when the barrage hit them dead on that she was snapped rudely back to reality.

Falling to the earth, at least this time behind cover, it took a few seconds for them to collect themselves. Even as she stood up, Ashido was trembling violently. "I thought you said you had it!"

Jiro shouted indignantly.

For once, Ashido was unable to really voice a reply. "I..." Was... was she about to cry?

Jiro's attention was elsewhere. Lounging toward the rock wall between them and the enemy she stabbed it with her earlobes. The rock crumbled to nothing, and the Shiketsu student on top of it fell into the crumbling earth. Hands acting on their own, Kaminari grabbed a pair of projectiles and tackled their would-be-attacker, knocking out two of his hit-boxes in the process. It wasn't long before Jiro had thrown another, taking out the last one. Before they had time to celebrate another barrage of projectiles raced through the hole in the wall she'd just created.

"Great going, genius!" Kaminari shouted, lounging just barely out of the way.

Jiro spat dirt out of her mouth, climbing back to her feet. "As the only one being pro-active: I don't want to hear-" Her eyes went wide. Some muscle-bound goliath of a boy was standing right over her. She lashed out with her earlobes, only to have them deflected by a gust of wind that knocked her flat, and the boy stuck downward with one of the projectiles in hand.

He never made contact.

Tackling him from behind was a certain engine calved lad, hell bent on taking him out. Their arms snared each other, fingers interlocking as engine and wind sent them sailing through the air, crashing through rock after rock. Jiro leapt right up, ready to charge into the fray when she noticed something truly bizarre: A flying hung amorphous... flesh? And it was sailing right at Iida. Who was there to defend him with an iron shield but Yaoyorozu.

A decisive footstep, stomping right behind her made Jiro whirl about, ready to strike. Her hand was caught mid flight by a familiar, lankly limb. "Bout time you showed up..."

Akaguro only smirked in reply. "I'd watch out for those two..." he gestured toward the two Shiketsu students. "Out of all the students on the enemy team they seem to be the most powerful."

Jiro nodded, getting ready to charge them at a moment's notice. "So what's with the... flesh, flying around?"

"Don't know," Admitted he, "just know that the guy behind it is never far... he's the one who took out Tetsu and Sero."

Ashido, just then having recovered her wits enough to scan the battlefield, gulped. "I- I think that's him." She pointed, "the guy without his right arm?"

"Damn, he looks about ready to collapse." Kaminari couldn't help but be impressed with the guy, "he must be overdoing it like crazy."
Akaguro sighed. "No doubt..." He cast his eyes at Iida and Yaoyorozu. Something was off about them. The way they coordinated was too fluid, instantaneous. They had the wind guy on the ropes, but something about the way they were moving, and that glazed look in their eyes... "There's a third player on the field." He pointed it out to Jiro. "See how they're behaving? I don't it's them controlling their bodies right now."

Jiro blinked. "But... if someone's controlling them... why are they still helping us?"

Akaguro smirked. "I can't help but notice that hurricane guy has yet to lose a single hit-thing. However..." he turned his attention to the guy with no right arm, "I've got other things on my mind right now."

"Like what?" Kaminari demanded, exasperated. "You're not thinking of attacking, are you? Look out there!" He pointed, right at the crowd of no less than nine opposing students not far away from the one-armed boy. One of them looked like some PSA against letting your hair grow out: a walking wad of fluffy, brown hair standing very near his one armed friend. "They're clearly just biding time for them, Hoping to run us out of the game by using these two!"

Ashido nodded, "or just get us all cornered and then finish us off."

"And charging head on was how Asui was taken out." Everyone but Akaguro jolted in surprise. Some girl with long, curly green hair had joined them.

"Who the hell are you!?" Kaminari shouted.

Rolling his eyes, the dhampire gestured between her and the group. "Setsuna Tokage, my classmates."

She smiled, baring a mouth of shark-like teeth at them. "Hiya!" she chirped, waving to them all. "I come with tidings of enforcements!" Just behind her were another few students, one Jiro definitely recognized.

"Hey, Zune-girl," grinned the girl with pink dreadlocks. "need any help?" Jiro averted her gaze, completely unable to face her.

Beside her, a girl with her black hair cut into a bob waved at them. "That's Mei Hatsume." Her voice was completely monotone. "I'm Yui Kodai." She raised her hand, giving a small, singular wave. "Hi."

"Hush," Tokage scolded, "now's not the time. Where's the others?"

Kodai shrugged. "Fighting some girl made of ice. Ibari and Todoroki told us to run."

Kaminari turned his face toward the ground, expression defeated. "We're... really getting creamed out here, aren't we?"

Akaguro clenched his fists, staring at the kid one arm as he focused on finishing off Yaoyorozu. Then, the dhampire sighed. "Damned if I do or don't..." Jiro quirked an eyebrow at him but he offered no explanation. "Kaminari," said he, "how do you feel about a charge? I need you to incapacitate the hairy one."

The electric boy blinked, utterly confused. "That's the dumbest idea you've ever had, please continue."

A nod was his only reply, "Hatsume," the pink haired girl grinned, obviously listening, "feel like
showing off those gadgets some more?"

She hummed happily, "you sweet talker, you know I do!" She pumped her fists excitedly.

"Then lets give Present Mic something to talk about." He pointed at Ashido, "can you coat the ground in a non corrosive acid?"

Her shoulders slumped a bit in relief. "Totally!" she gave a thumbs up. "Just say when."

Gulping, Akaguro nodded. "Alright, just follow my tail once this gets started because I doubt this will end well."

Jiro was suddenly very unsure about this entire plan. "What are you-" and he raced right past her, Ashido laying out a thick layer of acid right in his path. "Stendhal!"

"Now of all times you use my actual name..." grumbled he, "DO NOT WASTE THIS!" What the hell was he planning?

"Hey, wait up!" Tokage- no, her hands went sailing through the air after him, holding onto a pair of projectiles. Some student from Shiketsu leapt right at her, swinging his hand and hitting... where... her top half used to be. Now it was floating a good five feet above his head. She blew a raspberry at him, "How now, brown cow- OOP!"

When the earth went soaring up to hit her teeth, she floated aside, narrowly dodging. In his fit of swearing, trying to hit her with any scrap of earth he could control he failed to notice Jiro run right up behind him. Jabbing him with her earlobes she stunned him in place.

"Not the most observant guy are you?" and she proceed to tag all but one of his hit-boxes. Before she could hit the third the earth rose up and separated them, seconds before he lounged at her.

"What the hell's the plan!?" Kaminari shouted, as Hatsume went off the metaphorical walls with her gadgets.

A grappling hook snared one student, metallic spider legs sprouted from her back and threw another one -one who immediately sprouted wings from his back and flew away- and her boots propelled her along the slick ground like rocket powered roller skates. Correcting course with her spider-legs she started spinning around, grappling hook still tethering her to that other student, and keeping the entirety of the enemy forces at bay.

"We can't just have her do everything! And Ashido needs cover!"

Akaguro didn't say anything. He just kept running right at the kid with one arm.

"Akaguro!?!" At Kaminari's shouting, the one armed one aimed his other arm right at the dhampire.

"SHIT!" He shouted throwing himself just barely out of the way. That kid's arm had come clean off, turning into a blob of skin as it soared right past him. "WILL YOU STOP TALKING!?"

In reply, Kaminari gave a very meek thumbs up. "Uhh... just one thing." Akaguro growled at him. "What happens if that touch-" no sooner had he begun to speak that Hatsume had been hit by it and summarily turned into a... Hatsume colored blob of flesh. "OH MY GOD!" Of course, even then, her gadgets kept right on ticking, only now they were a hazard to everyone. Not just their opponents.

"You're running out of limbs, Shishikura!" His taunting had the armless boy focused right on him.
"What's next? one of your legs!?” And it was.

Narrowly dodging once again, Akaguro saluted Kaminari, his signature freaky smile plastered all over his face. He brandished something that looked like a blade and it was then that Kaminari understood what about to happen. "Dude, don't!"

But it was too late, he was charging right at the other boy, the sharpened rock in his right hand. "GET HIM NOW!" There wasn't much time. Skating on the ice, cursing under his breath, the electric charged the hairy guy. He was worried about making it over to him when the kid's hair snaked out and enveloped him.

Big mistake... And the other teen's body felt the full force of a direct blast of Kaminari's quirk. Of course, as happens with electricity, every muscle in his body seized and convulsed. His hair was no exception to this, and Kaminari felt himself being crushed in the snarled mess of cooking hair. Tried as he did to scream, he just couldn't. Seconds later, he and his opponent collapsed.

Of course, this had unforeseen consequences as well. Everyone on the acid-slick ground was electrocuted too. Akaguro managed to avoid the initial burst by leaping into the air, but even he was brought to his literal knees. Panting, straining against his screaming body, he tried to force himself to move but couldn't move fast enough.

To make matters worse, the one limbed kid looked ready to finish him off. "So close..."

"DIE!" A deafening explosion sent Shishikura face first into the ground.

This would probably be the only time Akaguro was happy to see Bakugo. Shishikura lashed out with his leg, kicking Bakugo square in the chest. Once converted into a lump of flesh, he sent the warhead skidding away along the acid-slick ground, sending him right into Ashido's unsuspecting face.

"Deus ex asshole..." the dhampire grinned leaping forward. "thanks for coming out!" Akaguro's yell was a warriors final battle-cry, moments before his fall. Swinging his arm upward, he cleaved the rock in his hand through the skin of his enemy and flew over his head. His grin widened when he saw the blood he'd collected.

"And Chizome Akaguro is disqualified!" Present Mic announced. "That's whatcha get for cutting an opponent like that!"

"heh..." Akaguro chuckled, looking right up at the booth the voice hero was perched in. "That's what I was counting on." and he lapped up some of the blood at the end of the rock, completely immobilizing Shishikura and his quirk. "Don't worry," mocked Akaguro, "since you used dirty tricks to win this," he tauntingly brandished the bloody rock, "I'll make sure you stay down until this is over." Even as he walked away he felt Shishikura's eyes boring holes in his back. "I don't care about winning, but some of my friends do. This is for taking that from them."

Tokage's hands flung forward, tagging every hit-box on the hairy guy before hitting all but one of Shishikura's. His last one was currently under him, inaccessible. "Aw come on!" her still floating top half complained, "All for that for only one kill!? What a waste of a good plan..."

"Oh quiet!" Said the surprisingly feminine voice of Jiro's earth-wielding enemy, "this entire fight and I haven't even gotten one-"

"Wave goodbye folks! Camie Ustsushimi, Mei Hatsume, Denki Kaminari AND Yui Kodai have all been taken OUT!"
"GOD DAMMIT!"

Jiro blinked in surprise, "Wait... you're a-"

Her opponent snarled. "DON'T YOU DARE ACT SURPRISED!" Jiro felt multiple hunks of earth slam into her abdomen, knocking the wind out of her and sending her flying. "THAT'S ALL I GET, ALL THE FRIGGING TIME!" Jiro flung her arms up, feebly defending herself from a savage pummeling at the hands of her enemy. "YOU HAVE NO IDEA WHAT IT'S LIKE, CONSTANTLY GETTING CALLED A BOY!"

The world went silent, her eye twitched with unbridled malice. Suddenly, she wasn't on the ground any more, she was kneeling. A pair of earthen pillars flying right at her face were destroyed by her earlobes as she grabbed her assailant's wrists. Then, in a savage uppercut she slammed the rubber ball right into the last hit box and threw her hard against the ground.

She groaned, clutching her middle as the world she knew took a moment to be something other than pain. "WHAT THE HELL'S YOUR-"

"Stop talking." the Shiketsu girl's eyebrows jumped. This other girl... her shoulders were shaking, fists clenched. Tears running freely down her face. Freak! "Just..." reject! "Just shut up." gonna cry, little freak? "And think before you open your mouth next time." Her gaze shot up, meeting her opponent's dead on, rage and pain clearly on display. The kind of pain you never forgot. "Because you're the one who's shouting," and her voice climbed, "without any idea what you're talking about!"

The other girl just lay there and stared, bewildered. "I... I didn't-"

Suddenly a shadow was cast over Jiro. She turned around only to get blasted away by a gust of wind. "Now that was just plain rude!" Shouted the goliath, pointing to his now defeated friend. "Apologize for hitting Chikyu!"

Groaning, her body having had just about enough of this kind of treatment, Jiro rolled over. Damn it all... She kicked herself, her own mind screaming at her, How can I be this fucking stupid!? What is wrong with me?!

"Apologize, you brute!"

Jiro looked up to see a truly hopeless sight. Bakugo, Ashido, Iida and Tokage were barely keeping themselves on their feet. Uraraka and Midoriya were no where to be seen, neither was Yaoyorozu. To make matters truly hopeless, Todoroki and... whoever he was with were no where in sight either, and the remainder of the Shiketsu student body had surrounded those present. Not the way she imagined losing.

"Don't you think," Jiro's eyes went wide. She'd never heard this voice before but it sent a chill down her spine, "that it's a little rude to talk to a lady like that?"

The wind guy scoffed, "Well, I-" and then his eyes glazed over. Just like Iida's, just like Yaoyorozu's.

Speechless, stunned and too afraid to really move thanks to her own instincts, Jiro turned toward the source of the voice: A kid with very tired eyes, wild, frizzy purple hair that stuck off his head in every direction wearing a deceptively peaceful smile. "Now," said he, with so much calm it made Jiro's skin crawl, "would you mind taking your entire school out of this festival for me?"

For just one moment, silence followed, before one Shiketsu student managed to speak. "Wait, what
did he just-" and then a hurricane of wind picked up every stray projectile within a thirty meter radius. The tornado that followed sent everyone not clinging to something for dear life flying, and the purple haired kid stood there, calmly grinning. Chime, after chime, after chime went off; signalling the defeat of one Shiketsu student after another. When the dust finally settled, Jiro could only gape at him in terrified awe.

Of course, with chilling slowness, he then turned and addressed her. "Name's Shinso Hitoshi." Then, with a close eyed smile he added, "Nice to meet you... but I think I'm out of the running now."

"AND IT IS OVER!" Present Mic declared. "SHINSO HITOSHI HAS ELIMINATED EVERYONE BUT THE TEN PEOPLE ON SCREEN!" The audience, for once, was entirely silent. "WHILE THAT INCLUDES HIM, I HAFTA SAY: THAT WAS A MEMORABLE WAY TO GO OUT! TOTALLY STOLE THAT OTHER GUY'S THUNDER!"

1: Inasa Yorashi  
2: Seiji Shishikura  
3: Momo Yaoyorozu  
4: Setsuna Tokage  
5: Izuku Midoriya  
6: Katsuki Bakugo  
7: Kyoka Jiro  
8: Tenya Iida  
9: Todoroki Shoto  
10: Ibara Shiozaki

Hitoshi just waved at her, slowly starting to walk away. "See ya."

She wanted to reply. She wanted to say something to this guy, but her every fiber screamed for her not to. *Who the hell... thought she, was that guy?*

"Look alive, folks!" Present Mic's voice jolted her back to the present. "Cuz after out contenders have a little break, it's time for the main event: ONE ON ONE COMBAT!" There was the jeering crowd.

Jiro sighed, shakily getting to her feet. "Well... I've made it this far." She smirked listlessly at the scoreboard, seeing her name up there almost instilled a sense of pride. Of course, reality declared that it not. Had Shinso not been there she likely would have been out of this competition right then and there. "Long way yet to climb."

"Jiro!" *Oh no no no no no no.* She had to gulp back her nerves, working quickly her palms furiously scrubbed the tears away from her eyes. "You made it!" Even beneath that dumb mask, she could tell he was smiling. It was a short lived expression, as he did not fail to notice the puffy red of her eyes. "Hey..." he reached out, very unsure of himself all of a sudden, "is- are you... okay?"

She nodded. "Yup." she lied, eyes everywhere but on his. "Just... yeah." She looked up just long enough to see his wide eyed concern, and then deflated with a sigh. "Just... I don't want to talk about it."

Nodding slowly, his reply was very quiet. "...Okay." After a breif pause, feeling bad for just leaving it at that, he added one last thing. "I'm... sorry I haven't been there lately." Damn it, now she thought she might start crying again. "I just... wasn't sure if I should try and say something after... you know."

She just couldn't leave this kid feeling like crap, could she? "Green..." she managed, a hand over...
her own face, "why are you apologizing? I was the one avoiding you, remember?" She peered up at him with her uncovered eye and a very tired expression, fingers pushing at her scalp under her hair. "You're too damn nice... you shouldn't apologize when you don't have to." Of course... apologizing when you didn't have to was classic behavior of anyone who survived life at the hands of people like Bakugo. Really, she couldn't fault him for it.

"I-" he laughed nervously, "it- it's just a force of habit. Sor- er, I mean-!

"Chill," she couldn't help but laugh a little, "it's fine," and her hand fell away from her face. Looking to the others, being carted away by robot medics in large part she frowned. "It's like a war-zone..." despite her best efforts, talking to him left her shaking. She was still bracing for the moment he'd start ridiculing her for crying, or worse than that.

That was what had always happened, and while she knew he wasn't like that, learned instincts were difficult to fight.

"Yeah..." Deku quietly agreed, "I uh, kind of expected more of us to make it to the final stretch."

"Tell me about it." Both Deku and Jiro turned to see the newcomer. Large as a house, all muscle, buzz-cut hair and a very serious face. His eyes were half lidded, bored looking like Jiro's usually were. "Hey..." he droned.

Deku meekly waved at him. "Um... who are you."

"Inasha Yorashi!" he bowed so fast and so stiffly he slammed his head into the ground, and Deku recoiled in shock. "Pleased to meet you and sorry for yelling!"

"Don't give yourself a concussion over it!" Jiro shrieked.

"Aplogies!" And he went and did it again. "I'll try to avoid doing that in the future!" Deku and Jiro exchanged a very concerned look, completely uncertain what to make of this guy.

To their left, laughing up a storm as her body parts reconnected to her, was Tokage. "I think I like this guy." Grinning at her other UA attendees, she said, "Think we can keep him?"

"LADIES, GENTLEMEN AND YOU BEAUTIFUL PEOPLE BETWEEN AND AROUND THE TWO- YOU KNOW WHO YOU ARE!" Present Mic shouted, prompting both Jiro and Deku to clasp hands over their ears.

"Damn it!" they both hissed.

"FEAST YOUR EYES ON THE FIRST LINEUP OF MATCHES!"

Turning toward the screen, Deku felt his heart sink. "Jiro..." She saw it too, right there in giant letters for everyone to see.

The line-up: Midoriya vs Yorashi, Todoroki vs Shishikura, and the one that had Deku's heart in his feet: Jiro vs Bakugo. The other two, while she hadn't yet recognized their existence, were Iida vs Shiozaki and Yaoyorozu vs Tokage.

Malicious snickering caught her ear. Turning over her shoulder, Jiro looked and saw none other than the warhead himself, grinning like a mad dog and right at her. This had to be some dream come true for him. "Bring it the fuck on." She growled, glaring right at Bakugo.

Deku looked at her like she'd just gone crazy. "But he-"
"Has never dealt with me," Jiro immediately shot out with, "trust me... I've dealt with worse."

Even as she stalked away, an air of confidence Deku only wished he had, doubt continued to gnaw at him. But... "Just this once," murmured he, "I hope you're not exaggerating..."
Battered fingers, bandages both old and new frayed around the edges, reached for the latch of a rusty locker. The lock rattled in her hands, she growled in frustration at her trembling hands. A blood-stained hand brought to her eye, the back of her wrist trying to dry tears from her face smudged dried crimson beneath it, just over a blackened bruise. With that same hand she clawed stray hairs from her face, the strands falling amidst a patch of their torn brethren. Large clumps of her hair had been snapped, broken by attacking hands.

In that moment of panic, like so many others lately, it had felt as if the entire hallway was trying to swarm her. This was becoming the norm for this place, going to school here. That it hadn't rattled her to the point of sobbing was a sign that she was getting used to it. Reaching for the bandages she kept in her locker, her arm drifted past the calendar taped to the inside of her door. Red X's marked every day of April and half of March, at the opposite end of the calendar was a day circled in red: her last day of school for the year.

*Can't get there soon enough...* She thought bitterly, collecting the bandages and disinfectant from her possessions.

"You've got it almost as bad as me."

Without thinking, her elbow was flying. Someone had snuck up behind her, and by now her instincts knew how that ended. A rush of wind, elbow sailing past her would-be-assailant connected with nothing but wind. Shoulder length red hair and the white tails of earbuds she wore fluttered like tiny wings, soaring as this newcomer dodged.

"Whoa!" A pair of prominent lips hollered, the owner of them raising their hands. "Easy! I'm not here to start anything!"

Jiro eyed her with the glare of a watchful, lone wolf. Any attempt to get close was to be treated as an attack. Despite her fear, the thudding of her heart in her chest, her face remained fixed with steely anger. This... girl was entirely unknown to her. In the last month she hadn't seen her once among the many faces in the crowds. Yet here she was, wearing a school uniform and a few bruises on her face.

Jiro's eyes narrowed. "Is that what you told the one who gave you those?" She gestured to the discolored skin, earning a nervous chuckle.

"Trust me," Jiro did no such thing. Another nervous chuckle, as the red-head adjusted her sunglasses, taking her earbuds out and poceting an absolute relic of an MP3 player. Where the hell had she even gotten that thing? "I got these the same way you did."

Then the purplette raised an eyebrow. "What are you talking about?" And her defensive stance eased slightly. "You don't mean...?" She looked at the stranger with new eyes, looking them up and down. A mournful wince twisted the redhead's features for a moment, unable to look Jiro in the eyes.

It took all of five minutes to find their way outside, to the disused lot behind the school. They sat on a boulder the size of a small car, Jiro with her legs under her as this strange girl splashed disinfectant on her battered fingers, making Jiro hiss with the stinging pain. Then she wrapped the fingers, one by one, with Jiro's bandages. Indelicate fingers, a touch too wide, attached to broad hands. Her shoulders were wider than was to be expected, hips just a hair to thin and her jawline
was far too prominent.

Feeling Jiro's eyes on her, she smiled sadly. "I don't blend in well, it's true."

Jiro quickly averted her gaze. "I didn't say anything..."

The other girl batted the tension from the air, her scratchy voice speaking gently. "Forget it," she set to work on Jiro's other hand, "everyone here already knows about me anyways, dumbass idea for me to out with it in the middle of last year."

A sympathetic look colored Jiro's face, regarding her medic with tender eyes. "That can't have gone well."

She chuckled mirthlessly. "Well, it did change everything, just like I'd hoped." And the bandages were applied. "Can you use em well enough?"

Jiro flexed her fingers, wiggling them rhythmically almost like the twitching of an insect's legs as it walked. "Yeah." Collecting her things she added, "thank you. Guess I owe ya one."

The redhead hopped off the boulder, feet padding on soft grass. "If that's the case, you should come meet a friend of mine." She flashed a wide grin as Jiro climbed off the boulder. "She'll like you."

Jiro couldn't help but feel a pang of envy. "So you've got a friend..." she smirked, masking the emotion with one she wanted to feel. "You're lucky."

The redhead shrugged, walking away from the school, the shadows it cast over them. "Maybe... but she isn't so lucky."

A tilt of her head to one side, Jiro blinked. "Meaning?" and her hands went to her pockets.

"Well, you know how it is." the redhead spread her arms to both sides, pivoting at the elbows and palms upturned. "No one wants to be friends with a freak, or the friends of the freak."

Jiro's gaze turned away, finding anything else to pay attention to for a moment. "I... wouldn't know that last part." A few moments of silence passed, leaving room for thought. Thought that Jiro soon turned to words. "Why haven't I seen you around before? Schools been going on for a month, where have you been?"

She sighed, scratching behind her head as she peered at the ground. "I uh... was recovering from surgery. Thought my depression was gonna do me in, I can't stand sitting around."

Her eyes went wide, "Wait, you don't mean-!?"

"Yes, I mean." she sighed. "It's the law, if you're serious about who you are then you'll get the surgery. Or so the logic says..." then she shrugged, "it's not like I wouldn't have gotten it anyway, it's just annoying that I didn't have a choice," the she muttered, "damn societal shackles..."

Tone hushed, more akin to breath than speech, Jiro replied, "Yeah, I'm... familiar with those laws." Tucking some of her hair behind her ear, she swallowed. "So you're not new here?"

"No, but believe me: I wish I lived in Tokyo, or some other city where I'd have more agency with this but..." her voice trailed away for a moment, a sort of melancholic tint shadowed her features even as she smiled. "You work with what you get."
"I... see." She fiddled with her fingers on one hand, very aware of her words. "you don't seem any worse for wear though."

That time she laughed. "Damn right. Life might be a rancid bitch but it hasn't thrown anything at me yet that I couldn't handle, and I don't intend to make that a lie anytime soon." That was a sentiment Jiro could appreciate, even as they continued in silence.

They'd only just reached the edge of the town when Jiro's new -and only- friend started looking about, searching for something. Walking past a shop window she took a look at her reflection. Her hair had been butchered. Her flowing, purple locks were lopsided, tangled messes in places. Her bangs were now entirely uneven and her face... bruised, puffy eyed and streaked with dried tears, a smudge of blood beneath her eye was shaped like a triangle. She went to scrub it off but something made her hesitate.

It's like war paint... So she left it be, expression softening her hand returned to her pocket. She'd only just turned back to follow her new friend when a pair of arms flung themselves around her.

"Awww," a cheek smushed up against one of her own, a mess of blonde hair spilling onto her face. "if yer not the cutest little thing!" Growling at the indignity of it all, Jiro grabbed her arms and flung her off of herself. This second new girl cackling with laughter with the entire way to the wall Jiro pinned her against. Rather than getting angry, she just smiled a crocodile smile, peering at her with yellow eyes. "Wassup? It's yer girl, Toga."

"Are you psychotic!?" Jiro demanded, and 'Toga' cackled with laughter. "You don't just- UMPH!" and the redhead's arm flumped onto her shoulders.

"Heyyyyy, Himiko!" the redhead reached out and pinched her cheek, and Toga did her best to bite playfully at the offending fingers. "Long time no see."

Toga laughed. "Finally got yer butt outta solitary, eh Big Sis?" Jiro ducked out from under the arm of 'Big Sis', backing away from the pair of them nervously. Toga pointed right at her. "Ya got a ducklin followin ya." Jiro growled at being called a duckling. "An angry, scardey ducklin."

She growled louder. "Scardey!?"

"Scardey pairdey!" Toga blew a raspberry, and Jiro lounged at her, hands trying to grab her.

"Get back here!" Now the blonde was howling with laughter, running with the abandon of reckless glee.

"K, help! She's gunna skin me!" Despite the obvious plea for aid, her tone was beyond ecstatic.

K, Big Sis, chuckled. "Run for your life! I don't think I can stop her!" Jiro couldn't help but grin. This was something she'd been lacking for the last month, something she'd written off ever having in middle school: fun. So the chase went on, right up until Jiro tackled Toga, the two of them crashing to the ground in a heap.

As the two of them struggled, both trying to pin the other, Toga and K exchanged a look. They'd found a keeper. Eventually, thanks to a very disorienting and unwelcome lick to the cheek, Jiro was defeated. Toga just sat over her, grinning like a lunatic. "I think I like ya." then she tousled Jiro's hair. "The mop? Not so much, but with a pair o'scissors I can fix that right up."

Jiro eyed the tangled mess of blonde sitting in a disheveled mess atop Toga's head. "Can you now?" Her tone betrayed her uncertainty as clearly as her features.
Rather than take this as insult, Toga laughed. "Don't worry yer pretty lil head." she hopped off of her, taking her hand and pulling Jiro to her feet. "When I'm done with ya, ya wont recognize yer reflection."

"If it helps," K pointed at her own hair, "she helped me with this.

Rather than continue an argument that would benefit no one, Jiro sighed and relented. "Alright…" Toga pumped her fist in celebration. "But… leave the bangs like this." Jiro pointed to the slanted, uneven hair hanging just above her eyes. "I kinda like em this way."

A glint of genius sparkled in Toga's eyes, the kind that flashed when a truly amazing idea was being formed. "I think I can help ya alright…." Toga turned and nudged K in the side. "Where'd ya find her?"

K just smiled, an empty smile that made all the right motions but held none of the spirit of a real smile. For the first time, Jiro suspected she was seeing her new friend's real face beneath her brave facade. "The same as you found me." A sympathetic look from Toga was all that bit of conversation needed for its conclusion.

There was something different about these two. Something about the way they carried on, in spite of all life threw at them. Jiro had made up her mind to find out what that was.

Maybe she'd be able to learn something from them, along the way.

A deafening cheer yanked her from her memories. Someone had just won a fight.

"AND THE WINNER IS MIDORIYA!" Present Mic screamed, splitting the eardrums of at least two UA students in one go. "YORASHI PUT UP AN AMAZING FIGHT, LET'S ALL GIVE THE MAN A HAND!"

Stunned, and a little surprised, Jiro made some vague attempt at applause. Up on the scoreboard was a reply of parts of the fight. Highlights, and whatnot. While Yorashi had a range advantage it was about all he had. Midoriya had no trouble countering his onslaught of wind with his super strength and claws: clinging to the ground and working his way relentlessly toward Yorashi. Even with his quirk at full tilt, it was little more than a battle of endurance, after it was established that Deku wouldn't be so easily defeated. Yorashi, for al his training, had the endurance that many an athlete or bodybuilder would envy.

But that wasn't anywhere near the fortitude required to battle Nomu.

Eventually, Yorashi had spent his energy. It was a simple matter for Midoriya to throw him out of the ring after that.

Somewhere to her side, Kaminari let out a single chuckle. "No surprises there. Our green boy more or less had that in the bag."

"You didn't see him wipe out his entire team in seconds," said Mina, rubbing the sore spots from where Yorashi's quirk had pelted her with so many rubber projectiles and bits of scattered earth.

Kaminari had his own sore spots about the conclusion of the skirmish. "Yeah, I didn't see much of anything after Akaguro led us into that kamikaze run." As the dhampire rolled his eyes, the electric blonde shot another remark his way. "You coulda said that was a suicide run before we were headlong into it."
Akaguro sighed. "It didn't go exactly as I'd planned, but we really should have expected as much." He leaned into his armrest, cheek propped against his palm. "Either way, I've about had it with it with self indulgent spectacle." Sneering at the gathered masses, he muttered under his breath. "Give the fools their bread and circus, distract them from the untold horrors likely being committed right as all this is happening…” The look of contempt in his eyes might have put off a seasoned Nun, making her question whether her place were truly right in the world. It was lucky no one but Jiro had noticed the look in his eye.

"You don't think a little distraction is healthy?" Asui tilted her head to one side, index finger resting on her lower lip. "If all people focused on was the bad things happening in the world, they'd probably break down and panic before too long."

Akaguro smirked, turning to look the frog-girl in the eyes. "You don't think anyone would rise to the occasion? Stand up to stem the tide of all the wrong being done?"

Asui seemed to shy away, faltering at the obvious strength of his beliefs. Speaking up for her was Kirishima, also out of the game. "Well, obviously there would be. Look at us!" he put a friendly hand on Asui's shoulder, earning a smirk from the frog-girl. "We're here, aren't we?"

At this, Akaguro could only give a half-hearted laugh. "After beholding what horrors of the world, I wonder…?" he turned away, regarding the jeering crowd with that same bored contempt as before. "One can only hope the 'heroes' of tomorrow have any idea." That was the last he had to offer on the subject, and so it was back to his quiet, brooding contemplation; a hand placed idly over his mouth, index finger tapping at his jaw.

"Heya, fam!" Jiro cringed. Camie, as she liked to be called, had a vernacular that lowered the collective IQ of whatever room she was in. "That was toats awesome, Midoriya." Between her choice of words -and that incredibly unsubtle wink- Jiro questioned why she was even allowed to sit with them. It had to violate some kind of rule.

It certainly violated her brain…

Right beside her, fangirling with equally unfiltered admiration, was Uraraka. "You were amazing!" She beamed, and between her and Camie Midoriya looked as though he may die from blushing. Too much blood pulled away from his brain. "I thought for sure Yorashi would be a contender in the finals, but them BAM!" Uraraka slammed her knuckles into her other palm, a wild grin on her face. "You just kicked him out of the ring!"

Kirishima, witnessing this, had to join in with equal enthusiasm. "Right!?!" he pumped his fist, also grinning wildly. "Just tirelessly forcing his way through a hurricane!" With a giggle, Uraraka nodded. "You got the makings of a bona-fide man, Midoriya!"

To Jiro's -and Deku's- surprise, the vampire seemed to blush brighter. "I- uh, well… I dunno if I'd go that far…" he seemed to shrink ever smaller with each bit of praise. It would have been adorable, if only it didn't remind any who knew that he had so little experience receiving praise. "It was a pretty basic strategy and it kind tired me out… so, it's not exactly practical in emergency situations."

Kirishima blinked. "Huh? Oh!" he said, as the realization hit him. "So right about now you need-"

"YOUR PROTEIN SHAKE!" In that moment Ashido, Jiro and Kaminari had collectively shouted, the blond scrambling to procure Midoriya's thermos from his schoolbag.

"Brought this up for ya, man!" Kaminari blurted out, with all the tact of a startled elephant, tossing
the metal canister to the vampire.

"We got your back, buddy!" Ashido gave an almost frantic thumbs up, her smile only just masking her fading panic. Camie could only look between the group in total confusion, exactly as they’d hoped for.

"Er, right…” Kirishima said awkwardly, "totally wasn't gonna offer, uh… nevermind." He held up both hands in a motion of surrender, laughing nervously and sheepishly slinking away to his seat.

Deku just shrank into his seat, hiding his face as he quietly sipped away.

Camie followed after Kirishima, subjecting him, Ashido and Kaminari to a line of questioning they wanted desperately to avoid. "Offer him…?

Ashido giggled like a mouse corned by a lion. "It's just a… stupid inside joke."

Jumping to her aid was Kaminari, "y-you had to be there."

Shaking his head at this was Akaguro, face buried in his palm. While the others were distracted, Jiro snuck over to her hiding friend. "Hey…"

He peeked up at her, vaguely worried she'd somehow make him want to turn invisible like the others. "Uh, hey." An attempt at a smile was made, it utterly failed to convince her that he was anything close to composed. "W-what's up?"

She sat beside him, knees drawn up below her nose. "Nothing, just checking on you." when she caught sight of sad surprise on his face, she sighed. "Yeah, I know…” she ran a hand through her hair. "I've been shit at that lately."

Capping his thermos, he uncurled himself in his seat and turned to look at her more directly. "It's okay." really he just seemed to be happy to be talking to her again, if anything. "I've been worried, but I know you had reasons." That little smirk he gave disarmed her reservations against such things being brought up.

And that was something she found surprising. "Yeah…” she murmured, "mind if we don't talk about that while I apologize for ghosting you?" When he nodded the weight on her shoulders lightened some small amount. But it was an amount she needed to be free of burdening. "Thanks. Sorry for ghosting you, Green."

With another smirk, he shrugged. "Forgiven and forgotten."

She buried her face in her knees, letting out a frustrated groan. "You're too nice. You know that?"

He chuckled. "Thank you." Even as he blushed again.

Fighting back a smirk, she growled and looked away from him. "Idiot…"

"Meanie." That one she hit him for, right on the shoulder. When they looked each other in the eyes, smiles straining against their best efforts to hide them, they burst out laughing. "Let's not do anything like this again, okay?" He had to wipe some hint of tears from the corner of his eye.

She smiled, feeling just a bit better about the rotten couple of weeks now behind her. "Deal."

"EYES TO THE CENTER RING, FOLKS! THE NEXT MATCH BEGINS SOON!" Boomed the voice of Present Mic, making both teenagers startle and flinch from the pain in their now ringing
"Fucks sake, can he not!?” Jiro hissed, palms shoving into her ears.

"I keep wondering that myself…" Murmured Deku, rubbing at his own screaming ears.

It always surprised her when his hearing caused him pain. That bag of tricks he had at his disposal was not without its hidden problems. Problems that… She bit her lower lip, a knot forming in her stomach. Memories stirring up like old, rotting bones to make her queasy. "Hey… Green?” When he turned to her, mismatched eyes wide and wondering, she felt a pang of guilt. The question she was about to ask was probably not one he ever wanted to answer. But she had to know. "What does it feel like?" her voice was quiet, like that of a frightened child trying to lie to someone who obviously knew the truth. "Being what you are?"

For the first time since she'd met him, he looked genuinely conflicted. Touched, hurt, like he wanted to hug her before running away to scream into the sun.

After a little more hesitation, he spoke."...you really wanna know?" When she nodded, he deflated letting out a long, tense breath. "It's um... " his eyes flitted away, throat gulping. "It's like being on fire." Her eyes fluttered, taken aback by the harshness of that declaration. "My mind, it… I still…” a palm dug into his forehead, right at the center of his brow. That look of pain on his face twisted a knife in her chest.

He wasn't even done talking yet. "When I wake up, it's like I get to feel human again for one second." the hand at his side clenched into a fist. "Then my body reminds me that's wrong. I'm not human anymore…” and the knife in her chest became a sword. "But in my head..." his eyes winced shut. "I can't shake it. It's like some part of me knows what I am. What I should be and it just won't-" He felt her hand gripping his before she realized she'd reached out to him.

Blinking, utterly confused, he turned back to her. "...Jiro?" Wait, why did she look she was about to cry? A question his brain had no time to find an answer to before she hugged him.

Getting into fights was no longer as horrendous as it had been. Having removed her problematic hair from the equation, Jiro had at least that much working for her. Granted her physique was never the best suited for brawling but she never had a choice when it came to these fights. When running didn't work, when you got cornered by four people who would probably love to see you die and pain was inevitable you tend to worry less about your body type and more about where you hit the enemy.

Of course, this would have been so much simpler if she could just use her quirk but that would likely get her expelled. The fights alone should have been grounds for expulsion of the bullies she faced but the teachers, as every bullying victim knows, either could or would do nothing about it. The year was rapidly approaching a close, tests were breathing down her neck, but she didn't care.

She wasn't alone anymore. She hadn't been for a while.

At the sound of the closing bell, Jiro was out the door like a streak of lightning. Unlike every school year prior to this one, she had friends waiting for her. Reaching the main parking lot with a happy smirk she waved to K and Toga. Both of them seemed excited to see her, K pocketing that relic -her silly little 'Zune'- with the biggest smile on her face. "Sup?"

"Same as you, lil ducklin." Toga said, unwrapping and then sticking a lollipop into her mouth.
K and Jiro rolled their eyes at her, shaking their heads in bemusement. Toga and her penchant for nicknames... "Still making up our minds about what to do," said K, "have you got any ideas?"

A dark, obnoxious and sinister chuckle made them freeze. "I got one." As the trio turned to face their least favorite students Jiro was hit in the face with a soccer ball. "How about 'run home crying to mommy'?”

While K helped Jiro back to her feet, blood dripping from her nose and lip, Toga glared at the three boys approaching them. "Izzat the best taunt you could come up with? Really?" then she cackled. "Wow, kudos to this school. Didn't realize lobotomy patients were allowed to attend here. Let's give em all a round of applause." And she started slowly clapping, a wicked smile spread across her lips while their antagonists seethed with anger.

Wiping the blood from her face, trickling from her split lip and nose, Jiro and K exchanged a nod. Just like always... "Go easy on em, Toga," Jiro quipped, "I know they look our age, but these guys are actually just toddlers with gland problems."

A blood vessel on the largest boy's head threatened to explode. "Do you want to die?" he hissed through clenched teeth.

"Why?" K devilishly smirked, "planning on killing us with your bad breath? You boys know that toothpaste isn't for decorating the bathroom, right?"

One line too far. The largest boy's anger snapped, "I know you're little secret." and he smiled like a man unhinged. "See, my dad works at the hospital," Jiro's heart skipped a beat, a sadistic smile spread on the bully's face, "He brought me into his work a while ago, got to talking about a patient. One with purple hair?" For a brief moment, as it hadn't in any real capacity for months now, she felt fear seeping into her from the cold air. "I know more than just your secret... you little freak."

For a moment the world was eerily silent. A gust of wind went through the parking lot, tousling their hair And K charged in, her friends not far behind. Like every other tussle did these days, it ended with the boys being handily defeated. Limping away to lick their wounds for the next time they tried something like that.

"Have fun replacing those teeth!" K screamed after them. "Just so you know: the tooth fairy isn't real!"

"FUCK YOU!"

"Not even in your lonely, pathetic dreams!"

"K..." Jiro's hand on her shoulder, along with her near lifeless tone, forced her to calm down. "Stop." As the redhead turned around she saw the tears streaming down Jiro's face, her shoulders shaking. "just..." and K hugged her, Toga following suit. They stood there in silence for a long time.

Eventually, as it was with silence, someone found just the words to break it with. "Hey." K backed away, placing a hand on Jiro's cheek, fingers under her chin upturning her face. "wanna know something about me I wish I could change?" Jiro, after some deliberation nodded. Toga just squeezed her tighter, face burrowed into her neck at the hairline. "My name is... it's Kenji." Jiro thought she might cry again. She still hadn't- "It's a bitch trying to get your name changed without your parents consent."

If her heart hadn't been reduced to shambles before then, it had now. "K..."
K held up a silencing finger. "It's nothing." She gave a smile so warm it could have melted ice. "It's just a label, and labels are for idiots who don't care enough to see the reality of what's in front of them. They just wanna box it up and not think about it." she giggled, "so names don't matter. It's the heart of those that own them that do." She took Jiro's hand, "come on, let's go get some food."

Walking hand in hand with K and Toga, Jiro felt a little better. She was able to stop sniffling before long. When they finally arrived at the sweet shop -Toga's suggestion- K walked off to the restroom. "Not what ya expected, is she?"

Jiro blinked, turning to look at Toga. For once, her manic demeanor had been replaced with something calm, thoughtful. "No." Admitted she, fussing at her eye. "No, she isn't."

Toga nodded. "She wasn't to me either." she fiddled idly with the ice-cream in front of her. "When I heard she had depression, and that other thing goin on," they didn't mention that out loud. Not when people could over hear them, "I figured 'ey, this one is gonna be a bundle of joy...', cuz most folks with depression?" She pointed her spoon at Jiro, "well they're kinda lifeless. Mostly cuz they just don't... want to keep goin, ya know?"

Toga smiled a lopsided frown, shifting her head to one side while a shoulder rose up almost to her cheek. Casting a sidelong glance at the floor she went on. "If ya throw a depressed person into the ocean, and they realize they're gonna drown, there's no sense of panic. No streak of fear that kicks in, tellin em that it's do or die. So, knowin that, I kinda figured K was just some idiot who didn't know what she was. A sad sap lookin for a way to fix 'the unhappy' with some hormones or somethin."

Jiro flinched, fussing with the hem of her skirt, her innards in knots.

"But... she obviously wasn't." The smile on Toga's face was serene, affectionate. "Girl's got spunk, life to her that won't be ignored in spite of a brain that hates her." Then, her usual self came rushing back, flashing a crocodile smile right at Jiro. "Ain't that fuckin badass?"

That... was Toga... It wasn't just K she was talking about, was it? At that, Jiro couldn't help but laugh, flattered as could be. "You know what, yeah. It's badass." She gave Toga a very appreciative smile. "Thanks, Himiko."

"Anytime, Kyoka gurl."

A few moments later and K had come back, "Hey," she smiled, happy to see her friend had cheered up. "I knew Toga had the right idea with this place." She took her seat and scooched up to them. "What were you talking about?"

Toga shrugged, "Oh ya know, just some stuff." She and Jiro shared a quick, knowing look and set about eating their treats. Over the course of their desert, Jiro couldn't help but steal glances at K. It was strange, but... it wasn't often that you found a friend who turned out to be your role model.

Thanks to Toga, and K's prior actions, Jiro was starting to feel lucky realizing that this was the case.

Forcing his face away from her, it took every fiber of self control he had not to bite her right there and then as she hugged him. But she obviously needed that hug. So he clasped his jaw tight and wrapped his arms around her for as long as he could. Eventually, of course, it got to be too much. His heart hammer, temperature through the roof, straining to keep his voice quiet, he hissed as he put shaking hands on her shoulders.
"Um, ah-" why did thinking have to be so hard? "fangs!" he went with that as his pleading warning, and he would almost instantly come to regret it.

Understanding what he meant she moved away quickly. Her arm snared in his underarm, yanking him awkwardly closer to her for a moment. His face brushed against hers, their cheeks flushing bright as they made contact. Her chin glanced off his forehead moments before his face squished right into her sternum; and everything in that vicinity. Then they rocketed away from each other. She let out a mortified squeal while he did very much the same, a flurry of apologies spilling from his brain.

"I- that- I'm so sorry! I didn't-"

"Me too!" She interrupted, her face just as violently red as his. "That was a complete accident!"

Stammering, his every word was a single, uninterrupted train of thought. "Of course! I never would have assumed otherwise! I know you're not like that at all!" He was deathly afraid of offending her in this moment. He probably could have thrown her from end of the stadium to the next, but for whatever reason the fear was perfectly logical in his brain.

Blushing furiously, she turned away to stare at the floor. Hiding behind a hand placed strategically at the side of her face, she fiddled with her hair. "Holy hell today has been a trip…" she breathed, after clearing her throat.

"It uh…" Then it was his turn to clear what vocal chords he had. "Could be less of one, yeah." She could feel the heat radiating from his face.

It did not help her calm down. "You're overreacting…" she hushed, once again hiding her face behind her knees.

He couldn't even look at her as he replied. "Believe me, I am trying to refocus my brain." Never again would he think of her as 'flat chested'. Something he wished had been more of a decision on his part than it was.

She peered at him, like a cornered cat afraid of a stranger. By god that boy was embarrassed. The meekness his face held seemed such a paradox in the face considering what they both he was. Then her eyes turned to their friends, who were suspiciously, entirely unaware of them. "...Do you think they noticed?"

"...I don't know." he sighed. "It wouldn't surprise me if people in space noticed." Now he was hiding behind his knees, "I'm really sorry…"

Shoulders deflating, forehead jamming into her knees, she let out a long breath. "It's fine. I should probably just be glad it wasn't some total pervert who just…" she couldn't. "Y- you get the idea."

His reply was a single word. "Yep." spoken at a pitch higher than she would have credited his vocal chords of being able to reach. In truth, they'd likely look back at this moment and laugh. Before, once again, blushing half to death. Why couldn't things ever be normal when they interacted?

"AND HERE WE GO!" They both yelped, hands slamming over their ears as Present Mic screamed. "LET THE NEXT BATTLE START!"

Deku leaned forward, eager to see Todoroki's quirk in action again. His notebook seemed to just appear in his hands and he flexed his wrist. This was the first chance he'd had in a while to actually study his classmates quirks. Hell, it was the first time he'd been able to observe quirks from
students outside the school. Considering what he'd heard about Shishikura, this was going to be quite the match. If Todoroki could keep his quirk away, he'd just have to-

The fight was already over. Todoroki had almost instantly frozen the poor boy with a simple scuffle of his right foot, shooting ice along the ground. From there it climbed up Shishikura's legs and turned him into a statue before he made his first move.

For a moment the stadium was silent. At the sight of nothing happening, Present Mic declared the winner. "AND TODOROKI WINS BY AN AVALANCHE!" The crowd, perhaps more sedately than ever, applauded. "SOMEONE GET SHISHIKURA THAWED OUT! HE MIGHT WANNA WATCH OUR NEXT FIGHT," here was the announcement that had her mind anywhere but here... "BAKUGO VS JIRO!"

Deku blinked, gulping down a sudden bout of nerves. "That was... abrupt."

"Tell me about it." Jiro breathed, watching Todoroki stalk away with weary eyes as reality settled in: she was up next.

She had to fight Bakugo. Admittedly, she'd wanted to beat the stuffing out of him since they'd encountered each other outside the lunchroom. But now, now her innards were all in knots. A queasiness had spread from her stomach and almost to her legs. Reality was here, and it had billions of eyes watching her. Still, she refused to back down now.

Standing up, fists clenched, she steeled herself. "Guess I'd better get to the waiting area..." Deku looked at her with those wide, puppy eyes and she couldn't help but smirk. "Wish me luck."

He nodded. "You can do it, Jiro." He smiled, giving a thumbs up. "Good luck."

Mina thrust her fist into the air, "You've got this, Jiro!"

Kaminari gave her that reassuring smile of his. "Go get em, lady."

"Plus ultra!" Kirishima cheered. "May the best-" wait... he couldn't say 'man' there... "uh... Hero win!"

Taking in a deep breath, Jiro started walking. The stadium's halls felt oppressively dark, cramped. In the midday heat she started sweating. There were only a few minutes before the match would start, but it felt like hours before she reached the waiting area. Heart thudding in her chest, wiping sweat from her brow she did everything she could to keep her mind locked on the present. Whatever form of catharsis she wanted from fighting Bakugo wasn't the point here. This was about proving her mettle as a hero. Kicking Bakugo in the tail was just a bonus, however personal this was.

"Hey." She looked up and saw Todoroki, walking past her. "Good luck. You're going to need it."

"...thanks." she muttered, before opening the door to the waiting area with more force than intended. She walked to the water fountain and splashed water on her face, taking a long drink.

She had this, she could do this. This wasn't new, she'd fought actual villains and won. So why was her heart pounding? Why was she so worked up? Why couldn't she stop thinking about-

...no. No that wasn't new. There wasn't a day that went by where those few months didn't haunt her as surely as the present. Today it was just impossible to deny. Bakugo was scum, but she hated him for personal reasons, reasons he had nothing to do with directly.
But he was just like those bastards, and he'd made Midoriya go through what she had for a decade. Worse than that, he'd been alone from start to finish and it showed. His awkwardness, that nervous lilt in his voice when he talked, how he couldn't take praise without turning into a blushing, stuttering mess. The way he didn't even seem angry about half his fucking face being disfigured. Bakugo deserved a beating and then some, but... could she actually deliver? he was insanely gifted. His quirk was enough to at least challenge Midoriya if not outright surpass him through power alone. Did she really have a chance at this?

"GET READY FOLKS! IT'S ABOUT TO BEGIN!"

Jiro took another deep breath, utterly failing to calm her heart. Fists clenched she started walking toward the door, then to the ring. She reached to her pocket, hoping to squeeze that old Zune for good luck but, of course, it wasn't there. Growling at her stupidity she remembered that it was probably long gone. If she could have remembered where it was- she slapped both sides of her face. Focus, Kyoka! And then she was at her edge of the ring, staring down Bakugo. Cold confidence and blood lust shone in his eyes. Like some beast staring down a lamb.

That was not how reality would play out, those were not there respective roles. She reused to allow it.

"LET THIS MATCH..." She braced herself as best she could. "BEGIN!"

Neither of them seemed willing to take that first step forward. The hesitation that slowed their footsteps as they made that first approach sent a wave of worry through the audience. Something in the air, tangible as the humidity, made it known that this would no simple brawl between the heroes of tomorrow. Eyes locked on one another broadcast the personal nature of this bout. Bakugo was wary, cautiously approaching the center of the ring.

With every step forward her emotions climbed. Fear, resentment, displaced anger and blame, guilt from years passed. As her emotions rose, her footsteps hastened until she was running right at him. Her charge was met with an outstretched palm; an explosion tearing the air between them with deafening heat. Yet she muscled through it. Arms crossed in front of her eyes, ignoring the ringing in her ears she lashed out with her earlobes.

Nothing but air.

Bakugo had seen it coming and dodged. A growl escaped her throat, the lower corner of his eye twitched. Palm raised he let another explosion free. His quirk had one drawback in close quarters like this: it obscured his vision for all too precious seconds of time. Seconds she used to get right up next to him. Cursing under his breath he used his quirk to propel himself away from her. She yelped, hissing in pain and clutching at her ringing ears. This was his chance! He raised his hand, she expected him to blow her away and braced herself, arms right in front of her face.

Only nothing happened. She looked up, confused. There he was, eye twitching, raised and readied palm shaking. His expression was locked in place, fiery determination mingled with fear. Fear of what?

"GET HIM, JIRO!" Above the din of the crowd she made out Ashido's voice. "HE'S A DEER IN HEADLIGHTS!"

"KNOCK HIS TEETH OUT, JIRO GIRL!" For once, Camie's voice didn't make her nauseous.

All the reminder he needed to do something other than stand there. The explosion he unleashed did nothing more than singe her skin and gym clothes. This was a far cry from what he was capable of.
Her eyes narrowed, cursing under her breath as she once again failed to jab him with her earlobes. Then it was Kaminari's turn to cut through the noise. "KICK HIS ASS, LADY!" Why was Bakugo hesitating?

His last retreat had sent him flying, and he'd landed some distance away. Adjusting her tactics she charged again, waiting for the moment he tried to defend himself. When it came, and the explosion came roaring forth, she lowered herself almost prone. Earlobe stabbing into the ground she tore the surface of the arena apart, turning the ground beneath Bakugo's feet to loose rocks and sand.

While he flailed to correct his footing, sinking into the ground, she used her earlobe and fingers to send debris at his eyes. A choice of attack that had Akaguro silently hoping Bakugo would end up with a damaged eye, for karma's sake. Her choice paid off. While the walking warhead sputtered, clawing at his blinded eyes, she rushed in. Earlobes jutting forth she sought to spear at his ribs, if she didn't knock him out she would stun him long enough to land the real deciding blow.

Only it didn't happen.

Bakugo had sensed her approach, instincts kicking in. Fear and adrenaline fueling his actions he lashed out with both hands and set off a deafening attack. She screamed. Ringing in her ears rocked the very foundation of her skull, a searing pain in her ribs and arms sizzled with burned skin as she dragged along the ground.

It was a monday, just after the weekend following that last violent encounter with those bullies. Something was wrong. School had gone by completely without event. No one approached her, not her usual antagonists, neither of her friends, no one. It was enough to fill the air with a sense of foreboding. In the midst of her final class her eyes drifted to the clock. Still another ten minutes to go. What was wrong? Where were they? Why did the air have to be so thick? She couldn't focus on the lesson. She just wanted to get up and find K and Himiko. But that was silly. Nothing was wrong, it was probably just some project or something. School getting in the way of things. Midterms were approaching after all. Yeah, that was all it was.

At the sound of the bell her book slammed shut and she was out the door. Worming her way through the crowded hall, she reached her locker and dropped off her things. Only something caught her eye. There was... an envelope in her locker, sitting square in the middle of her belongings. It was unmarked, unlabeled. Picking it up, she found it was heavier than if paper was left inside it. Something plastic, with mild heft slid to her fingertips as she turned it over, finding no writing on the other side either. As she closed her locker in confusion she jumped. Hiding behind the door was the bully, his face covered in bruises and lips twisted into a malicious smile. She leapt away, braced for combat but it never started.

"Feeling lonely?" His tone dripped of venom. "Heading home by yourself this time?" There was a look in his eyes, something beyond his usual sadism, hatred. Something that pit a nauseous pit in her stomach. "What of it?"

He snickered maliciously, "Oh... I see." he started limping away. "Nevermind. Have fun."

As he drifted away, she felt something wash over her. Panic. Why wasn't he attacking? Why was he talking like that to begin with? Turning toward the exit she broke into a run. The world was nothing but black and white, her footsteps clattering in distant echoes made up the only sounds she heard. No one was waiting for her outside. Not in the town. Not at their usual hideouts. Neither answered their phones. She tore open the door to her home, chest heaving with breath. The last
place to check, the last place they might have been waiting that she knew of.

All she saw was her mom, a look of devastation on her face. "Sweetie..." her voice was as dead as her face looked.

Jiro's breathing hastened. "Mom..." she felt a pang in her chest, anxiety from some mood she couldn't make sense of. It had to be unfounded. It had to be teenage hormones riling up nothing into melodrama, it had to be. "I- have you heard from K or Himiko?"

Her mother winced, eyes closed for a moment she breathed in slowly, bracing herself. "I just got a call from the school..." Jiro's heart sank, and all warmth faded from her skin. "Please... you should sit down..." No... No no no no no no no no no no no no no!

"Your friend K... she's... something happened..."

Underestimating Bakugo. Not a mistake she anticipated making. She clutched her singed, bleeding ribs while her hearing returned very slowly to normal. Every sound was dim, fuzzy. Her equilibrium completely thrown off, it was disorienting to hear the world like this: through an ocean of cotton, her understanding of her surroundings faint.

She'd never relied much on her eyes to observe the world, not when her ears told her everything they couldn't see. How a person's heartbeat quickened when they were afraid, the sound sweat made when it sprouted, the creaking of muscles and bones moments before someone sprang to action. The echoes of enclosed spaces, broadcasting where things were in a dark room. The way sounds moved like ocean currents, branching and splitting around objects in their paths.

Perfect vision was nothing compared to that, and it was what she had to work with at this moment.

Of course, her opponent wasn't faring much better. While she hadn't made contact with his ribs, Bakugo's eyes were struggling and his ankle was almost useless. He was lying on the ground, clutching his screaming limb, eyes watering and turning the dirt on his face to trace amounts of mud.

It was a dizzy climb back to their feet, made with swaying staggers as they stared each other down.

Once upright, her eyes gave her something her ears never could. As Bakugo struggled to stand, she saw they'd reversed positions on the field. He was standing with his back to the seats where 1A had gathered. His palm outstretched and waiting to defend himself, propped up by one good leg, was shrouded by the far away face almost directly above him. The scarred, mismatched face of his former childhood friend. That determined fear on his face was all but gone, his eyes fixed on her burned ribs. The usually colorful pallor of his face had gone painfully pale. In a brief moment, she connected the dots, realizing what he was as a moment from weeks ago echoed in her memories.

Thirteen faltered for a moment, "True..." Clearing her throat, she spoke louder this time, "However, considering the destructive nature of my quirk, if I were to make a mistake it could easily kill someone." The mood of the class dropped from enthusiastic to grim apprehension in mere seconds. "I've no doubt there are some among with similar abilities." Unseen by most, Bakugo raised an upturned palm, and gazed at his hand before clenching it softly.

So this was what he really was. Not some belligerent, unfeeling brute but a childish boy who'd never once stopped to consider the consequences of his actions. Either because he hadn't wanted to or never had to and thus didn't know that he should. Her fists clenched, nails embedding themselves in her palms.
"God damn you..." her rage, seething contempt for him was wavering in conflict. "You idiot!"

She charged right at him, the look of momentary confusion he wore replaced by that now familiar fearful resolve. He was immobile, his fear overwhelming his hesitance enough to put some more oomph back into his quirk. The blast rocked her body, rattling her even further. Pockets of reality and memory flashed interchanging in her wavering consciousness and she forgot to use her quirk when she punched him in blind fury.

For brief moments she wasn't fighting Bakugo, she was fighting him. Years ago, in the rain, after running for hours, tracking him down and screaming with impotent fury and grief. They traded hit for hit in the past, fist for explosion in the present. Both her opponents were disoriented, staggered by the force at which she'd hit them. Somehow, by either throw or the searing fire of the blond's quirk, she was hurled onto the ground. Her body twisted, launching herself at an unprepared enemy. Her hands grabbed his collar, missing his throat by millimeters and her earlobes lashed out. She'd struck true, and both versions of reality blended together. In her memories she screamed, in reality she didn't have the strength. Do you feel that!? In either case, her enemies had felt fear looking at her in stunned terror as their bodies were rendered helpless by her quirk. That insane fear making you want to puke!? Making you want to run for you life!? Her teeth grit, world spinning around her from pain and emotional whirlwind. That's something she never got to feel! Every day she was alive, every day she made herself deal with this stupid, fucked up world was a march through hell you will never understand! Both boys threatened to black out, as well as both versions of herself. You stole that from her! Stole her effort away to fight through a pain she was born drowning in!

Hands moved to her wrists, and she hauled their owners forward, pulling them both off their feet. Tears streaming down her face, her lips moved, past and present in unison. "Take it back! Take back what you did, god damn you!"

It was here that reality and memory split apart. Where the bully had looked at her with broken eyes, Bakugo raised his hand and retaliated. She was sent flying, slamming into the ground face first as the world threatened to go black.

They stood there, in the rain. One with his back to a brick wall, the other poised to break his body where he stood. Neither could speak, neither could move. She stood there, defiant and triumphant in their battle, but broken and alone. He fared no better. For whatever reason, those stooges that followed him about were gone. No longer by his side. His hands loosely held her wrists, not trying to hurt her in the least as rain and tears streamed down her face.

"...I can't."

She started shaking, quivering, guilt, grief, anger, pain. It all made her body tremble as though she might come apart. With a disgusted heartbroken wail she threw him to the ground, his battered form splashing in the puddled sidewalk. When he looked up to say something, she'd already started away.

The rain and wind tore at her. Her slender form was little more than a toothpick flying through a typhoon that raged around her. All she could do was run, keep moving against the weight of this horrid world. When the door to her home tore open, her shoes flying off, she ignored her mother and father's worry on her way to her room. Door slammed and locked, drenched as she was, she dove into the covers of her bed and gripped her pillow like it were her only anchor to the earth as she sobbed into it. Sleep overtook her exhausted body, and nightmares plagued her restless slumber.
At the end of them all, she was alone, clutching what remained of her friends. She'd lost one of the most important people she'd ever met. Someone she looked up to, who's example she desperately wanted to follow. But... her example had led her to... No, don't think of her like that. She climbed out of bed as reluctantly as could be, but something needed doing.

Himiko had yet to reply, to say anything to her. Awaking early the next day, she found she still hadn't said anything. No calls back, no texts. Not even bothering to change her clothes or get ready for the day she trudged off to school. If Himiko was there she needed to know. No one else would tell her. As far as Jiro knew, Himiko had no parents to speak of. So it was on her to pass the message along.

No one at school dared to speak to her, to approach. Her appearance was outright dreadful. Face bruised and bloodied, lips cracked and dried, eyes black, hair ruffled and messy, clothes much the same. She made a brief stop by her locker to collect her hoodie and claw into it. Some stupid scrap of paper, something plastic too, crumpled in her hoodie's pocket. Whatever, not important. After that she went to Himiko's locker and waited.

She didn't have to wait very long before the superintendent, the guidance councilor and principal were all looming over her. "What?" she snapped.

"You're coming with us."

She rolled her eyes. "I'm busy."

One of the grabbed her shoulder and started hauling her away. "Not any more."

For twenty agonizing minutes she sat alone in the faculty meeting room. Staring at the floor in silence. Eventually, the three staff members she'd had the encounter with arrived, followed closely by several others. Her parents, worried sick, the now lone bully and his father. What followed was about far from anything dignified as an official discussion with the school could have been. Late last night, the bully had wandered home and his father had asked no end of questions. Their discussion led the fact that Jiro had attacked him but little else. His father called the school the next morning, and now here they were.

"What do you have to say for yourself, Jiro?" Her hands clenched into fists, a numb rage boiling over inside her. "How can you possibly justify this kind of violent behavior?"

She wanted to scream, to lash out and smash the building into dust. When she opened her mouth to speak, she was surprised by the voice that filled the room. "Are you fucking kidding me?!" Blinking, dumbfounded, she and all others in the room turned toward her mother, bristling with anger. "This!? This is what we're doing now?!

"This brute and his stooges antagonize my little girl, beating her to a pulp for how long, and it's only after he drives her friend to the edge, pushes so hard the unspeakable happens that you come together against her!?

"She waved her arm to the side, slicing through the air in declarative defiance. "NO! If you want to know where to direct that hostility," she pointed right at the bully, "direct it at him! Hold him accountable for his despicable behavior!"

When the staff failed to say anything, when all they could was stare at her, Jiro's father stepped up. "Well? How about it? It sounds perfectly reasonable to me."

Licking his upper lip, tongue scraping against his top teeth, the principal's upper lip twitched in a barely contained snarl. "This is the first we've heard-"
"Bullshit." Now everyone was staring at the bully, his dead, vacant eyes locked on Jiro's mother's.
"She's telling the truth." His voice was like that of a zombie, barely holding any life in it at all.
"It's... all true." His face turned toward the floor. "I'm the one at fault. Have been the entire time."

The room was silent, air heavy with the weight of all too obvious decision that now had to be made. "Children," said the superintendent, voice laden with defeat. "wait outside..."

Outside the room neither of them could hear what was being said. But it was all to obvious now, how this was going to play out. As she slumped against the wall, she once again felt the paper in her pocket. Pulling it into view, she recognized the unmarked envelope. Hesitating for a moment, she slowly tore it open. Housed inside was a relic of an MP3 player. Inscribed on the back, was a simple phrase: When the world gets you down, just play a song and give it space. -K.H.

"It wont take anything back." She looked up, drawing her legs up, her knees close to her face. She was sitting, curled up in a ball against the wall now, hugging her legs up to her face. He... just slumped, facing the ceiling and sprawled out across half the hall. "For what it's worth... I'm-

"Don't." Her face shoved behind her knees. "Just don't..." It was finally drawing to a close. The bullying, the fighting, all of it. But that didn't change that she was alone all over again. That this had still played out as badly as it possibly could have in every other way.

He respected her wish, eyes still staring into the tiles above. "What are you gonna do now?" Her body tensed, holding herself as tightly as she could. "Once I'm gone... well, this place will probably be a lot better for you. But I can't say I'd be surprised if you left anyways." She felt herself relax a fraction, realizing that now she had a decision of her own to make. "What's your way forward, girly?"

And the brute finally called her something other than freak. "Do you know who I lost?"

"Your best friend."

"Wrong." When he turned to look at her, he found a fire burning in her eyes as she stared right back at him. "I just lost my hero."

His body seemed to shrink, if that was even possible for him to do any further. "So the world's lost someone that important. That special..." listlessly, he turned back toward the ceiling. "Are you going where I think you are with this?"

Hesitation stalled her reply, the answer she was already determined to make reality. Fist clenched by her side, she caught her breath and found her voice. Beaten, bloody and disheveled as she was, her answer rang forth like a bell through a still morning. "I'm going to be what she was meant to be from the beginning."

Her fist hit the earth, her shaking body pushing itself harder than she ever remembered doing. Sweat dripped off her face, blood from her wounds and she hauled her shaking form upright. Staring down Bakugo, the warhead looked about ready to blow a gasket he was angry and confused, she recalled the words that brought her here. The words she would live the rest of her life to fulfill.

I am going to be a hero.

Her feet started running, body preparing to launch itself at her opponent, even as he snarled at her. "You think you have any right to say that to me!?" Ignoring the pain in his screaming ankle, he
frothed at the mouth as his hands splayed out behind him. "YOU'RE NOT THE ONE WHO FUCKED UP LIKE ME!"

The cascade of explosions he unleashed sent him at her like a projectile. His body curled and twisted in the air, his right hand poised to deliver a one-hand-knock out of an attack.

So he's human after all...

Her earlobes went to her hands, taken between her fingers in a vice-like grip. She had a plan of attack, one that was far riskier than any from before. Considering how battered she already was, it was do or die time: risk was part of the part of the game no matter what, all she could do was embrace it. "You have no idea how wrong that is..."

Back then... she'd been so focused on her own crap that she hadn't bothered looking to anyone else's suffering. To actually take care of her friends. Kyoka Jiro would never make that mistake again if she could help it. With that thought fueling her muscles, she lanced her hands and earlobes out toward Bakugo's palm. Rather than jabbing his undefended flesh, she brought the metal of her earphone-jacks crashing together.

As Bakugo unleashed the mother of all explosions, the resulting onslaught of sound amplified and deflected it. Bursting forth from the ring was a wave of wind and dust so strong it pushed everyone into the backs of their seats. Microphones blew out, cameras were spun around and the stadium was shrouded in a cloud of dirt.

No one could see how it had ended.

"JIRO!" Deku leapt forward, his hands catching the railing of 1A's private section of the stadium, allowing him to lean over it and closer to the arena. By his side were Kaminari, Yaoyorozu and Ashido, frantic to see what had happened.

"Is she okay?" Ashido brought a hand to her mouth, shoving it against her lips.

"I don't know..." Yayorozu worried, "can anyone see anything through this?"

Kaminari narrowed his eyes, trying to see through the cloud. "Rrrgh!" he growled in frustration, his and Ashido's hands gripping each other on the railing. "Where's... Wind... Guy when you need him!? I can't see anything!"

Deku waited with baited breath for the dust to clear. Slowly, like a curtain unveiling for the final act of a play, it split enough to see the area. Bakugo was lying outside it, dazed and groaning, clutching his useless ankle, but Jiro...

"I DON'T BELIEVE IT FOLKS!" She was lying motionless at the center of the ring in tatters. "THIS MATCH IS A TIE!" Present Mic announced with uncontrolled excitement. "BOTH CONTENDERS ARE OUT OF THE RUNNING!"

"WHAT!?!?" Deku screamed, as the audience erupted in mixed cheers and booing.

Ashido growled in petulant frustration, stamping one of her feet. "That's so stupid!" She threw her hands to her sides, yanking Kaminari's hand -along with him- to her in the process. Bodies leaning against each other, they both blushed bright red before inching apart. Meanwhile, robot medics had arrived with stretchers, carting the fallen students away to see recovery girl.

Deku fell back into his seat, completely disheartened. What kind of ruling was that? Just because the rule was 'whoever was knocked out of the ring or could no longer stand would lose' didn't
mean it had to apply to both of them! She'd come so far... He buried his face into his hands, leaning forward.

"Nothing sparks a memorable event like a good outrage." Akaguro sneered. "I think I might actually be sick..." and he stood up, hands shoving into his pockets as he stomped away to who knew where.

By Deku's side, Uraraka sighed. "I don't like how often he's had the right idea today." she pouted, arms crossed. "Jiro should've won that."

He wanted to say something, to agree with her but... a realization crossed his mind. There was a lesson here, one he'd learned a few too many times. "Sometimes... the best we can do isn't enough to win." For a moment, he saw Shigaraki's lifeless body on the ground in front of him. Fingers curled, digging into his palm, he gulped before he continued talking. "Sometimes what should happen just doesn't." Forlorn, he looked at the floor of their section.

Surprising him, Uraraka put a hand on his as she leaned toward him. "But that's why we're here!" He blushed furiously, jumping and leaning away from her as she got just a little too close to him. "We're going to be heroes aren't we?" Her resolution made way for a look of defeat. If you'd asked him right then, Deku would have said that such looks belonged no where on Uraraka's face. The fact that such a thought crossed his mind surprised him. "Aren't we supposed to stop things that shouldn't happen?"

He blinked, she failed to move her hand away from his. "Yeah..." She realized just how close the pair of them were and flushed beat red. Moving away from him, fingers fussing nervously at each other. "But a world without things that shouldn't happen, is a world that doesn't need heroes." For some reason, that sounded very familiar to him. "Just think of this one as a reason to fight harder against the next one that tries to stop us." Smiling, like she usually did, she nodded emphatically. "Now that's the Deku I know." She said through a closed eyed grin. Though after a moment, it faded and she looked toward the arena again. "Think someone should go make sure Jiro's okay?"

Ashido was the first to reply to that one. "Actually... Kami and Yaomomo kinda already went to do that." She held up her phone for the pair of them to see.

Jiro's in the waiting area she started in. She's not really taking this well. - And Ashido would save Kaminari to her contacts as "Kami" followed by a heart.

Deku and Uraraka frowned at the same time. "Poor Jiro..." She murmured. Unable to just there, Deku stood up, walking for the exit. "Deku?"

"I'll be right back." While Ashido and Uraraka looked after him, saying... something, he made his way toward the waiting area.

This entire event was playing out in a way he hadn't once suspected it would. Shiketsu's sudden appearance, the battle royale that followed, now... this. He'd expected chaos, heightened emotions, fighting for recognition against the best of his peers but not this sinking feeling in his gut. He hadn't expected him or his friends to win, to make it to the final stretch.

Or that failing to get there would hurt this much.

He was almost at the waiting area when he ran into Kaminari. "How is she?"

For a moment, the blond seemed uncertain as to what he should say. "She..." he sighed. "Go talk to her." He met Deku's gaze, something in his eyes pleading for him to oblige. "Yaoyorozu and I tried
but... I dunno." The blond slumped against the wall, hands in his pockets and staring at the floor.

In reply, Deku nodded. "I'm not sure I'll do much better." He rubbed at the back of his neck, "I'm not the best at 'peopleing'."

"Heh..." Kaminari chuckled mirthlessly, "trust me. You don't have to be." Before Deku could ask what he meant, the other boy clapped him on the back. "Go on."

Unsure what to think, uncertain what to feel, Deku just kept walking along. He felt... nervous, almost queasy for some reason. What was he supposed to do? Why was Kaminari-

...Wait. He stopped in his tracks, ears straining. Between the sounds echoing slightly in the corridor -the noise made by the crowd outside- he heard... singing?

"I never really feel quite right
And I don't know why, all I know is something's wrong
Every time I look at you, you seem so alive..."

That was Jiro... he almost hadn't recognized the voice. She sounded totally different, singing like that.

"Tell me how do you do it, walk me through it
I'll follow your every footstep

Maybe on your own you take a cautious step
Till you wanna give it up, but all I want,

Is for you to shine
Shine down on me
Shine on this life that's burning out..."

Why was she...? He shook his head, making his way toward the room she was hiding away in. His knuckles tapping on the door elicited a sharp gasp. "Jiro?" He mumbled, "It's me..." he heard rustling in the room, hesitation at any actual movement toward the door. "are you okay?" He heard her breathe, open her mouth and then close it; unable to find words to speak with. "... Do you want me to go?"

At his offer of space the door opened. The sight of her made him want to cry. Recovery girl had more or less healed her up, but that did nothing for the dirt and dried tears. Or the damage to her clothes. Jiro had since changed out of her UA gym shirt, mangled as it was, and was wearing a madras patterned shirt. Primarily black with red lines, some hints of white thrown into the pattern for good measure. She wasn't wearing the way she was supposed to. She'd tied it off at her midsection rather than using the buttons and rolled up the sleeves. "No."

Slowly, he stepped into the room with her. It wasn't much more than four walls and a few chairs, a water cooler and a sink thrown into the corner. When the door closed he turned toward her to say something but never got the chance. In a moment, her arms were around him, face buried against his chest. Reading the room, with as limited skill as he had, he determined it would be best not to deny the embrace. Instead, he put his mask back on and wrapped his arms around her. "How not okay are you?"

She laughed a solitary, breathy laugh. "A typically reductive inquiry, Green."

Tried though he did to resist, he smirked anyways. She'd just quoted Star Trek, something he wouldn't have expected from her. "Sorry, Spock."
Lightly, she smacked one of her fists against his shoulder. "Shut up..." the way she was shaking, she was likely laughing but it could have been crying.

When she finally backed away and he saw her face, it turned out to have been a bit of both. "That was... a pretty song," Said he, and she bashfully looked away. "I couldn't help but hear it."

Her eyes drifted back to his, hiding behind those sunglasses of his, but her face remained where it was. An idle hand ventured to the side of her head, fiddling with a few strands of her hair. "Have you ever heard it before?" He shook his head. "That's not surprising." Said she, taking a seat in one of the room's few chairs. "It's well over two hundred years old." Surprised, his eyes fluttered as he took the seat next to her, while she continued talking. "I heard it on my uhm..." pain, sadness, grief, old, old anger moved her face, flickering the expression there for a moment. "the Mp3 player. It was the first song on it that I listened to."

"So it's important to you..." an obvious bit of information, but more so than the next he inquired about. "I'm guessing it has something to do with... K.H.?" At the mention of the name she seemed to shrink. Shoulders slumping, eyebrow furrowed gloomily over closed eyes and a pained smile. He hadn't meant to hurt her, he hadn't wanted to. Yet the pain was there, and might not have been if he hadn't asked. "Nevermind..." he shook his head at himself, "I'm sorry, I- ... shouldn't have asked."

"It's fine..." her face turned toward the floor, eyes now open but face otherwise unchanged. She took a slow breath, in through her nose. "Yeah. It has a lot to do with her." She turned her face toward him, and he felt the weight of everything she'd yet to say, staring at him from behind her eyes. "I never really told you about myself, did I?"

It had only been two weeks, two weeks since their year at UA had started. From day one she'd known his story, to some extent. What history he and Bakugo shared, how he'd become a vampire, what growing up quirkless had been like. She'd never divulged her own history, told him the story that out her here on the same path as him. There, in the waiting area, while the world outside seemed content to be unaware of them and busy with its own dealings, she told him. There was only so much to tell, so many important details that bore true significance. But now he understood, or was starting to at least.

It's like being on fire... Was that the real reason she was looking out for him? Why she wanted to be his friend? It was all because of K... "I'm still not really sure what I'm doing..." Jiro's voice trailed on, "trying to make myself into a hero when... I don't even know if that's what she would have done." Her shoulders started shaking, tears dripping from her eyes and her palms flew up to her face, hiding her face from view. "But I don't know what else to do!" Between sobs, as his eyes widened, she managed a short couple of sentences more. "What are you supposed to do when your hero loses the same fight as you, the one you can never stop fighting?" Her voice filled the room, sobbing becoming utterly uncontrollable. "What am I supposed to do?"

Even as he hugged her, holding her as her body shook itself violently, he couldn't find an answer. He'd never had to ask that question before. But something about what she'd said...

The same fight...

It's like being on fire...

...

Oh...
He could only squeeze her tighter, hold on harder than he had been until the crying passed. Even then, her fingers clung to his shirt, face buried in his shoulder. Eventually, when the next fight was announced, they had to move apart. "I'm gonna..." she sniffled, "go hide for a bit longer." When she looked him in the eyes, he almost started crying himself. "I'll uh... meet you back at the seats, okay?"

He nodded, and together they left the room, before going their separate ways. Body almost entirely numb, though he knew not why, he started wandering back to his other friends. Just around the corner he saw Kaminari waiting, hands shoved into his pockets, staring at the floor. "...You heard everything, didn't you?"

The blond could only smile a sad little smile. "I already know the story..." he sighed, "heard most of it through rumors and the rest from her, back in middle school." He turned to look him in the eye, holding his gaze. "Keep it quiet yeah?" Then he shoved off from the wall, walking back the same way Deku was headed.

A knot in his stomach kept him from walking, kept him rooted to where he stood. "Kaminari?" The other boy stopped, turning around, an eyebrow raised. "When she said 'the same fight'..." he fought to raise his voice above the barest whisper, "did... did she mean...?"

Kaminari raised a hand, index finger raised and pushed to his lips, silently shushing him. "Before I even think about answering that..." he gave Deku a long, searching look, scrutinizing his every detail. "Does it really matter?" His fists clenched, stomach upturned, going even further into a bunch of knots. He couldn't look at Kaminari anymore, even as he kept talking. "Would knowing change anything? Like how you feel about her?"

"I... have no idea how I feel about her. But..." Slowly an answer came to him, his hands unclenched, stomach settled and air left his lungs. "...No. It wouldn't change anything." His eyes went back to his friend, seeing him smiling with approval. "She's Jiro, my friend. Nothing's gonna change that."

And so the blond smiled, almost grinned really. "Good." Turning away he kept walking back to the others. "For what it's worth, I'm glad I can call you 'friend'... Green."

Deku couldn't help but smile. "You too." When Kaminari was out of sight he slumped against the wall and took a long, deep breath. What a day... Wringing his fingers through his hair, pushing them at his scalp, he shoved off from the wall and started walking back to his awaiting friends.

There was still the rest of the festival to get through yet...

"When you looked through me,

you really knew me,

like no one else ever looked before..."
"He's your oldest and your best friend...
if you need him, he'll be there again..."

Answering a call for help was standard fair for any hero. Running to the aid of someone you might not reach in time to save, arriving just in time to watch them die... all too often did things like this transpire too. Getting the call, hearing the screaming, begging pleading for their lives, it reminded him that he was just a man. There was only so much one could do, even with such gifts as his, to quell the suffering of innocents. By the time he'd arrived at the scene, it was long over.

This was someone's home. He stood there breathing, chest heaving up and down. A cold clammy sweat had started down, past his wide open eyes. Shock had overtaken his nerves, his mind. Blood caked the room. Ceilings, walls, the chairs, the table, all were splashed in the still warm fluid. Fingers lay scattered on the floor, a hunk of bone and flesh was centered in a puddle of red. Someone's torso, legs still attached, lay against a wall, torn open. The head was attached by what remained of their neck, half their face torn away and revealing the bones beneath. Hidden behind the couch was a much smaller body, its little hand resting over the head of a bloodied teddy bear.

He lurched away. Metal mask torn from his face he vomited over the railing into the street below. Gasping for breath, chest still heaving he shuddered and gagged. "What kind of-" he had to gulp back what tried to evacuate his stomach. "It couldn't have been human!"

"Are you indeed so certain, Ingenium?" Wiping the vomit from his lips, Tensei Iida looked up to see her, in all her black and red splendor.

Vanessa Valentine, he'd never had the opportunity to work with her. They'd all heard the stories, how she'd appeared one day, Eraser Head vying to see her established as a professional hero. The foreigner with unbelievable strength. When she'd first arrived on the scene it was only a few years into his career as a hero. Aizawa had dodged every question he'd asked, told him nothing he'd wanted to know about her or why he wanted her in this profession. Only he and someone called 'The Nameless One' seemed to have any idea what she was doing working as a hero.

Not many knew about Valentine, most that did were suspicious of her at best. Tensei Iida was one such person.

Right now he was just thankful she was here, and that was a first. "Look at them..." he breathed, trying and failing to do so himself. "There's... there's nothing left. Just... parts." His stomach churned, queasy as if he'd eaten sour milk. She on the hand, looked right into the face of it. Horrible as it was, there was not a trace of the disgust she felt worn upon her face. She walked to the center of the apartment, taking in the sight and rancid smells. "Have you been to the other apartments in the building?" Her eyes were locked on the body hidden behind the couch, her tone as lifeless as what now surrounded her.

"No," Ingenium replied, "I haven't."

Valentine pointed to something, hidden from view in another room. "They smashed through the wall, going into the next one over too."

The engine hero felt his heart -and stomach- sink. "What do you see in there?"
She turned and looked at him, not that he saw. Looking into that spectacle wasn't something he was brave enough to do. "It's... comparable to what happened here. Whoever our perpetrator is, they can't have gone far. This is... fresh."

How she knew this so easily, he didn't want to know. "They?" So he focused on what he could bear to.

"The bite marks... massive, jagged teeth." Eyes covered by tinted lenses surveyed the carnage, "I've only ever seen one person with teeth that could have done this." double checking her observations. "No one else could have-" she seemed to choke on her words for a moment. "eaten..."

Which indeed she had, as just then she sounded as unsettled as he. "this much, besides."

Tensei's hand gripped at his belly, jaw clenched and eyes winced shut. "Oh god, you mean that thing from the news?" his head hung low, "where do you think the... thing went?"

Steeling her resolve, gulping back her own disgust, she ventured into the adjoining home. "When I find out, I'll call for you."

---

Did I ever tell you about my favorite flower?

I saw you fight today, in the tournament...

heard what you said...

in a lot of ways, you remind me of it now.

But then... you always did, my little Izu.

...

Vines were cut to ribbons with scarcely the effort required to move his arms. A feat either of his immense strength or the sharpness of his claws. Either way, it was an altogether brief encounter. Shiozaki hadn't even managed to bring up enough foliage to shield herself from him. She was barely obscured even from view by the time his palms -fingers splayed wide, an effort to diffuse the force of his hands impacting on her flesh- met her abdomen, throwing her from the ring. When Present Mic's announcement cut through the air, declaring him the victor, his hands were already over his ears. Wincing eyes declared he'd been hurt by the volume all the same. While the crowd cheered for him, he slunk away back to the concrete halls of the stadium. Winding back to the seats, where his classmates were waiting for him.

Some minutes remained between now and the final bout of the tournament, and recent events had left his mind disquiet. Jiro, his friend and arguably the one he felt closest to right now, had told him a great deal. Both about herself personally and what sort of life she'd lived in recent years. And that last implication... No. That didn't matter, not to him. With any luck, things would just go on like usual. A few awkward moments of putting his foot in his mouth, some sarcastic quips and the odd reference. They hadn't been friends long, but he was starting to get used to it.

Of course, that was hardly the thing to focus on now, what with his next fight being so imminent. If he was one to gamble, it was a safe bet on his opponent being Todoroki. A young man formerly very much unknown to Deku. Their interactions before this day were to be described as non-existent, a fact that neither bothered nor put Deku at ease. He was just a classmate, someone who's face he only regarded as familiar thanks to their mutual attendance of Aizawa's classes.

Soon he would be his final opponent in the arena.
Sweat trailing down his skin, slick on his forehead, was wiped away by the back of his hand. Exertion's reward to a toiling body on a heated day. His stomach rumbled, his mind raced to recall if he had anything left in his thermos to eat. Memory has a way of faulting in the wake of hunger's pangs. So wend his way back to his compatriots he did, footsteps echoing in the faint light. A smell of glycerin and sweat, burnt skin reached his covered nostrils, laboring to breath beneath his silicone mask. Rounding the corner he saw him walking side by side with Uraraka, thus his feelings of encountering his old bully were mingled with something warmly, strangely, positive.

Waving to a smiling Uraraka, Deku went to walk right past them, to ignore Bakugo altogether and get to his thermos, when the familiar voice reached his ears. "Wait."

"I can't." His pace hadn't even slowed, barely had he gone passed the two of them when a hand grabbed his collar.

With a snarl, angry, maybe with some other emotion coloring that anger, Bakugo bared his teeth. "Damn it, Deku!"

"Wait!" Uraraka interposed herself between them, making Deku's eyes leap wide open. "You said you wanted to apologize for something! Not hurt him!"

Heart rate through the roof, Deku froze with fear. After losing that fight against Jiro there was no predicting what heights Bakugo's temper would flare to, what he'd do to her. He put a hand on her shoulder, trying to move her away, but she just reached up and took his hand, squeezing it reassuringly. While Bakugo seemed to boil in his flesh, she stared him down, determination blazing behind her eyes.

"Shut up!" Snapped the warhead, "He was just gonna walk away!"

Uraraka seemed to get taller, her own anger making her puff up slightly. "If you were serious about apologizing that wouldn't matter!" She stepped closer to him, Deku's hand fell away from her shoulder. "Sorry isn't about what you want, it's about being kind to someone you wronged!"

Bakugo faulted at this, silence his only retort. He almost looked confused with that raised eyebrow, like he'd never once had this explained to him. No one spoke for a few moments while the warhead collected his thoughts, tried to comprehend what he'd just been told. His mouth had only just opened to speak when another voice caught their collected ears. "No." Icy, emotionless, monotone. The three of them peered back around the corner Deku had just rounded, down the hall, catching sight of two individuals who hadn't noticed them.

One bore a crimson scar over his left eye, iris a searing blue, and hair that was both red and white. Young, tall and with a physique earned by over a decade's worth of sculpting his body for the life of a hero. The other was a mammoth, towering over the boy with enough muscle mass to crush a lesser man with weight alone. His flame-red hair was offset by fierce eyes and beard made of fire. The nation's second greatest hero, Endeavor.

"I wasn't asking, boy." Said Endeavor. "You will use that fire of yours, embrace that part of yourself in this next match."

Todoroki's eyes narrowed into a glare. "I said no, and you know full well why I wont."

What was this? Why were these two arguing? Did they know each other? Wait... The resemblance, something in the area around their eyes. Father and son... "You're being an arrogant little fool." Endeavor scoffed. "I didn't spend so long trying to create you only for you to cast aside your gift like some unwanted toy." He took a step forward, looming over his son and casting a threatening
shadow over his smaller form. "Do you understand?"

There was a slight tremble, a shaking of Todoroki's hands as he stared defiantly into his father's eyes. "You've never taken refusal of anything well, have you?" Something about the seething bite those words carried made Endeavor's twitch. At the barest hint of motion on his father's face, Todoroki's hand clenched into a shaking fist. "So it is true... " His eyes went wide with rage, "that's why I have this eye." blood trickled down the space between his fingers and palms. "You really are just a monster wearing the skin of a hero."

Nausea had settled into the pit of Deku's stomach, Uraraka's face told of similar horrors snaking through her mind. That... what was that implication? What did that mean? Why did Endeavor look like he was about to strangle Todoroki? Questions that received no answers before the hero's hand was around his son's collar, lifting him off the ground. "You..." He hissed, "haven't the slightest idea what you're talking about, what you're thinking."

"It's all I ever think about." Todoroki's voice strained, his teeth bared at the man holding him off the ground. "That's why, no matter what, I'm going to be the kind of hero you never were. I'm going to be better than you!"

Knuckles impacted into Todoroki's gut before he was dropped unceremoniously to the concrete floor. "You have until your final fight." Endevor turned on his heels, walking away, leaving his son in pain, on the ground. "Do not disappoint me." Without any regard for his child, rounding the corner and failing to notice the three onlooking teenagers, Endeavor stalked back to his seat.

"What-" Uraraka, pale as a ghost, gulped. "What just... what was that?" She was shaking, trembling in fear, disgust.

Deku was fighting a similar battle against his own body. Sickening, that was the only word for what he'd just seen. "I... I don't know."

Beside them both, a cold sweat drenching his skin, Bakugo's mind was racing, puzzling together the evidence he'd just beheld. 'Why I have this eye...?' Bakugo, slowly, linked something between the pro hero and his son. Flame quirk, brazenly on display. A burn scar over Todoroki's eye.

A burn scar over Deku's eye.

The kind of father who would lift his own child off the ground by his collar and-

His breathing stopped. Slowly, Bakugo's eyes trailed back to Deku. His hand, still gripping Deku's collar, pinning him to the wall. In horrified disgust, his fingers released the cloth of Deku's clothing, backing away from him, mouth agape. No. No no no no no no no no no no no! That wasn't him! He wasn't like that! That wasn't the kind of hero, the kind of man he'd- he'd...

Move aside, Deku! Get out of my way or you're dead!

Have you ever had a friend who wasn't scared of you?

What kind of dirty tricks did you use to do it, you quirkless twerp!? HUH!? I was supposed to be the first and only!

Blow me to bits!? You're awful! Do you really wish to be a hero?

I'LL KICK HIS QUIRKLESS ASS!

Psycopath. Don't yell at Uraraka like that. She doesn't deserve it.
You've always been a bug! A useless little, STUPID DEKU! AND DON'T YOU EVER FORGET IT!

Take it back! Take back what you did, god damn you!

You wanna be a hero so bad? Here's some advice: take a swan dive off the roof! Maybe you'll have a quirk in your next life.

His stomach, lurched, a hand flew to cover his mouth and Bakugo bolted for the nearest rest room. He was barely at the nearest sink when his stomach emptied itself into it. Body heaving with burdened breath, his shaking hands gripping the edges of the sink were the only things keeping him from falling over. His hands... fuck today... he raised one of them, turning it over and staring into his palm.

"God damn it..."

his fingers curled inward, fingernails cutting into his skin. Tearing his gaze away, unable to look at the cursed bearer of his quirk, he saw his reflection in the mirror. A look in his eyes, a seething anger, cutting into the world they beheld. Eyes that burned with a rage he would forever attribute to an abusive, violent monster of a father. "GOD DAMN YOU!" Combustion of his quirk rocketed from the scant space between his fingers as his knuckles flew, shattering the mirror with cacophonous retribution. Shaking shoulders, breath trembling and quick he pulled his hand back and hit the mirror again. And again. And again. And again. Again. Again. Again.

Arms snaked up, under his shoulders. Pulling him away from the wall before he could ruin his now mangled hand any further. "Stop it!"

Shaking, flailing to get free, Bakugo screamed. "GET OFF ME! LEAVE ME ALONE!"

Deku just held him tighter, even as Bakugo's elbows railed against his ribs, the side of his head. "Not until you stop! You're gonna ruin your hand!" After one nasty blow to the side of his face, Deku's sunglasses went clattering away.

Feet kicked about, heels hitting the floor, Deku's toes, his shins, his knees. "WHO THE FUCK CARES!?"

Hands gripped Bakugo's shoulders, hauling him against the wall, knocking the air from his lungs. When he looked up, Deku was staring him in the eyes with a desperate, pleading look in those mismatched orbs. "ME!" The hands gripping Bakugo's shoulders were slight, gentle, doing their utmost not to so much as scratch him. It made the warhead want to weep. "I CARE! SO CUT IT OUT ALREADY, KACCHAN!"

Bakugo's jaw dropped, shoulders slumped and all tension in his muscles just went away. Plastered on his face, making him look nothing like his old self, was the most broken-hearted expression Deku had ever seen. His face dipped, turned to the floor as his shoulders started trembling.

"Why?" hands curled into fists, his eyes hid behind his hair as he stared at the floor. "Why do you still-?" his voice cracked, choking in his throat. Fight as much he could to hold it back, it seemed nothing was going to keep this dam from bursting. Guilt, pain in his flesh and bones, seeing Deku's mangled, worried face looking at him so concerned... His palms clasped over his eyes, moments before the tears started flowing. "You- You idiot!" His body shook, heart shambled. Arms went around him, holding him tight and Bakugo sobbed louder. I don't understand... why are you still being nice to me?
After a time, perhaps not so long as it felt, Bakugo managed to calm down, at least a little. "You should go see recovery girl." Deku's arms unfolded, freeing Bakugo from their embrace.

"But-"

"Go," said Deku, "get that hand seen to." And he left the room, passing by Uraraka as he went.

Concern worn plainly on the brunette's face directed itself toward both boys, looking between them both. As Deku wandered away, her eyes shifted to the warhead and his mangled hand. She said nothing, he said nothing. He just stooped to the floor, picked up Deku's sunglasses and passed the off to her as he walked away. "This isn't who you wanted to be, is it?"

Bakugo stopped in his tracks, face staring gloomily at the floor. Drawing in a long breath, he sighed. "...No." Sniffling, he wiped his face with his uninjured hand. "I never really... I just..." he bit his lip. "What does it matter?" He shook his head. "Why do either of you even care? I'm obviously not worth it."

She hesitated, foot fussing at the concrete floor. "Maybe not... but can't you still change into someone who is worth it?" The question cut like a knife, lancing his heart like the glass now in his mangled fingers. "You don't have to be like this forever."

No reply came forth, no reply was even thought of. He just sighed, and walked away. Even if he could do that... it was too late to change what he'd already done. He'd marked a friend of his for life, on his very skin. Even if the damage hadn't been direct, even if his behavior had prompted something self destructive and stupid long ago, the markings were his fault, and his fault alone.

Be someone who's worth it... Like that was even possible. If he had any sense in his brain he'd just push until everyone walked away. They'd be better off, safer that way, if nothing else.

But then... he was never that selfless, was he?

He found him curled up in a dark corner, face behind his knees, arms hugging his legs tight. Gingerly, he sat beside him, saying nothing. The other boy knew he was there, he could tell by the way his breathing went quieter. Rather than say anything Deku just sat beside him. What could he have said anyways? Abusive parents were a tribulation he'd not known. Had Endeavor simply been unaware that there'd been onlookers? It seemed the only reason he'd been so shameless with his behavior.

Something Todoroki's eventual mumbling confirmed. "What did you see?" He sounded scared.

Deku could only admit to the truth. "I... heard all of it, I think."

Todoroki seemed to grow smaller, shrinking further into the ball he'd curled up into. "So why aren't you saying anything?"

Again, all he could say was the truth. "Because I don't know what to say. What to ask." you're obviously not okay...

The heterochrome chuckled joylessly. "I guess that's fair..." Slowly, his legs drifted away from himself, his shield lowered as he slumped his head back against the concrete wall, to stare at the ceiling. "you know... it's pretty obvious that it's gonna be me and you in the last fight. I don't mean to speak ill of Yaoyorozu but..." his eyes drifted shut, mind searching for the right words. "when it comes to raw offensive capability... you, Bakugo and myself are the ones at the top of the roster."
Yet another thing Deku was left uncertain how to meet with a reply. "You think so?" He scratched at the back of his own head, behind his ear. "It's not like the others are so incapable..."

"They're not." Todoroki said, making sure his tone was gentle. It was... odd, unexpected from one with such a demeanor as he. "They're more versatile, in most cases. But this makes their potential and presently available combat prowess somewhat limited, in comparison to us."

_All people are not born equal... "Maybe you're right about that much..."

Todoroki sighed. "Even so, inevitable as this was, I was really hoping it wouldn't be you." Deku blinked, confused, about to question his meaning when Todoroki turned to look at him, pointing the scar over his own eye. "You and me, we're... a lot alike, I think." His eyes drifted away Deku, unable to look into his as he spoke. "Marked by the violent pride of horrible people, given powers that are more akin to curses than 'gifts'... things that we have to keep at bay, lest we become what we hate." another sigh and he turned to look at the ceiling again. "Sorry if either of things are... sensitive matters."

"N-no, it's okay." Deku tried to reassure him. "So... Endeavor he... he did that to you?"

Todoroki winced. "Not... directly."

"FASTEN YOUR SEATBELTS, OH GENTLE AUDIENCE!" Deku almost screamed as his hands lurched over his now ringing ears. "IT'S TIME FOR OUR SECOND TO LAST MATCH! TODOROKI VS YAoyOROZU!"

A growl that could only belong to Aizawa resounded over the loudspeakers. "Please tone it down a little... I can only take so many painkillers for this headache." And then the microphone cut out.

Tired, that was how Todoroki looked as he climbed back to his feet. "Midoriya?" Said he, back turned to his classmate.

Meekly, quietly, he replied. "Yeah?"

"I wont hold back... but I hope you win." Before he could do more than blink in confusion, Todoroki had wandered away. Alone now, Deku got back on his feet too, before wandering back to his classmates.

It wasn't far, not as far as it had felt the last time he'd tried to go this way. An occupied or otherwise distracted mind can go a long way to passing time. He couldn't help but wonder about Todoroki. _Powers akin to curses..._. It was only as he made it to the threshold of the seats when reality rudely stormed the gates to his thoughts. Sunlight, barging into his eyes and stinging made him yelp, recoiling from the light as his eyes watered.

"Hey." When he managed to open his teary eyes, he saw Uraraka, her hand outstretched, offering him his sunglasses. "You lost em again."

She always seemed to be the one to return them, whenever those silly things went missing. "Sorry."

Sorry? She couldn't help but smile as he took them back. "Why are you apologizing?"

Right, he didn't have to do that."Old habit, sor-" he caught it that time, she still giggled. "... thank you." Said he, returning them to his face.

She shrugged, "Don't mention it. With everything you've had going on today you can't be expected to keep track of everything."
"Yeah, but without these I'm blind, so long as it's sunny." A finger tapped at the scratched, dented and chipped rims of the silly, round rimmed spectacles. "It was stupid of me to leave them behind..."

"Don't be silly," Uraraka's smile went from amused to gently reassuring, "you were running from one boy that needed help to the next." she reached up, fingers self consciously fiddling with her hair. There was a hint of something else, a twinkle in her eye, in her smile that confused him as she looked at him, after saying that. "I wasn't sure what to do... just wound up following you and trying to talk some sense into Bakugo."

Clearing his throat, recollecting his thoughts, he managed, "D-did you help?"

Another shrug, coupled with a frown. "Didn't make it worse, at least. Last I saw he was off to see recovery girl."

Now it was Deku's turn to sigh. "Well, it's something."

He'd started walking back to his seat, feet dragging slightly as he went, when she heard herself speak again. "You really do worry about everyone, don't you?"

With a scuffle, clicking of a heel against concrete, he halted. Back turned to her, uncertainty gnawing at him, his words were difficult to find. "Not sure what you mean."

Walking up beside up, her presence drawing his gaze back to her face, she elaborated. "When Jiro lost her fight, you ran after her. When Bakugo, someone who used to pick on you someone who..." he winced, she guiltily looked away from the right side of his face. The discolored skin, the paper-white hair, the jet black sclera around a green iris, faintly glowing behind his sunglasses.

"When he was freaking out, you just went and helped him anyways. And as soon as he was okay," there was that twinkle, that warmth in her smile all over again. "you ran off to check on Todoroki."

She seemed to laugh a little, though the vocalization was oddly breathless, like her lungs were directing energy somewhere somehow more important. "When I tried to talk to him he just..." she averted her gaze again, a touch of sadness on her features. "is he okay?"

It took a moment for him to find an answer. "I... No. But he uh, might've gotten some of it off his chest, at least." The audio feed clicked to life, Present Mic was going to start yelling again.

Hands went over his ears, palms pressed firmly down to shield his sensitive hearing, only they were hardly his own. After he was done wincing, the pain subsiding, he realized his hands were over hers on the sides of his head. From the embarrassed look on her face, that heated flush of her cheeks, he surmised that she'd acted without thinking.

Clearing his throat again, he gently removed her hands from his face. "Th-thanks. I think..."

She gulped, turning somehow redder. "Sorry! I- I just reacted! I know loud noises hurt you if your not ready for them and I just-"

He squeezed her hands, reassuringly. "It's okay." When had her heartbeat gotten so loud? Releasing her hands, adjusting his sunglasses made for a flimsy effort to hide his face from her. Her... excitement, that had to be it, made him nervous in an odd way. In all that excitement, he'd failed to notice that he'd kept his control. Not for one moment had he felt that all too familiar urge to bite, in spite of his stomach. He should have felt proud, but he didn't remember to.

Clearing her throat, calming herself a little, she found that enthusiasm he was beginning to find
familiar. "Anyhow... I just wanted to say that I think you're amazing." Ah, there were those butterflies again... wait, again? When had he felt those today? It hadn't been around her. So... who...? "I'm glad you decided to try and be hero. I know it probably wasn't easy to do that after... well, you know."

After becoming a literal monster. "Yeah... weirdly, that's not a very happy topic," he murmured, "I wasn't really sure what else to do." A fluttering of her eyes told him he'd surprised her. "It's what I've wanted for so long I..." he shook his head, "I figured if anything could redeem what I was," he'd bitten a man while he was unconscious, "what I am," he'd bitten Jiro when they first met, "it was the same thing I'd always wanted anyways." It was the only thing that could redeem his monstrous behavior.

The careless death of Shigaraki, that still appeared before his eyes.

Nodding, understanding, it was another moment before she spoke again. "You know, I don't think you ever said why you wanted to be a hero," she'd side-stepped it, the topic of his species. she seemed eager to shift from that topic. ...was that why she couldn't look at his face just then? Because of why and how it had healed? "back when everyone was talking about it a few weeks ago." She smiled again, he questioned the smile. "It's had me wondering." was he being paranoid or... was his species an issue for her? Did she not want to think about it? But she was the one who brought it up...

He was about to speak when they both heard the audio click back on. This time, she did not leap to his aid and he managed just fine. All the same, they blushed as Present Mic announced the beginning of the fight between Todoroki and Yaoyorozu. "Guess that'll have to wait..." all of it would.

She nodded trotting eagerly back to their seats as he followed, more sedately, slowly. There was something heavy about him. Not muscle or weight just... fatigue. Today had been a drain in every respect. His body was tired, his mind was tired, he felt tired. Slumping into his seat, Jiro only vaguely caught his attention. She was still wearing that patterned shirt, her violet eyes bearing an odd shine to them that captured his attention. The fight started, Yaoyorozu had managed to evade Todoroki's initial onslaught.

Jiro handed him his thermos, a smirk bearing an odd softness on her face. "You look exhausted."

He gratefully accepted, no longer caring that he'd be drinking blood in front of others. Todoroki missed with his next attempt to freeze Yaoyorozu in place. It was a desperate game of keeping each other at arm's length. "so do you." he emptied it, consuming everything in one go. "Are you okay?"

Neither opponent was eager for any sort of entanglement. There was an odd chemistry in the air, between them. Something that prevented them from acting, moving forward and ending the bout. "No." Her abilities to prolong the conflict were being tested, she was already tired after such a long day. Excitement could only keep one going for so long before the adrenaline left one feeling drained. "I feel a little better though." He seemed to be weary, faltering in his efforts to remain upright already. It seemed she was drawing closer to him. "You?"

There wasn't much space to retreat to, not that he seemed to be trying to. "I don't really know..." he'd let his guard down, an opening in his otherwise usually stalwart defenses.

"Do you need to talk about it? It'd only be fair." An opening she leapt at.

Attention turned from the fight, his eyes met hers. She was sitting closer to him than he'd noticed, almost nestled against him really. Opening taken, caught unprepared, he reacted with the first thing
that his mind conjured. "I don't even know where to begin."

Ice erupted between them. Somewhere in the arena, a girl, a classmate was encased in ice. Deku's breathing was sharp, jagged. Adrenaline at the sudden appearance of a glacier had snapped his focus well and truly back where it belonged. To his side, on the other side of the frozen water, Jiro was reacting similarly.

They looked back at the arena -what of it they could still see- and saw Todoroki panting with wide eyes. Present Mic declared him the victor, and Deku noticed something his sluggish brain hadn't a few moments ago. Todoroki's flesh was starting to freeze. Bits of ice were clinging to his skin, making his movements sluggish. Overusing his quirk had a drawback after all... he could only freeze so much before his own body succumbed to the cold of his quirk.

Todoroki reached out, his left hand pressing against the ice. Slowly, it began to melt away. Eventually, after Present Mic announced the final fight would begin in a few minutes, the barrier that had nearly encased Deku and Jiro melted away. "That was..." she gulped. "Sobering."

He nodded quickly. "Woke me up." And pulled his mind right away from where ever it had just been. Where ever that was...

_Believe me, I am trying to refocus my brain._

Blushing, he turned away from Jiro and hoped she wasn't trying to see his face just then. What was wrong with him today?

A growling sigh, "He's unhinged," the voice of Akaguro caught his attention. "I'd bet on his father having a hand in this..." regarding the sheer volume of ice that still stood, melting in the hot sun, covering no small portion of the stadium, he watched the weary Todoroki walk away.

Deku, once again, could only blink, leaving Jiro to ask what he'd wanted to. "Wait, what are you talking about?"

Another sigh from the dhampire. "A long time ago, nearly seven years ago I was..." he winced. "I took shelter with a friend, Todoroki's older brother." _He has an older brother? _"I wasn't supposed to. He wasn't allowed to bring people inside the family home." Akaguro took a long swig from his water bottle. "Something about hiding some... creation from the public eye." He capped the water bottle, others were listening now too. "His father found out, I was thrown out and... that was the last time I got to really see him."

Ashido, afraid to ask, slowly voiced the question on everyone's minds. "What happened to him?"

Akagro frowned, drawing a knee up beside his long face. "He vanished, ran away from home. Haven't heard from him since... but," he raised a finger, "I did see a kid that looked vaguely like him. Mostly covered in bandages, hard to say really..." he shrugged. "Ever since then though..." his eyes glared, scanning the crowd for Endeavor, "after seeing that kid all bandaged up, clothes just rags, I could never stop wondering why he was so afraid of his father. If he was... violent with his children." His finger flicked something off his knee, releasing some pent up frustration. "I've always regretted not looking into it."

Evidence seen with his own eyes corroborated that one, he felt ill just thinking about it. "What's with that face?" Deku looked up to see Ashido, concerned and eyeing him curiously. "You look like you're about to throw up."

He gulped. "I think Akaguro's right." Jiro's eyebrows jumped. "From... from what I've seen of
Endeavor that wouldn't be surprising." And now that he thought about, public record seemed to back that up too.

There were few photos out there, online, in publication, where the Todoroki family could all be seen together. Over the years Endeavor had been pictured with at least three different children along with his wife. A girl, now an adult, with glasses and flared white hair. A boy, a few years younger, with spiky white hair with a face and build resembling his father. The third had also been a boy, his only notable characteristic had been black, wildly spiky hair. In truth that last child bore little resemblance to the family, from what he remembered.

"Yeah," Akaguro seemed to perk up, "that was him. Toya." A slight, sad smile played at his lips. "Good kid..." his sad smile remained as his eyes shifted away.

"Wait," Ashido scratched at her head, "where's Endeavor being a scumbag come in? Lotsa heroes avoid being seen with their families."

Deku couldn't answer, his face turned away from the conversation. Speaking for him however... "He hit Todoroki." Uraraka barely mumbled, but everyone turned and looked at her all the same. "right in front of us."

Akaguro's lips twitched in disgusted anger, Jiro looked appalled, Kaminari's jaw dropped, Kirishima's eyes went wide and Ashido looked like a horrified puppy. "Bwuh- No way!" her arm flew sideways, as if to throw the notion far, far away. "You gotta be lying! Making stuff up! How could a hero do something like that?"

Eyes averted from everyone, Jiro gulped, murmuring just loud enough to be heard. "Fame and money, give em to the wrong person and watch what they do, once they think they're untouchable." It was something ugly, an unspoken rule of any industry where one could be idolized.

It would be Akaguro that gave voice to what she'd begun to explain. "Take any soul, give them power or a mask and you will see their true face." He took a long swig from his water bottle. "All too often is common decency a mere facade put on by those too afraid to be themselves, for fear of retribution."

"Theeeeeeeeere's a fun thought..." Kaminari sighed as his head slumped forward into the palm of his hand.

"Man," Kirishima griped, "here I was thinking today was just gonna be fun... Just some healthy competition, not this kinda thing."

Deku looked up at the scoreboard. Just a few minutes to go... Gulping, nerves twisting in his gut, he started walking for the exit. "Goin already?" Kaminari frowned. "You just got back."

Deku sighed. "Yeah... sorry. I'm kinda nervous," he offered, trying not to be too fidgety, "plus... there's not much time before it starts."

Ashido pouted, frowning much the same as Kaminari. "Okay..." then she grinned, mischievously. "But after this is over we're all hanging out! No more doom and gloom for the rest of the day!" Jiro suppressed a groan, wanting nothing more than to go hide away in her room. Something Deku was also keen on, after such a draining day.

All the same, he didn't want to disappoint his friends. "Sure," he smirked, "so long as it's not too exciting."
Smiling, eyes closed, Ashido traced a finger over her chest in a criss-cross. "Cross my heart."
Having seen her other hand crossing its fingers, Kaminari smirked and rolled his eyes, shaking his head.

Nodding, Deku made for the hallway again. His footsteps, though hesitant at first, soon picked up the pace. "You're gonna do something crazy," he stopped, shoe scuffing on the concrete. Turning around he saw none other than a certain girl with purple hair, walking slowly over to him. "Aren't you?"

Hesitantly, he turned the rest of the way around. "Define crazy."

Jiro seemed uncertain, one of her hands fussing at the hem of her shirt as her eyes darted away. "I'm not sure... But if there's one thing I've come to realize about you, it's that you tend to throw yourself into danger when people need help." Now his eyes averted, uncertain how to take that. "I heard about what happened, you know. With the sludge villain." Sudden fearfulness crept over Deku, and his eyes darted back to her. "After the USJ incident most of us became pretty well known. Someone in the news recognized you, showed what happened to you when you ran in to help Bakugo." His head lowered in shame, eyes wincing shut for a moment as he recalled it himself. He could still feel the wood, pierced deep into his flesh... "That was before you got your powers, wasn't it?"

Unable to look at her, he turned his eyes to the cold, concrete wall. "Does it matter?"

"Kinda," Jiro crossed her arms, "it tells me you don't give a second thought to yourself when you notice someone needs help."

"Isn't that what we do?"

She growled, sighing in frustration. "It wont be what you do for long if you don't learn to watch out for yourself too!" She advanced a step, leaning forward, arms uncrossed and by her sides. "Whatever's going on with Todoroki, what do you really expect to do here?"

Deku sighed. "His father wants him to use his flame quirk... embrace his full power so he can... I don't know exactly, but he's willing to get violent in public about it." He looked up to gaze at her eyes, finding her sickened, shocked by what he'd just said. "Todoroki has to go home with him. If his father's willing to be that bad where there might be witnesses, what do you think he might do once they're home, alone?"

Jiro gulped, some of her color draining from her face as she returned to something resembling her normal posture. "You're tired, fire is a weakness of yours and it doesn't sound like you're worried about yourself right now." She was persistent, he'd give her that. "Whatever you do, just-" she bit her lip. "Just don't get hurt out there, okay?" She fussed her wrist against the side of her leg, palm turned to the ground, fingers curled in. "If you slip up and bite him on live tv who knows what'll happen."

Giving her a thumbs up, he smirked. "wasn't planning on screwing that bad." He turned back to wander down to the waiting area again, putting his mask back on as he walked.

Sighing, hands stuffed into her pockets, Jiro breathed. "No one ever does..." Before walking back to her seat.

His heart was racing, almost as fast as it had during that first heroics class. In truth, he had no plan. No theories, no ideas, nothing but a twisted feeling in his gut. This was a no-win scenario if ever
he'd met one. If he won without getting his classmate to give the fight his all, Todoroki was in for it. If he succeeded in getting Todoroki to use his quirk, he'd likely get seriously hurt. Even then, if he still won, it didn't seem out of the question that Endeavor would still punish him. And if he lost... well, he lost. After coming this far, if he just threw the match, what would that look like? Cowardice? Some collusion with Todoroki to get him out of being punished? Either way, he didn't see that ending well for-

...Or, perhaps...

Maybe he had a plan now. Some idea as to what to do at least. It was stupid, risky, personal and about the only thing that seemed like it might work. It was, at the very least, better than nothing and considering how hard Todoroki had been pushing himself, he had one advantage: while tired, his body hadn't been nearly so taxed as his would be opponent. Todoroki was slowed on top of it all, and Deku had not only speed but agility on his side. So long as he didn't over do it, tire himself out too fast, this could work.

"HOPE YOU'RE READY, OUR GENTLE VIEWERS!" That time, he actually screamed as he covered his ears. "BECAUSE IT'S TIME FOR THE GRAND FINALE: MIDORIYA VERSUS TODOROKI!"

Deku sighed, rubbing at his ringing ears. At least no matter how this ended, things would - hopefully- quiet down considerably. Adjusting his sunglasses, he took those daring steps out the door and walked to the starting line. As soon as the bell rang, he advanced. True to his earlier matches, Todoroki opened up with by shuffling his foot, sending a wave of ice along the ground to entrap him.

Only the vampire was ready. Leaping aside and over it he flexed his wrists and his claws sprang from his fingertips. Now that the expected part was out of the way, there was no telling what Todoroki would follow up with. To his surprise, he stepped up his game: rather than holding back, conserving his energy, Todoroki had gone full force and sent a jagged column of ice, roaring toward him.

Deku's momentum betrayed him, carrying him right into the path of the frozen onslaught. Swigging with one of his arms, hand curled into a fist, and smashed through it. Having lost balance, his footing slipped and he toppled over in an awkward somersault. No room nor time to breathe, he had to dive further aside to avoid an even larger barrage from his opponent. An eight of the ring had just been covered in a glacier. Rolling to his feet, Deku found his footing and sprang toward Todoroki.

Eyes flying wide open, all the Heterochrome could do was put up a literal wall between him and Deku. His claws had cut through the armored steel of a Zero Pointer. Ice, a true force of nature as it was, only slowed him down. Cursing under his breath, Todoroki extended a palm and unleashed a sprawling spire of ice, right into Deku's chest. The force of the impact knocked the wind from his lungs, carrying him far away at a break-neck speed. Jagged bits of ice cut into his flesh, tearing his shirt apart. Hissing in pain, Deku had to wrench himself free as the ice started encasing him. When he looked at the ground, he saw that he was no longer in the ring. Todoroki had pushed him out of bounds! But... His feet hadn't hit the ground! Working quickly, snapping himself free, he almost panicked when gravity kicked in.

"Crap!" Swinging his arm wildly, he hooked his claws into the cold solid and spun himself with the newfound leverage. The force at which he'd swung his body carried him around in a winding spiral, until he was back on top of it. He wasted no time leaping back for the arena, just moments before Todoroki launched another massive hunk of ice to smash what he was on top of.
The crowd was going insane. Just moments in and they were at the edge of their seats hollering with boundless excitement. "I DON'T BELIEVE IT FOLKS!" Present Mic, thank god, had lowered his voice just in time. "MIDORIYA HAS MANAGED TO COME BACK INTO THE FIGHT! I THOUGHT FOR SURE THIS WAS ALREADY OVER!"

Eyes narrowing, palm aimed right where Deku was headed, Todoroku muttered, "it is." And what followed left the world shocked into silence. If the attack that had won the match against Yaoyorozu had been a glacier, this was the entirety of Antarctica. Springing into existence with violent speed and force, was a a jagged, overwhelming monolith, leaving Deku nowhere to be seen. Falling to his knees, panting out frozen breath, Todoroki looked at his right side. Blue skin, a pointed chunks of ice protruded from a thin, motion restricting layer that weighed him down considerably. Breathing labored, jaw chattering his teeth together, he looked back up to the ice he'd just created.

Was... that the final blow? Did I win?

Present Mic seemed hesitant to speak, even as the audio feed clicked on. "Well... I GUESS WE HAVE IT FOLKS! WINNER OF THE TOURNAMENT IS-"

The ice shook. Todoroki's breath caught, murmurs went through the audience. What was going on? Surely he couldn't be... It shook again, large pieces of ice broke away, falling to the ground and shattering. "No way..." One last time, the ice shook, but this time it was punctuated by a loud smash. A wave of frozen vapor, like dust in the wind, wafted across the battlefield as icy shrapnel scattered across the ground.

Blood splattered on the ground, panting could be heard somewhere inside the glacier and a red sneaker took a step out of it. Labored breathing, legs shaking, Deku stared down Todoroki as he and the audience took in the sight of him. His shirt had been torn to shreds, rags draped over his shoulder, what remained of his under-shirt didn't hide much. There, on display for the whole world, was a boy who's upper body was covered in tiny scars. Burns, nasty ones from the looks of them. Injuries he'd gotten when small, that had stretched as he'd grown. A particularly nasty scar on his side, from the ugly wound he'd gotten the day he'd died.

Well... the first time he'd died. The scar from the second time was right there on his face.

Even then, as he panted, the old wounds now uncovered along with his scrawny frame, new injuries leaked blood into his clothes. What truly silenced the audience and made Todoroki look as though he might be sick, was his re-knitting flesh. "That..." Deku panted, shaking his head, trying to remain standing. "all ya got?"

Todoroki shuttered, falling back, away from Deku. He brought up his shaking right hand, staring into his palm. What... what would have happened if he'd been fighting someone else? How badly had he just hurt Deku? "What did I just do?"

Deku caught his breath. "You're starting to get it, aren't you?" Todoroki turned his gaze toward him. The black eyed boy seemed so... calm. A gentle look took root in his features. "It's not... your quirk that has the potential to make you like him." Todoroki's eyes fluttered, Deku's hand went up to his mask. "It never was."

In one fluid motion, he removed his mask and Todoroki's jaw dropped.

Tossing the thing out of the ring, jaw trembling with his effort to avoid lunging for Todoroki's throat, Deku smiled. "It's not what we have, not our... quirks that make us anything bad." Holding
up a hand, claws on display, he re-sheathed them. "It's what we do. Our choices, above all else that make us who we are." Deku let out a breathless laugh. "Just look at me... I'm more a monster than anyone, but I'm choosing to be something else."

Expression softened, mind and heart partially at ease, the heterochrome had only one reply. "Do... you really believe that's enough?"

The shift in Deku's smile made the boy want to hug him, right there and then. He just looked so sad, so tired... "I have to." I have to...

Nodding, Todoroki understood. "Even still," he clambered shakily to his feet, "I can't do it... not against you." From the look of him, Todoroki had completely lost his desire to fight. "I'd be no better that my father... than Bakugo if I..." sheepishly, he gestured to Deku's right eye. "I can't stomach it. I wont be like them!"

Deku took in a long breath through his nose, before slowly letting it go in a sigh. "Then I've only got one choice..." Seeing Deku's muscles tense, Todoroki got ready to defend himself, but never had the chance. Deku spun on his heels, turning toward the audience, staring down a man whose beard was made of flame. "HEY, YOU!"

Todoroki's eyes went wide, his heart started hammering. What the hell was he doing?

"WHATEVER IT IS YOU'RE TRYING TO PROVE, I'VE GOT BAD NEWS FOR YOU!" Even from this distance, Todoroki could make out the searing scowl of his father's anger, and his body backed away. "I WONT BE A PART OF IT!" Deku's arm cut through the air, hand outstretched, fingers rigid. "AND I WON'T GIVE YOU AN EXCUSE TO ACT LIKE A TYRANT EITHER! IF HE USES HIS OTHER QUIRK IT'LL BE ON HIS TIMELINE!" Endeavor's lips curled into a snarl. "YOU WANT SOMEONE TO GET MAD AT!? I'LL GIVE YOU SOMEONE!"

Deku took a step forward, Todoroki's hand outstretched, trying to reach him. "Wait!" And Deku stepped out of the ring.

The audience erupted in calamity. While all the world screamed, furious about the end of the tournament, one person leapt to his feet and cheered above them all. "THAT IS HOW IT IS DONE!" Akaguro earned more than a few odd looks, but Kirishima was right by his side, cheering Deku on. Jiro just stood up and blew a shrill, celebratory whistle. Ashido and Uraraka jumped into the air, fists pumping sky high as they laughed. Kaminari just laughed uproariously as he applauded. Yaoyorozu, gave them all very confused looks, but hesitantly started clapping all the same.

Todoroki stood there, in total disbelief, unable to speak as Deku turned back around. Smiling warmly, he gave him a thumbs up. "You win."

Blinking, the heterochrome mouthed only one word. "Why?" Deku raised an eyebrow, confused. "You barely know me... you didn't have to protect me..."

Hands in his pockets, Deku smirked. "I thought that was the point." Walking forward again, he collected his mask, returning it to his face. "Otherwise... what are we really doing here?"

Shrugging, he made for the exit, leaving Todoroki to his thoughts as the crowd booed.

"...Thank you... Midoriya." I hope helping me doesn't come back to bite you. He clenched his fist. No... I won't let it. Whether they knew it or not at that time, the two of them would count each other as friends from that moment forward. Not a bad trade, where Deku would have been concerned.
“He won’t complain if he’s caught in a freeze...”
"Can you still remember... when little things made you happy?

and can you still remember... when simple things made you smile...?"

It was only ten seconds of film. Ten seconds of a face, a smiling face.

But it was all the world needed.

All one man, in particular, needed.

Ten seconds of film... That was all it appeared to be, to one Kurogiri. He sat in his seat, clutching his ribs and lightly massaging them, wondering what his master was up to. He'd been struggling with the remote, rewinding and pressing play only to pause to rewind again. The Husk was trying to find something. One moment, one frame out of ten seconds worth of film.

When ten seconds are all you have, even one can seem to last a long time.

Confused, concerned, Kurogiri turned his eyes to his master. "Sir," he pleaded, "perhaps you should leave this for later." The Husk ignored him. "Whatever you're seeking, it will still be there after you've had time to rest."

The Husk snarled. "I've had nothing but time to rest for over a decade!" His fingers fumbled, weak and decrepit, barely holding onto the remote for the frantic anger that trembled them so. "There is something here..." He murmured, searchingly. "something familiar, something old that I haven't seen in over..." abruptly, he pressed pause. Then, reverently, his voice began whispering again. "...a century." The remote clattered to the floor, his chair fell back, Kurogiri looked up, worry worn plainly on his face as his master stood, taking a staggering step toward the television. Then, his shoulder slightly shaking, a breathy, raspy laugh was heard.

"Master?"

He said nothing. Instead, The Husk began cackling. His body shook, the respirator began blaring an alarm, warning of a drastic upset to his oxygen levels. The Husk ignored it, continuing to laugh with mad glee. It was only when Kurogiri's eyes shifted to the TV that he saw what had The Husk laughing.

There, on the boy's face, peeking from behind his smiling lips, was a pair of white, thing fangs.

"What does they mean?" The Husk either ignored him or hadn't heard. "The fangs, sir. What do they...?" A hand on his aching gut, staggering away down the hall, The Husk continued laughing.

He knew the boy's arsenal, what he was and was capable of now.

His revenge and recovery were finally within his grasp.

Then the rest of the long dormant plan would follow...
It was fifteen minutes after the sport's festival had ended. Media frenzy in full swing, dissecting the last match and every word that poured out of one teenage boy's mouth. A hero's character was called into question, however briefly. Funny what money and the right friends can do, even to sweep away a public spectacle such as that. A few minutes texting on a phone and speculation was already dissipating. Funny what money and the right friends can do to sway opinions that want to be swayed. Endeavor, formerly an idol of one Izuku Midoriya and current idol of many, many more. Now, to one boy, he's just another over-powered face in Japan's hero roster. Plans to discard all his merchandise cemented in his mind, all he needed to do was get home and do it.

Fifteen minutes, surfing the web on his phone, confirmed his worst thoughts. No one wanted to believe that Endeavor was anything less than a stellar parent. Whatever drama that Izuku -real name yet to be chosen- had witnessed, he'd misunderstood. In disgust, Stendhal clicked off his phone and scoffed through gritting teeth. Nothing induces nausea quite like the willingly blind...

"Akaguro?"

He blinked, looking up to see a curious Yaoyorozu. "Yes?" Replied Stendhal.

She seemed hesitant, nervous. Her pallor a slight too colorless. He unnerved her, something he'd suspected, known since that day at the USJ. Good. Intimidation was a useful tool and this woman had a will about her. If his 'true face' could rattle her, then it could rattle others with perhaps more conviction than she. "What was Midoriya yelling about just now?" That quiet gulp only further confirmed what he already knew.

 Suppressing a smile at the overheard sound of hidden fear was only too easy. "Ask Todoroki." Sighs he. "We've done him enough disservice by speaking of once already without his presence." Standing up, hands in his pockets, Stendhal turned toward the exit and started walking.

The yelling was impossibly loud. How Midoriya and Jiro -real names yet to be chosen- could stand it even when his ears ached eluded his understanding. Practice, he supposed, though one had leagues more than the other. Water bottle withdrawn from his pocket he drained its last drops and wiped his mouth. An eyebrow raised. Some girl with blonde hair, drawn up in messy buns, was skipping her way down the corridor. Blonde hair... a relative of that 'Camie' who'd been eavesdropping on everything since the main event had started? Speaking of whom, he hadn't seen her after that last fight had ended.

"Excuse me," Said he, but she payed him no heed. Raising his voice, Stendhal spoke again. "You're in the wrong section."

She ignored him, skipping merrily away, her oversized sweater bouncing almost as much as her light steps. Turning his nose up, he sniffed at the air in her wake. She smelled of blood, faintly obscured by perfume. A similar sort of scent that he'd noticed on Camie. Stendhal grinned. Run away, little changeling. He chuckled under his breath. I'm sure we'll meet again, 'Camie'.

A thought occurred, that Midoriya hadn't commented on such. Perhaps he hadn't noticed or hadn't cared about her scent. Or maybe, simply, he'd upgraded his mask or done something to it to block out smells. He had thought that the boy smelled faintly of garlic... well, that might be wrong. Since he hadn't noticed him wrinkling his nose or heard anyone else commenting on it -he'd been rather close to several people today- he wouldn't mentally retcon that bit of information into being.

Still, a decent enough idea to hold onto.

"Are you trying to end up dead, child?" Somewhere up ahead, behind a very thick door, Aizawa was scolding someone.
Zero credit to the one to guess his identity. "N-no sir!" Stammered Izuku 'Green' Midoriya. "I- I was just-!"

"Don't." Aizawa sighed, abruptly. "Your need to butt into that family's business has just put a video of your face, during one of the world's most high profile sporting events, without a mask into circulation." The sound of someone falling into a chair, exhausted, was heard. "I could see your fangs, kid. Not for long, but if I saw them, then..." a note of hesitation, a fearful gulp of nerves. "He, will no doubt see you for what you are..."

Another raising of his eyebrow, Midoriya shuffling his feet uncomfortably was heard. "...He?"

The sound of skin, a hand dragging over a tired, stubbly face. "The Nameless One." A wave of shivers was sent over Stendhal's goose-pimpling skin. Whenever someone spoke that name, whenever he'd been there to hear, it had always been with an undertone of dread. That a man with such steeled nerves as Aizawa could speak the name with such an inflection only added to Stendhal's growing weariness of the moniker. "The architect behind the... final genocide of the Vampires." ...Interesting. Seethed one boy's rising temper. "If he finds out that you exist, it may spell the end for you."

Fingers curled, nails digging into their respective palms. Not on my watch.

At present, Midoriya was the only tie he had to his past, his long dead family. Losing that was not something the dhampire would allow. It was an odd basis for a friendship, but he cared not. Not when the two of them seemed to get along despite their mutual, obvious social obliviousness. This prompted investigation, research into this "Nameless One's" identity.

"If this blows over and, by some miracle, you come out unscathed? We need to have another discussion about keeping your identity secret. Have I made myself clear?"

Midoriya gulped. "C-crystal, sir."

A sound, someone's hand patting a cloth covered shoulder. "Go, spend time with your friends." Footsteps padding for the door were Stendhal's cue to slink away. So slink away he did. Aizawa's sending him off wasn't a show of fondness, more like giving someone on death row a final meal. Perhaps that was unfortunately phrased, considering what physical proximity to others gave rise to. Hmm... I need to work on my word choice, don't I? As he rounded a corner he walked face first into someone. It wasn't his face being buried against the other's chest, however.

The sweaty, glycerin scent gave away the name before the voice. "Watch it!" A strong, bandaged hand shoved him, unbalancing the lanky teen. His long fingers gripped fruitlessly at the wall, but their dragging along the pebbled surface slowed his descent long enough to regain his footing. "Fuckin idiot..." Bakugo growled, good hand squeezing gingerly at his bandaged one. Stendhal rolled his eyes. Once again, this brute was lashing out, hurting others with only regards to his own dilemmas. It made him shudder to think what it might take to rattle this kid into widening his narrow vision.

That train of thought would be ended by the warhead himself. As he continued stomping away his shoulder slammed rudely into Stendhal's upper arm.

"Watch where you're going, crow-face."

Last straw.

Stendhal's hand was on Bakugo's throat, a millisecond before his body was slammed against the
concrete wall. Bakugo was dragged across the pebbled wall, drag upward by his neck. The snarl on Stendhal's face bared teeth, pointed canines similar to Midoriya's fangs. The warhead tried to kick the taller boy off him, his legs were already flailing about, but he didn't so much as budge. When he went to turn his good palm to Stendhal's face -to blow him away with his quirk- the dhampire's unoccupied hand snared his wrist. Bakugo's wrist felt like a twig between his fingers. Humans really are fragile little things. His snarl curled into a dark smirk, relishing Bakugo's helplessness.

"What's wrong?" goaded he. "Never been put in a situation like this?"

Bakugo choked, trying to say something, likely just more mouthing off.

Stendhal cackled, "You really haven't been having the best time of it today."

Even as he choked Bakugo's lips flinched upward, snarling at him.

A gesture Stendhal was only too happy to ignore. "Late karma if you ask me." Bakugo's face started going white, his limbs losing their strength. Stendhal took this as a cue to toss him back to the ground. As the warhead sat there gagging, gasping for air like a beached fish, Stendhal turned to walk away. "If there is any hope for you at all, take this as a warning..." his hands went to his pockets. "if you really want to be a hero then correct your path, or some day I will come along and correct you." With another cackling laugh he added, "Next time someone walks into you, try being polite."

"Get off your damn high horse..." Bakugo massaged his throat, climbing onto shaky legs. "Like you've never made mistakes in your life!"

How I wish that were so. "At least you admit it." Said he, both to himself and the other boy. Truth be told that threat was likely an empty one. It wasn't possibly to forcibly correct such a stubborn spirit as Bakugo's. The only way to stop his violent path was likely to end that path. Not an action to be considered lightly.

But then, that sort of thinking was never far from his mind...

He didn't remember much about the day his family died. A lot of smoke, heat, a building burning to ash around him. Eventually it collapsed, leaving him almost buried on the bottom floor. Concrete dust and smoke clouded the air, blood and corpses tainted the ground. Both had nearly suffocated him, though for much different reasons. When All Might had arrived on scene, pulling him from the wreckage, he'd found little more than a screaming child covered in his mother's blood. Memories he'd done his best to bury, to avoid discussing entirely.

One thought, above the others, persisted: he wondered exactly what he might do if ever he found his parent's killer. The answer was never difficult to find. Every now and then a crack would appear in his mind, some errant emotion or desire that prompted a re-compartmentalization of that dreadful night.

Such as a friend killing maniac pissing him off, reigniting his murderous intent.

Really, the days where he felt almost nothing were the best days, by far. Feeling things was...cumbersome, draining. Days like today made his emotions work overtime. He let out a yawn, doing his best not break stride as his mouth pulled wide open. *Time to go 'home'...*

"Akaguro?" He stopped. Turning around, he saw a certain vampire, looking after him with those mis-matched puppy eyes of his. "Where are you going? I thought we all made plans to hang out after the festival."
That look on Midoriya's face, of a puppy missing its owner, put a smirk on his own lips. "Sorry, my friend," said he, doing nothing to mask his fatigue, "I'm just... weary. Today was a bit tiring, rich as that must sound." He chuckled, self conscious of how selfish that must have come across.

"N-no, it's fine!" Reassured he, hands frantically gesturing about. "I just..." he seemed to struggle with something, debating whether or not to divulge a certain emotion. He wanted to say that he was hoping Stendhal would tag along, that he wanted his friend there as they blew off steam. However, he didn't voice this in the end, and thus Stendhal could only guess what he wanted to say. "Nevermind," Smiled he, failing to mask his disappointment, "get some rest, alright?"

Another chuckle, this one devoid of any darkness. "Alright, and I'll... be sure to be there next time."
At this, a genuine smile appeared on Midoriya's face and Stendhal turned to keep walking away. He'd only just made it to the door, the exit, when a thought occurred. "...You know," said he, turning around seeing his friend doing much the same. "There's a rumor going around that we're going to chose our real names soon."
Midoriya blinked, clearly confused. "Soon you won't be 'Deku' or 'Green', 'Midoriya' or 'Izuku' but a name of your choosing, your true name."

More blinking, a hesitating hand pointing at himself. "My... true... name?"

Stendhal chuckled again. "That's right," without meaning to, he smiled reassuringly at his friend, "the names others give us, no matter the reason, never hold as much meaning, as much weight as those of our own choosing." Midoriya, slow on the uptake this time as he was, seemed to be getting it. "The names we choose are who we are, reflections of our own hearts, indicators of our desires; the things that make us who we are." He pointed at himself, more decisively than Midoriya. "I chose the name 'Stendhal', and will officially when that day comes." Then, that look of dark determination, curious this time, colored his brow, his eyes. "I'm curious about what you'll chose."
Waving goodbye, he stepped through the door. "See you soon, 'Midoriya'."

As the door closed, the vampire waved goodbye. "See you then... Stendhal."

And the door clicked shut.

Well, that had certainly turned out to be fun. Skipping along, humming merrily to herself, Himiko Toga plopped a lollipop into her mouth. If she could just ignore the fact that she'd had to ignore her 'Kyoka gurl' the entire time, this was actually a good day. She got to go out, beat up a few jerks, meet new people, be new people, the good things in life. Although she had hurt one person who hadn't really had it coming today, she'd have to leave her chocolates as an apology. Assume she'd even remember what happened, that was.

The old man had a way of fogging memories, something she'd long been afraid of. Make one wrong move, betray the old husk and there goes your identity. Every story you ever had to tell, gone in a flash. It wasn't the kind of thing she daydreamed about happening to her. She cherished her memories, the good and the bad. If those memories got to be hard to carry? Well, she had ways to manage the burden.

"You done yet?" Her ears perked up, at the gravely voice of a strange man. "The Boss wants us to report back immediately.

"I'm done when I'm done." Snapped another man.

The first one growled. "Gotta death wish? We're keeping him from his experiments with the girl."

Girl? What Girl?
"Ain't gonna go any faster with you badgering me," the second remarked, "you're so anxious then git. I'll let im know what's up when I get back."

A long tired sigh from the first. "You do gotta deathwish." Arms were thrown into the air, slapping down by his sides. "Fine, your funeral. Just don't try beggin to me if I'm the one who's gotta kill ya."

Experiments on a girl? A boss who killed his peons on a whim? She grinned, barely containing her squeal of delight. Oh what a fun day! Now she had to know what all this was about. Slinking forward, toward the voice who had already left his friend behind, she drew one of her knives. Quietly, silent as a shadow, she tailed him. It was only after a minute that she saw where he was headed. A rutty, run down, abandoned shop. Several people were gathered around outside it, most of them young. Dirty, rag-wearing street urchins, to the untrained eye, but Toga saw through them. Their eyes were never focused on their games or side-walk scribblings, but always on their surroundings.

Watchers, lookouts for some secret hideaway inside the old shop.

Very interesting indeed. Grinning wide, exposing her four, long and pointed canines she crept up to the thug. This man had no qualms about killing his friend, why should she feel bad about killing him?

"Psst." Whispered she.

The thug, with as much deft as a drunk toddler, turned around in time for her to stab him through the neck. Wheeling behind him, arms hooked beneath his shoulders, she dragged him into an alley as his strength left him. Allowing herself a quiet cackle she withdrew her knife and latched her teeth into his neck, mouth over the open wound. Slowly, gulp by gulp, the man's strength faded and she was left standing in an alley holding a cold corpse.

Stripping down, hiding her clothes away for later, she drew in a deep breath as her skin turned to blobby jelly and her body re-shaped itself as the man she'd killed; clothes and all. Clearing her throat Working quickly, she hauled the body to a dumpster and fished the man's belongings from his pockets. His ID, several glass vials containing liquids of varying colors, a phone and- she balked at the sight of it. A gun?! What kind of criminal was this man? Warily she pocketed the weapon and started lumbering towards the hideout. One of the children, the lookouts, nodded at her with a smile. She grunted in the man's voice and nodded at the young one. The beaming smile she got from such a minor gesture almost made her heart skip. These kids weren't treated very well, were they?

Once inside the shop she peered about. There had to be something in here, some hidden entrance to a hideout. Wandering into the back room, she found it. Scratched upon the floor were faint, semi circular markings leading to one side of an old cabinet. She allowed herself a grin, easy-peasy. What is this, criminal amateur hour? Taking hold of the outer edge she hauled the old cabinet to, and opened the secret passage-way. A long, winding step into the dark below. Judging from the smell, these goons were hiding out in the sewers. Jus' what I wanted... Wrinkling her nose she began the long descent.

Slippery were the steps, so much so that she nearly lost her footing. Once at the bottom she whistled out a relieved breath. What kind of lunatic would establish a hideout down here, she wondered. As if to answer the question was the sudden ignition of a blue flame, at the end of a man's fingertips. He stood there, poised as though his fingers might become a flame-thrower, staring her down.
"You're late." Said he, with a face so ghastly she nearly let her eyes go wide. From is sternum all the way up to his upper lip, his skin was dark, wrinkled and glistening. So too was the skin beneath his eyes, and in both places it seemed that miscolored, dead skin was held in place with little more than a few staples. What kind of monster would do this to a person?

"Sorry," she shrugged, still speaking in the dead man's voice, "idiot's taking his sweet time takin a leak." Silently, she decided to call him 'Frankie', after Frankenstein's monster.

Fankie rolled his eyes. "Typical." And the flames extinguished as his hands jammed into his pockets. "Did you at least try to make him hurry along?"

She chuckled, feigning nervousness. "You know I did."

A growl rumbled in her companion's throat. "Well, at least you had the brains to come back. I don't look forward to watching him get scraped off the wall."

A sentiment that piqued Toga's curiosity. "Whudda ya think the boss'll have done to im?"

Frankie scoffed out a single laugh. "Just the usual." No answers to be gained from this one.

Toga nodded walking silently by the man's side, following him deeper into the underground maze. Above them, the ceiling shook. "What was that?"

Her friend turned a lazy gaze to the ceiling. "Probably that mutant thing on the news, from the USJ incident or whatever they're calling it. It's so close to us now every time it lands somewhere it shakes the place up." He dusted off his shoulder. "Mind your head, Tsubasa."

"Will do…." The Nomu… was it headed toward UA? Why? That thing was supposed to be mindless, incapable of sentient thought. The old man had done a number on the man it used to be. That it was running about, causing trouble of own volition was concerning.

After another few steps, Frankie opened a door and ushered Toga through it. There, standing at the far end of the room, looking up at a large chemical vat, was a man. He stood only a few inches taller than your average man, his reddish-brown hair unkempt. Draped over his thin frame was a large, fur collared bomber jacket. When he turned around to give them a sidelong look in the eyes, his own eye narrowed. A thin, beady, gold eye with a pupil so small it may as well have not been there.

"Did you obtain them?" He spoke through a leather plague mask, fastened together and lined in places with old metal.

The voice made Toga's skin crawl. Without a moment wasted, she reached into her pocket and procured the glass vials, holding them up for this man to see.

He hummed, pleased with the result and turned back toward the chemical vat. "Good. And where is your partner? Delayed again?"

Toga, once again, laughed nervously. "He's been makin a habit of it."

The man in the plague mask sighed, "It won't be one for long." Then he turned to Frankie. "Dabi," he said to Frankie, "when he returns, turn him to cinders." Nodding, Frankie turned and walked out of the room.

"And me, sir?"
"Call me Overhaul, Tsubasa." The man in the mask held up the vials. "You did well, bringing me these." Placing the vials on a table, beside the chemical vat, he said, "now leave, and er, tell Katsukame to bring Eri to me." He removed one of his gloves, flexing the fingers and wrist of that hand. "We have work to do."

Deku wasn't sure exactly how they'd arrived at the theater. He only knew that, for the last two hours, they'd been sitting through a two-hundred-year-old film called 'Serenity'.

To his side, curled up in her seat, Jiro was fast asleep. She'd nestled up against Kaminari's arm, face pressed against his shoulder as she slumbered. Smirking, taking off his jacket, he draped it over her. "Is she… usually like this?"

Kaminari shook his head. "Only when she's exhausted. The more tired she is, the more cuddly she gets." In her sleep, Jiro groaned, shifting down slightly, obscuring her face beneath Deku's jacket. "It's too god-damn cute… get me insulin, Green. She's giving me diabetes."

"I… doubt that." Deku smirked sheepishly, scratching at the side of his neck.

Peering over from Kaminari's left was Ashido, turning scrutinizing eyes to the sight of her friends cuddling. "Nope, he's right." she grinned, suppressing a mischievous laugh. "Just don't don't be rude now and wake her up by tickling her."

At Ashido's harsh whispering of that one word in particular, Jiro's eyes bolted open and she sat up, practically jumping to the other side of her seat. Then Ahshido started snickering.

Jiro glared at her, making sure to cover her sides with her elbows as she rooted herself as far onto the other side of her seat as possible. "You're evil." Ashido's snickering almost turned to cackling. "When I graduate? You're the first villain I'm putting away." Then both her and Kaminari burst out laughing. Growling, Jiro, with no small amount of indignity, jabbed Kaminari with her earlobes.

"OW!" He all but shouted, "Why me?!

Crossing her arms and looking away from him, she angrily pouted. "You were closer…"

And shielding the other person who made her mad... Deku did not say.

As Ashido continued laughing several people in the theater started hissing, "SHHHHHH!" Even then, she kept snickering.

Rolling his eyes and shaking his head, Todoroki shrunk into his seat, trying not to be seen by anyone. "We're not going to get in trouble, are we?"

Nervously glancing about, looking for any of the staff that might have decided to kick them out, Yaoyaorozu mumbled, "I sincerely hope not… I'm rather fond of this theater."

"It'll be fine," Uraraka batted that sentiment out of the air, "when I was a kid I made loads more noise than that and we never got kicked out."

Deku couldn't help but disagree. "I don't think security will be so forgiving with a bunch of teenagers… children get away with things because they're, uh…"

"Kids?" Jiro offered, giving him a playful smirk.

"...Well, yeah."
She shrugged. "Nah, I'm sure it's still fine. This place isn't nearly ritzy enough to get mad about one-" a mammoth of a yawn exploded out of her. Just watching her face made Deku, very involuntarily, follow her example. "Noise complaint." she finished, trying to get comfortable where she was. Noticing Deku's jacket was draped over her, she blushed a little as she tucked herself into the make-shift blanket. "Thanks for your jacket…" she mumbled, hiding her face a little more as she snuggled against him.

He almost followed suit with the blushing too. Guess Kaminari was right…. "S-Sure." He meekly replied.

Fighting back fatigue, she managed to notice that stutter of his. "Um… I can just… try to stay awake."

"N-no, it-it's fine!" he chuckled nervously under his breath, earning a very peculiar look from Jiro. "You-you don't have to do that…"

Uncertain, giving him an apologetic look, she closed her eyes. Before long, she was far away in lala land all over again. Deku let out a short breath. Two weeks of not even talking, and now this? It was official, friendship made no sense to him at all.

Fortunately, he was in the perfect place to avoid confusing trains of thought.

Turning his attention back to the movie, Deku suddenly remembered what he was watching. Once upon a time, Deku had tracked down the old Tv Show that accompanied this film and loved it. To a thirteen-year-old Deku, it was about as amazing as serialized Sci-Fi could be. But this movie… it was a grim, monstrous beast, only vaguely like the original. What was it about the big screen that made writers feel like they had to kill off such beloved characters? The wider audience it garnered, perhaps. The idea that what you have to say could reach and affect the lives of millions; it had a way of making one feel as if they must leave some tangible mark on those who would behold such a creation. Whatever lesson this film seemed to be trying to teach, Deku wasn't sure he liked it.

'...They will swing back to the belief that they can make people… better. And I do not hold to that.'

He squirmed in his seat, trying to avoid letting such a sentiment sit well with him. It was the kind of thought that led one to question the viability of any sort of personal growth. A defeatist attitude, one Deku couldn't afford to abide by.

*If that's true, thought he as he exhaled sharply, what hope do I have of overcoming what I am? If people can't be better than… themselves, then what hope does anyone have of overcoming the terrible things that might have happened to them?* He turned to his gathered friends, considering their stories; at least those that he knew to any degree. Two of them had come from places, backgrounds that made his own life look easy, simple. Yet here they were, fighting against what they carried to be better than all of it. It was… disheartening to think that struggle would be in vain.

Wasn't it just human nature, to struggle against one's darker side to try and leave the world a better place than when you entered into it? He couldn't stop thinking about that, not even when the film ended and everyone was going home.

Jiro tried to hand him back his jacket, but he just shook his head. "I don't really need it," she gave him a curious look, prompting him to elaborate, "I don't really get cold. Thanks to, er…"

A look of realization crossed her face and she held up a silencing hand. "Say no more." She slid into the garment, with more more grace than one should have been expected of the so recently
awoken. "I'll bring it to school on monday, promise." She said with a happy smirk.

"Thanks," he chuckled nervously, "Iida would probably yell at me for breaking the school dress code if you didn't."

Jiro giggled, "yeah, even though that's Yaomomo's job."

"Ooh ooh! Mine too!" Ashido said, excitedly raising her hands. "I'll totally be like 'you have committed an unforgivable infraction!' "

Todoroki gave her a very incredulous look. "...I.. I don't think it would be that bad."

Leaning closer to him, both Yaoyorozu and Kaminari whispered in his ear. "She's probably kidding." Making a very self conscious Todoroki wish his jacket had a hood for him to hide inside; So his body language said anyways.

Chuckling, Uraraka spun around on her heels to talk to everyone. "That was fun, but I think if we stay out any longer we're all gonna collapse." Giving them all a wave, she bid them all goodnight. "See you all soon, yeah?"

"Of course!" Ashido chirped. "Even if we don't hang out this weekend we're all back at this school thing after that!"

Nodding, Yaoyorozu gave their little group a polite smile. "Sweet dreams, when you have them, everyone."

Waving goodnight, Jiro failed to fight back another yawn. "Night, guys."

Pointing at Jiro's nose, Kaminari gave her a playful scolding. "Text me when you get home, sleepy."

She rolled her eyes. "Tell your gramps I said hi, alright?" Nodding, Kaminari spun around and started walking away, Ashido and Uraraka doing the same.

"Midoriya?" Deku turned to see Todoroki, fidgeting his fingers at his other arm. He was obviously somewhat uncomfortable. "...Thanks. For... well, you know." He looked Deku in the eye, hoping he'd catch on so he wouldn't have to elaborate.

In the end, that hope was answered. "Anytime, Todoroki." Surprising all present, the heterochrome smirked. Something that none had yet seen him do.

"If ever you need my help," said the dual-quirk user, "I'm one phone call away." Waving, backpedaling for the first few steps, he turned about and walked off.

Mild shock worn plainly on her face, Yaoyorozu turned and looked at Deku. For a moment she wondered exactly what had happened out there, in the arena, but failed to ask about it. In the end, she simply -and silently- regarded him with a small degree of respect. "See you soon?"

Both he and Jiro nodded. "Count on it." Said she, and a smiling Yaoyorozu walked away. "What a day..." Jiro sighed, rubbing the back of her head. "Feels like it dragged on for over a month or something."

At the utterance of those words, Deku let out a long breath, and only then did he realize just how exhausted he was. "Forget sleep, I think I'm gonna fall into a coma tonight..."
Jiro laughed. "I'll be sure to inform your mother, so she stocks up on smelling salts." She stuck her
tongue out at him, jokingly, but after a moment, she almost started to look gloomy. "...I wanted to
thank you too." Deku blinked, surprised by her sudden sincerity. "I've been a lousy friend for a
while, like I've kinda already said but..." she looked at him, a guilty half frown on her face. "You
were awesome today. Letting me whine and cry to you about my stupid life and more or less acting
like the last two weeks never happened." Reaching out, she lightly punched his shoulder. "You're a
good one, Green." She smiled, her awkward, unpracticed little smile. "I'm... glad we're friends."

For a moment, he truly had no idea how to react to this. Blinking, shaking his head and forcing his
brain to function, he blurted out. "Ah, me too! I-I mean, don't worry about it." She raised an
eyebrow at him. "You were obviously going through a rough time, considering- ah, wait you
probably don't want to think about that!"

"Um... Green?"

"The main point I was trying to make was you had nothing to be sorry about! Ah, n-not that your
feelings are invalid or anything!"

"...Green, it's-"

"I just don't you too feel like-"

"Green!" She shoved a pair of fingers over his lips, silencing him outright. "Breath in, slowly." He
did. "Good, now let it out, just as slow." Closing his eyes, he obeyed and felt his nerves calming
down. "Good boy." Removing her hand from his face, she shook her head failing to notice a rather prominent reddening of his face. "You know you can relax around me, right?"

Just to be sure, he took another series of slow breaths. "Starting to, I think." he murmured, suddenly
aware of headache that was coming on.

Still smiling she rolled her eyes. "Izuku," his face went bright red again at her using his fist name
like that, "you are one silly person." Judging from that look on her face, that smile still perched on
her lips, she'd clearly started letting her guard down around him.

Still blushing, he drew a closed hand up in front of his lips and cleared his throat. "Um, ah..."
Words, his brain knew how to use those once. "Are we... on a first name basis now?"

"Hmm?" She blinked, smile replaced by a look of curiosity, head tilting to one side. Then it hit her,
and it was her turn to blush as her hands flew to cover her mouth in her embarrassment. "Oh! N-no,
that was..." and she cleared her throat, "accidental, total slip of the tongue, Green. Sorry."

"H-hey, it's okay." he reassured, "It's... not the first time, remember?"

Another round of curious blinking. "Oh... right..." not a happy memory. "Back at the USJ." She
rubbed at the back of her head. "I just didn't know what else to do then. You were so out of it you
didn't respond to anything else."

"Sounds about right." Said he, fighting back the memories, the images of the ensuing battle that
had followed. "Actually... why didn't you try calling me Deku? It's what I call myself in my head,
after all."

Sighing, eyes narrowing slightly, she forced herself to remain patient. "Because I refuse to call you
anything approximating 'Dekunobou' or 'useless person'." She reached up and flicked his nose,
making him flinch. "So... get used to Green, or whatever you want me to call you instead."
Realizing he wasn't going to win this one, he relented. "Okay. But, what do you want me to call you?" Jiro, once again, quirked an eyebrow at him. "Like… do you have a nickname or should I just stick with Jiro?"

Cheeks going pink again, she reached up and fussed with a strand of her hair, eyes darting away from his. "I-I mean… yeah? Jiro works but…” Okay what the hell, this was nothing to get flustered over and she knew it. "I did just call you-" No, don't call him that again. "By your first name, so, maybe… just give mine a try?"

Credit where it's due: of all things he'd been anticipating, that was the one he was least prepared for. "U-um, okay…” he gulped, taking a short breath before the plunge. "Kyo...ka?"

Nope. Nope nope nope nope nope nope nope nope. The shade of crimson they both turned was almost neon red. So embarrassed were they that they had to turn away from each other. "Iiiii think Jiro's fine." she squeaked, and he could only nod rapidly, many, many times in reply.

They stood there in silence, forcing themselves to calm down again. A gust of wind blew. A car drove by. Her watch beeped, telling her the hour had struck.

Glancing at her watch, she winced. "Fuck. Um… yeah, we should call it a night." It was ten. Again, nerves finally calming, he nodded. "Uh, text you later?"

Putting her hands into her jacket pockets -well, his jacket pockets- she waved and gave him another smirk. "You'd better." For a few steps she backpedaled away, but soon enough she was spun about and walking, almost skipping away he thought.

Sighing, rubbing at his eyes he did his best to process what a day it had been. It was clear from the spinning of his brain that he was going to need sleep before that happened.

"That was so cute!" Deku almost screamed, whirling about, arms flailing he wound up face-to-face with his mom. She jolted, backing away from her surprised and flailing child. "Did I sneak up on you?"

"What are you doing here!?" He almost shrieked, hand over his hammering heart.

She blinked. "You… texted me where you'd be?" She held up her phone, pointing at the message in question. "I thought you wanted me to come get you once the movie ended."

When the hell did I do that? "O-oh. Thanks mom…” okay, remember: breathe slowly, Deku. That's how you stay calm.

She smiled. "Sorry to scare you, I just didn't want to interrupt the two of you." Then she giggled. "I have to admit, I didn't expect to be seeing anything quite like that so soon into the school year."

He did not like the sound of this. "...What are you talking about?"

"Oh, nothing I'm sure." She gave him the most obviously fake innocent look he'd ever seen. And that was saying something. "Are you hungry? You didn't say if you'd had dinner yet."

Relieved at the change in topics, he sighed. "No, but I'm not hungry-” Then his stomach practically roared. Forcing his jaw to remain closed, he covered his face with his hands. Great, so much for the peaceful walk home. His mother clearing her throat prompted him to peek through his fingers. She was giving him a patient smile, holding up a metal thermos. Gulping, sheepishly, he reached out and accepted it. "Thanks, mom…"
She leaned forward and kissed his forehead. "What else would I do?" as he opened the thermos, they started walking home. "Bad parenting to let your kids go hungry."

_Not like anyone would blame you, kid being a literal monster and all._ Sipping at the thermos, he silently thanked his good sense to not say that out loud. "...Yeah."

Only she knew her son well enough to guess what he might have been thinking. Concerned, frowning, she cast him a sidelong look as they walked. "Little Izu?"

"Hmm?" he murmured between sips.

It took her a little while to sort out her feelings, to find what she wanted to say. But eventually, as she always did, she found exactly the right ones. "...Did I ever tell you about my favorite flower?"

They'd just started walking over a bridge, just as the wind picked up the other side. It carried the lingering scents of the city's daytime activities. All those wonderful and disgusting smells that reminded him just how inhuman he was now. Streetlights reflected off the water below, orange coloring the little river in shimmering cascades across the blue, rippling surface of the water. Yet the youngest Midoriya was focused on the question, unanswered. "...No." Said he.

She smiled, peering up at the night sky as they walked, more slowly now. "I saw you fight today, in the tournament..." Her voice was quiet, trailing almost as gently as the wind around them. To say it was calming wouldn't have done it justice. "In a lot of ways, you remind me of it now."

Giving him a knowing look, she added, "but then... you always did, my little Izu." He stopped, overcome by curiosity as she gazed out into the water below. Her hands trailed along the cobbled stone that made up the wall, along the bridge's edge before she leaned against it, resting. "It symbolizes one of the things I've always thought to be the best about people: love." Deku rubbed at the back of his neck, not sure he really agreed or understood the sentiment. "My little boy, his heart so big that his biggest dream was to be a hero. The kind that saved people with a smile?" She gave him another knowing look, and he bashfully looked away.

_Darn it, mom..._

She turned back toward the water, face upturned she closed her eyes and drew in a long breath. "And in all this time that never went away." her voice was sad now, almost longing, searching. "Even when life seemed to content to just batter you around for the fun of it..." Eyes open, she looked sadly, down at the water again. "Now here you are, making that dream come real, even as you fight against... how did you phrase it? 'That monster you are now', right?" Shaking her head, at the silliness of her boy ever being such a thing, she went on. "Blood, anger, aggression, violent things... it's also a symbol of those. So in the end... the little flower symbolizes the internal struggle everyone faces: love, that quiet, persistent thing that it is, trying to be the greater force and win against such terrible things, that we all have the potential to do." Then, smiling in full, she turned at looked at her son, standing there speechless. "Guren, the crimson lotus, reminds me of you, my little Izu, and I know the better side will always win, no matter what."

_Do you really believe that?_

...I have to.

He smiled, taking a step closer and holding her tight. "Thanks, mom."

She hugged him back, face nestled against his shoulder. When had he gotten taller than her? "I love you, my little boy." He squeezed her tighter. "Never forget that."
He wanted to say 'I won't,' to tell her he'd always know that, but he couldn't. Something stopped him. A lancing feeling in his chest, right through him, a stabbing pain. He was so shocked to feel it, nothing felt wrong just then, did it? So why did he…?

His eyes opened, the world seemed… blurry, hazy. He held up a shaking hand and saw-

Eyes going wide, his mind was slow to recognize it. Blood? It spurted from his mouth, something ripping in, through his chest. He was drenched in it, one of his lungs screaming in agony!

"The beginning… is the end and..." said a strained, tired voice. The kind of voice that had seen into the darkest depths of all living things and not turned from the sight unscathed, unmarked. "Keeps coming round again."

Deku was flung into the air, the things lancing through his chest wriggled about like squirming tendrils. White, glistening with his blood and reflecting light like only human teeth ever did. He'd been stabbed by teeth, growing, writhing, superhuman teeth. Screaming in pain, his claws extended and he slashed through them.

Screaming, his attacker retracted what remained of his mangled teeth. Hands flew to his mouth as Deku fell against the concrete, his blood gushing from his chest as he gasped for air, lungs gargling against the fluid that filled them.

"M-mom," he strained, "ru-!" and then he was aware of it. The thing standing over him, its purple, muscled leg right in front of his face. Looking up, he saw the face of a thing he'd hoped never to look at again: the face of the Nomu, covered in what could only be human blood.

Its face twisted with rage, neck convulsing, twitching as its mouth slowly opened. "You…." it- it could talk? "Killed master." Bits of dried blood and viscera flaked off of it at it moved, the remnants of flesh that he could smell on its breath.

His chest hadn't finished healing. Its hand was on his head, pulling him from the ground as he gasped for air. Maw drawing closer to his head, his limbs struggled to function against a lack of air. Eyes flinching shut, he tried to think of anything other than the things maw and hoped it would be a quick death.

Flesh was rended, cleaved from the body, and Deku fell again to the street. Confused, dazed, his eyes opened to see Vanessa standing over him, her claws dripping red. She stood, defiant, between Deku and the Nomu. "Touch him again," she threw the Nomu's hand into the river below, "And I will kill you." In retaliation, its fist swung for her, but a flick of her wrist cut the attacking appendage to shreds. It roared in savage anger, and so did she.

Arms flailing over his head, a feeble effort to protect his nearly healed form, Deku tried to be as small a target as he could. Vanessa lounged forward, her claws digging into the thing's chest. Feet planted firmly on the ground, she hauled with all her strength, and threw the Nomu. It screamed, arms not yet regenerated, it went crashing to the ground. The man, speaking in riddles, leaped over it, lancing out with his still bleeding teeth to spear the lady. She barely even tried to dodge. Leaping into the air, her knee soon made contact with the man's head, sending him skipping across the road.

"NO!" The Nomu screamed, kicking her with the force of a hurricane. Her body was sent careening, crashing through a nearby building. "NO KILL FRIEND!" Arms reforming it tore through the night after her, as Deku writhed on the ground. She met its charge head on. Claws tearing through, skin, muscle and bone, her hands lanced their way down to its chest. She vivisected it, tearing it clean open and spilling its entrails onto the street.
It didn't even scream. It just lurched forward, and latched its teeth over her shoulder. A sickening, splattering crunch made Deku thing he might be ill. Dazed, unable to scream, Vanessa fell to her knees. Her eyes twitching, body unable to move as one of its arms rekindled. It picked her up and started flailing her into the ground, over and over and over again.

The madman wasn't moving, noise seemed to fill the air. Heroes arrived, Ingenium, he thought he saw. Ground shaking, a woman the size of a kaiju stepped into the fray, stomping on the Nomu while Ingenium scooped up the unconscious madman. She was flung into the air, her spine crashing down through a nearby garage. Blood spurted from her mouth, the Nomu soared through the air, its feet drawn up close to its body, poised to crush. When it connected, the giant heroine's sternum was driven into the yielding flesh of the organs behind it.

"God damn you!" Vanessa screamed, tearing through the air after it. Her foot managed to snap the Nomu's neck, its head dangling limp and swaying at the slightest motion. "Takeyama, hang in there!" the giant lady wasn't even moving. Her body shrinking down to its normal size, motionless and going cold. Arms swinging wildly, Vanessa tore through the Nomu again and again. Blood was strewn across the ground, bits of ribs, arms, muscles and tendons painted and clung to walls. Why didn't it just fall!? A question punctuated by a rather desperate and savage punch to her head, sending her careening through a small car.

Staggering, the Nomu looked about, shaking its head as it snapped back into place. Its eyes found Ingenium and it snarled. "No." In an instant, it was on him, hands crushing his armor and ribs as it brought his head to its mouth. With a defiant scream, Vanessa leaped back onto the Nomu her teeth sinking into its face, its eye as she speared her hands deep into its chest. Fumbling about it dropped Ingenium, and grabbed her. Pulling with all its strength, one of her arms was torn clean from her torso before it hauled her over its head smashed her through the roof of a nearby van. Staggering, its flesh crawling back together, it hobbled over to the madman and picked him up.

"ENOUGH!" Slamming into the ground, feet smashing through the pavement, was a herculean being that made the creature's eyes bulge. "You're not hurting anyone else, because I AM HERE!" All Might, his voice was a battle cry, challenging this monster for all it had left to fight with.

It wouldn't be delivering on that today. With a rush of air, it took off into the sky, leaping for the horizon, and All Might pursued.

Coughing, gagging, Deku shuddered. If All Might hadn't arrived… no, there wasn't time to think about that. His groggy head rose and scanned the area. Ingenium was groaning, rolling onto his back in an attempt to get back up. Vanessa was peeling herself from the jagged metal of the vehicle she'd crashed through. The other lady… wasn't even twitching.

Blood spewing from his lips, his lungs struggling in their final efforts of repair, he tried to talk. "Mom," he coughed, gasping for more air, somewhat easily this time. His hand fumbled about, searching for her. "Mom, where-

Palm resting on her back, he felt a warm, open wound. Her shirt and skin completely saturated, body unmoving.

"MOM!" He lurched forward, hands cradling her limp form. She was so cold now… "Mom, stay with me!" a hand went to her face, cupping her cheek. "I've got you! It's gonna be- it's…" No, no please no! Not her! Not her for the love of everything! Take the world, take anyone just not her!

"Izu...ku?" Oh god, oh no, oh god, please! "You... your eyes..."
"Mom…"

She smiled. "I never noticed… how clear…" her hand was on his face, the scarred side, tracing around his blackened eye. "How clear… they still were…" Color drained from her face, hand falling to the ground, eyes glazing over, unfocused and staring into eternity.

No warmth, no life.

"Mom…"

Nothing.

Just a void, where she used to be.

You don't meet people like her.

Not crying, it was so… easy. Just strangle your own heart, relish the pain of it, the misery it brings, caging up such things. Of funerals were the one place you were really expected to cry…

My mother was-

Teeth dug into a lip, the rain beat down from the sky. How much time had gone by? How had he gotten here? Faces… none of them friends. Co workers of hers, he guessed. Here as some act of courtesy to the woman they'd long labored beside. Some of them had said… something, kind somethings. He couldn't remember what they were. He couldn't remember anything. He couldn't let himself feel anything.

But every time he started speaking… there were those things called emotions, threatening to boil to the surface.

'Tell me you're gonna be okay,' a friend had said, a girl with brown hair. 'Tell me you'll get through this, Deku.'

How can I?

'If you need anything,' A square jawed boy with glasses, 'I will be there.'

Can you bring her back?

'I am sorry,' tall, lanky, muscular and messy hair, 'it is a useless sentiment, but I know how you feel.'

I wish you didn't…

Arms wrapped around him, purple hair smelling of lavender under his nose. 'I'm here. You're not alone. I won't let you be alone.'

Jiro… and he'd held her tight. I hate that you know this feeling too…

A girl with a pony tail, much taller than he. 'You... she didn't deserve this.'

That's the problem: I did, but she…

Teary eyes, pink skin, messy hair, a tight hug, face smushed against his shoulder. He could feel the tears running down his shirt. 'I'm sorry... I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry
I'm sorry!

It wasn't your fault. Even if you'd been there...

'Uh... shit, hey man.' Yellow hair, black zig-zag. 'If... don't be alone okay? Call me if you need to, I'll swing by, spend the night, week, whatever. I've got your back, buddy.'

Thank you...

Cold, sympathetic, heterochromic eyes. A wordless hand on his shoulder, squeezing gently. 'It's okay to not be okay. You don't have to heal until... Until you heal.'

How much did you need someone to tell you that, once upon a time?

Spiky red hair, strong arms around him, crying his eyes out. Nothing was said, nothing needed to be said. The embrace said it all.

You're a good man, you know...

Tears wiped from his face, standing at the podium, days later. This was it... the last goodbye...

The eulogy of Inko Midoriya.

You hear about them, people like my mother, but you never really see them. You never really meet them... so you end up just thinking they don't exist. You end up deciding the exist only in the most ideal fictions. In stories, maybe... people willing to give everything they have for their kids. Fingers gripped at the podium, cracking the old wood. But she... she was it. She was all of that and then some.

Alone... she'd lived the majority of her adult life alone. Raising a boy too stupid, too suicidal to just not Go charging off. And DIE ONLY TO COME BACK LIKE THIS!

That was her...

That was Inko Midoriya... my hero.

The porch of their house felt desolate. Alone, he sat there, hoping the sun would just burn him from the earth. Waiting for the end.

This was the end, right? Things couldn't go on after this. The world wasn't that cold, it couldn't just keep spinning like nothing happened. It had to stop, it had to realize she was gone. Someone important was missing, who needed to be here. Why was it still spinning? WHY DID EVERYTHING JUST KEEP GOING LIKE NOTHING HAPPENED!?

It can't do that...

It shouldn't...

Alone he sat, waiting. Nothing happened, nothing changed, nothing went back.

This was his life now.

This was reality.

At the end of the walkway, several figures stood. A woman with sunglasses perched on her face, a boy with spiky, ash blond hair, another with spiker, red hair and a girl with violet eyes.
"Do you really think he'll listen to you?" Vanessa murmured. "He hasn't moved in days…" She remembered sitting there with him, offering him drinks from various canteens. Trying to keep him going, to bring him inside to sleep. He wouldn't move, react to voice or touch. His mind, heart, done.

'Do you really just want to die?''

And if I do, would you blame me?

It was her last ditch effort to go and find friends of his to help him, but even they hadn't heard him speak one word.

Walking, cautiously to his side, holding his hand, was Jiro. She didn't say anything. She just squeezed his hand, letting him know she was here. He looked at her sympathetic face, his vacant eyes searching for a reason. Why she was here, why she was wasting her time. There wasn't any point… he was done.

"Oh fuck this…" Fingers snared his collar, hauling him to his feet. He barely had time to give Bakugo a look of shock before he slapped Deku across the face.

"BAKUGO!" Jiro roared, hand seizing the boy's wrist. "WHAT THE FUCK ARE YOU DOING!?"

"Come on man," Kirhsima, urged, trying to coax Bakugo away from him. "What good is that gonna do?"

"You're still in there, right?" Deku blinked, utterly unable to talk. "Good, because you need to fucking listen:" He hauled Deku's face closer, letting his eyes burn a way into Deku's soul. "You cannot just sit there forever!"

"Whuh…." all he could do was blink. "Buh… I-"

"Is this what it was all worth to you?" His breathing stopped. "Everything she did, all the care your friends have for you… if it's really that worthless, fuckin do it! Just sit there forever!" And Bakugo Dropped him, stunned, Deku felt his breath come in shuddering gasps, as he stared up the other boy.

Having had enough of Bakugo's usual antics, Jiro threw a mean right hook, right into his eye. Bakugo reeled, staggering from the force of the hit, Kirishima fought to keep between them. "Lemme at him! He's just hurting him! Stop protecting him!"

Laughing, smirking, Bakugo righted himself and loomed over Deku. "But just so ya know…" He leaned down and looked the vampire right in the eye. "If you walk away? If you really do decide to die? Then you're saying everything she did for you, everything she went through, everything your friends feel for you, all of it was worth nothing to you."

Jiro's eyes crept wide open, Kirishima turned around in disbelief, Vanessa just watched.

Deku's mouth slowly opened. "What did you-"

"You heard me." Bakugo goaded. "You don't value a single thing she did for you," he bared his teeth, "because if you did, you'd be at school kicking ass to make what she gave you worth it!"

Something inside Deku was trembling, shaking, burning now. What was this feeling? What was Bakugo-?
"You're saying that you never loved your mom."

A blur of green, a rush of air, the sound of something hitting all too yielding flesh and Bakugo was sent flying to the ground. Standing, panting, rage and pain on his face, Deku realized he was feeling something.

"Shut… up." Deku's shoulders shook, his body quivered. "Just shut up!" He was angry. "Where the hell do you get off say any of that?! You have no idea what this feels like!" Tears streamed down his face, running freely as his breath turned to sobs. "You've never lost anything except a fight! Never cared about anything but yourself, have you!?" Groaning, blood trickling from his lips, Bakugo fought to so much as prop himself up. "So why are you…?" Hands clapped over his face, Deku fell to his knees, sobbing violently. "Why are you trying to make me care?"

Deku's speech devolved into incoherent crying, blubbering anguish. Bakugo, despite his wounded pride, despite his wounded body, got to his knees too, and put his hands on the shoulders of his former friend. "A long time ago…" said he, quietly, "I… had a friend." Deku's sobbing seemed to stop, sniveling he looked at the warhead's face.

There was… grief on his features, regret. "This weirdo who believed in me… wanted to be just like me." His face scrunched, he growled at himself, but… tears came anyway. "But I… I threw him away. Let my ego get into my eyes and it was all I could fucking see. I treated him like crap because he didn't have a quirk, he was never going to be like me and the idea that he wanted to be, that he'd fight hard enough to do it? Scared the shit out of me." He looked Deku in the eye, those disbelieving, mismatched eyes of his own making. "I was scared that you'd be better than me, becoming a hero without a fucking quirk."

The splintered remains of Deku's heart threatened to break all over again. "...Kacchan?"

Bakugo sniveled too. "You're right… I have no idea what real loss feels like." His face turned to the ground, hands gripping tight at Deku's shoulders, as tears ran down his face. "I just know what it's like to lose your best friend because you were too much of an asshole to do anything other than hurt him until he hated you." Tears streaming freely now, his face upturned with fiery determination. "SO I AM NOT LETTING YOU THROW AWAY WHAT YOU HAVE LEFT, OKAY!?" Deku's lip trembled, the sobbing starting up again. "Get up…" Bakugo's face was shaky, quiet and straining against too many emotions at once. "Get up and fight to win, no matter what like you always do. I know we can't be friends again, but if one us gets to be a hero it should be y-"

Arms flung around Bakugo, pulling him into a vice-like embrace, as a familiar face buried itself in his shoulder. "I missed you…" Bakugo's breath shuddered, unable to believe what he'd just heard. "I missed you, I missed you, I missed you!" And then, unable to hold himself back, his arms went tight around his old friend.

"I'm so fucking sorry…"

"I missed you, Kacchan."

"I'm sorry…"

Looking on, with the biggest, sad smile was Kirishima, beaming at the two hugging, crying boys. Wiping away tears of her own, Jiro walked to them, putting a hand on Deku's shoulder. Vanessa, sighing in palpable relief, walked to the house. School would be starting soon… He'd need his things, probably something to eat.
As Kirishima and Jiro helped the boys to their feet, the purple eyed girl turned to Bakugo. "Thank you." She whispered.

Sniveling, wiping away tears, he nodded. "Whatever…” Clearing his throat, he patted Deku on the back. "Let's… just go to fuckin school."

Eventually, after getting the poor boy inside to change, they did just that.

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**UA High School: Class 1A Homeroom, Present Day**

Nemuri Kayama, otherwise known as the professional hero "Midnight". Teacher of Modern Hero Art history, it was her job to teach these rowdy teenagers the subtler side of determining one's identity as a hero. Symbolism and naming conventions, two aspects of the name so intricately entwined one could mistake them as being one and the same.

At present she stood at the head of Class 1A, a more forlorn group of faces she could not have found on school grounds. This class in particular, she noticed, seemed more tightly knit than the others. Whatever the reason for this was, whenever one of them was adversely affected by life, the pain permeated to all of them. Such was the comradery born of surviving the things they had already, so early in their careers as heroes.

Though that was presently irrelevant, save for understanding the present mood lingering in the air. They all knew what had happened, what had shattered the heart of one of their classmates in particular. Today, almost painfully too soon after recent events, was the day they chose their names.

"A hero's name," began she, "is perhaps more important than the costume," this earned her some odd looks, but nothing she hadn't observed before while teaching this lesson. "It's the label that people remember us by as well as something that usually carries a special meaning to the hero who chooses the name, though this isn't always the case."

Opening a small case, she procured a set of small dry erase boards and markers from within. Placing them in the hands of Hagakure -class 1A's resident invisible girl- she said, "for the next fifteen minutes I want you to consider who you are," one vampiric student in particular flinched at that, "your life, your values, your journeys to this point in your lives."

All in the room had eyes on her, she met their gaze with warm confidence. "Choose the name that fits all of this," she said raising a hand and pointing at them all, "choose a name that tells the world 'who you are'." Turning to one boy in particular, she added quietly, "A name that defies everything you've been through…"

The dry erase board felt wrong in his exhausted hands. This wasn't... No. He was here, he would see this through to the end.

For her...

"I saw you fight today... in the tournament..."

*A name that means something to me... Defying...*

He had it. Uncapping the pen he'd been given, he scrawled out the few Kanji the name required, the raised his hand.

Eyes fluttering in surprise, Midnight nodded. "...Alright. Come to the front of the class, hold it
where the others can see it."

Nodding, he complied. It felt like miles to walk to the front of the room. Out of the corner of his eye he saw many names his classmates had chosen. Crimson Riot, Alien Queen, Earphone Jack, The Invisible Woman, Chargebolt, Creati... Well, his friends had made good choices.

He only hoped his own would so well received, as he expected theirs to be. "I, um..." he mumbled, fidgeting with the board in his hands. "I've been thinking about this for a long time, what my name was gonna be when I got to be a hero. Since I was a kid, really..."

Aww... my little mini might hero! A mother's laugh, her loving embrace.

I love you mom!

He drew in a sharp breath. "Ah, anyways," he wiped a tear from the corner of his eye, "pretty much all those names, from back then were never really gonna work," a few of his classmates gave knowing, sympathetic chuckles, "which worked out just fine for me cuz, I made a friend..." He looked to one brown haired girl in particular.

They exchanged a look, she smiled at him, beamed at him really, even through the sadness she felt on his behalf. "I had this nickname they said would make a great hero name, and for a while? I wanted to do that, turn that name into something to be proud of." Bakugo averted his eyes, guilt twisting his face as he crossed his arms and shrunk into his seat. "But..." Deku breathed, "a few people came along and changed that." Resolution brimming back into his heart, he let his voice raise a little. "I can't change the past, make it prettier or easier to carry," and he flipped his board up, letting them see the name. "We all carry bad things with us, things that happened, things we don't want to be... but we can always choose to be better than that, if we fight hard enough."

Feral Hero: Guren Fang

"That's what this name, is supposed to mean..."

"Please tell me we're not alone,

in this world fighting the wind.

life can be simple if only you can see

the best is yet to come..."
"NO!"

Toga looked over her shoulder, out the door that Frankie -Dabi- had exited from. Kicking and screaming, a little girl was being hauled into the room by a muscular, broad shouldered man wearing a black cloak and a hockey mask. In his hands, held there as if in steel shackles, was a little girl. She had long pale-grey hair and a small horn on the right side of her head. She was frantic, hysterical, desperate to get away from the man dragging her into the room.

The muscular man growled. "So annoying..."

Overhaul pointed right at the hockey mask. "Hurt that child and I will end your life, Muscular." His eyes narrowed to a bloodthirsty glare. "We don't do this to hurt her, we do this to turn her cursed quirk into something that will help people. Isn't that right, Eri?"

Uncertain, Toga looked back and forth between them. Experiments on a girl... that had meant experiments on a small child? The girl, Eri was sniffling, tears running down her face, but she nodded. "D-does it have to hurt? I don't want it to hurt..."

"Oh, Eri..." Overhaul knelt before her, his hands on her cheek. At his mere touch she flinched, as if his fingertips alone were enough to snuff out her life. "You know I can't do that." Toga gritted her teeth. "Besides... I thought we agreed you deserved the pain, after what your little power did to your parents."

She was shaking, head lowered as she failed to fight back tears. "I- I didn't mean to make them go away..."

"Kill them, Eri." Overhaul said, fingers cupped under her chin, making her look at him. "You killed them, it's okay to say it." He put a hand over his chest. "I kill people too, but most of them deserve it. And what have I said about that before?"

She sniveled. "Making my quirk help people is how I wont deserve it too." Toga's lips quivered into a vicious scowl.

And now I have an Overhaul to kill. This was rapidly turning out to be considerably more than what she'd bargained for.

"Good girl." He ruffled her hair. "Now lets get you-"

"BOSS!" Frankie was screaming. "THERE'S SOMETHING HE- ARGH!"

Toga's attention was yanked away from the three others in the room. Sailing through the doorway, a nasty cut on his chest, was Frankie. He crashed into a table that sat at the center of the room, its straps and buckles clattering as he toppled it.

Muscular growled. "What the hell do you mean 'some thi-' " His eyes went wide, Toga's eyes went wide, Overhaul raised an eyebrow. Lumbering, shakily into the chamber was a purple, bird beaked Goliath.

Toga took a step back, away from the monster. What the fuck? Why is Nomu here!?

"That thing from the news?" Overhaul murmured, standing up. "No matter." Waving his hand in a
shooing motion, he spoke to the man in the hockey mask. "Muscular, kill it."

A dark chuckle resonated in his throat. "With pleasure, sir." Pushing Eri aside, he spun around and threw a right hook into the Nomu's face, snapping its neck completely around.

In response, its arm moved in a blur and the resulting punch sent Muscular through a concrete wall. Taking a deep breath, Overhaul sighed. "Must you? Good help is so hard to find these days."

"Hungry..." its shaking, bloody, overly muscled arm reached for Overhaul's head, its fingers ready to snag his skull.

Overhaul didn't even try to avoid it. He just reached up and gently took hold of its arm. "You should have asked nicely." In a violent spectacle so sudden Toga couldn't help but scream in shock, the Nomu's arm, torso and abdomen exploded. "Then I wouldn't have done that instead of feeding you." The Nomu staggered, its knees wobbling as its exposed ribs and organs crawled back together.

As most of its energy was being directed toward healing, it dropped the body in its other hand. Eyebrow raised again, Overhaul walked over to the apparent corpse. When the Nomu went to grab him, his fingers turned its remaining arm to paste and the lumbering beast toppled over. "No... hurt... friend..."

Overhaul scoffed. "You had no problems hurting mine. Why should I...?" A puzzled look contorted his brow. Reaching down he turned the body over, and looked at its face. "...Mooney?"

Gulping down her nerves, Toga spoke, creeping closer to Overhaul. "You know him?" This was the lunatic that the old man had sent Kurogiri to bust out of jail. Ain't that a coincidence...

Overhaul took in a short breath, rubbing at his masked chin and coughing a little. "I... used to." Said he, trying to close eyelids that weren't there. "What have they done to you..."

"Riddles..." managed the fading man, "questions... prophets of dark days..."

Overhaul blinked. "...what?"

Mooney laughed. "Forged in flame, but they know not why... soldiers... secrets..."

Blinking, no idea what to say, Overhaul regarded the man with something resembling horror. "They drove you mad, you poor soul... it would have been kinder to just kill you."

"Boss," Toga managed, eyeing the healing Nomu, its torso almost knitted back together, "who is this guy?" Something even the old man had neglected to mention.

"One of the brightest minds I'd ever known." Overhaul pet at the man's leather covered head. "A genius unparalleled... he deserved better than this."

Huh... so the Boss wanted a former genius on his payroll... Toga grinned. Imma just hafta find out what for. "Can you... fix him?"

"Hmm..." Overhaul rubbed at his chin again. "I don't know, there might not be enough of his mind left..." Beside him, the Nomu groaned, straining to right itself. Overhaul turned and looked at it, eyeing its exposed brain. "Although... maybe there doesn't have to be." Then he started chuckling. "Two poor souls on death's door, finding their way to my doorstep." He laughed. "Fortuitous." He dragged Mooney by his collar and dropped him on the Nomu. "Hang on, old friend. It won't be much of a body, but your mind may yet return." And he placed a hand on Mooney's chest.
The two of them burst. Organs, flesh, bone, muscle all tearing themselves apart, unraveling like flowers in violent bloom and weaving into each other. Two men screamed, their maws agape while their bodies burst and wove back together. Blood pooled on the floor, gallon after gallon as the pulsing, throbbing pile of flesh and bone writhed in agony with each passing, wet pop. Bone jutted out, then in. Stabbing through flesh, carving their way back into place. Two screaming mouths, faces, sets of eyes, slowly lurched closer, melding together and becoming one.

It was all Toga could do not puke.

"Shhhhh..." Overhaul cooed, "it's almost over." And with a final, bloody explosion, the warped body reshaped itself. With a frantic swat of its arm, Overhaul was knocked aside as it scuttled away to cower in the corner. Oh the warped shape it had taken... Its now overly long limbs and torso added something to its already terrifying height. A spine with vertebrae jutting out impossibly far beneath the skin along with the exposed sinews of the muscles in its neck gave it the vague appearance of a living corpse. Its face was shrouded in darkness, hidden beneath a hood molded from the leather of Mooney's outfit and the Nomu's skin.

It sounded like it was crying...

Overhaul stood, his mask torn clean from his face, exposing the jawline hiding behind it. His skin was all wrong... coughing violently, his legs trembling beneath him, the veins in his face, chest and throat had all turned black, the skin pale. Shaking hands returned his mask to his face and he cautiously approached his creation. "Mooney?"

It stopped crying. Fearful eyes turned to Overhaul, its body quivering in fear, rattling of its teeth audible to all in the room. Outside, a collection of black-clad men in plague-masks gathered, watching for whatever came next. Some drew weapons, guns and knives, others readied themselves to flee.

"I..." said the creature, its voice cracking. "yes... Mooney... I am Mooney."

Beneath his mask, Overhaul smiled. "Do you recognize me?"

"...Kai?"

"That's right." Mooney crept forward a few tentative steps, head lowered like a nervous dog and Overhaul kept his voice level, gentle "Are you hungry?" Slowly, Mooney nodded and Overhaul snapped his fingers. "Get this man something to eat and make sure he's comfortable." Confused, the creature peered about, watching for threats, any sign of danger or attack. "When Eri and I are done, we will have much to discuss."

Some grumbling was issued, some sighs of palpable relief and the crowd dissipated. Hesitantly, cautiously, Mooney crept away like a gorilla, crawling about on all fours and following a man who said something about food. Groaning, Muscular and Frankie collected themselves and left the room to lick their wounds.

This left only Eri, Overhaul and Toga in the room. "Tsubasa," Overhaul said to Toga, "I want you to head to the surface, see if anyone might have followed our new friend here." With a flex of his wrist, the bones and tendons cracked more comfortably into place. "If so... well, we'll have to relocate."

Toga nodded. "Anything else, sir?"

"No." Overhaul patted her shoulder. "Actually... be ready to get Eri some ice cream, in the event
that she behaves herself." From beneath a table at the far end of the room, Toga heard pitiful whimpering and had to resist the urge to tear out Overhaul's throat.

With a voice so level it may as well have been monotone, Toga replied, "Consider it done." And she left the room. Eri... she was about to go through what the Nomu and Mooney had, wasn't she? Fingernails digging into her palms, Toga made her way up the steps to the surface.

Running into an alleyway, body rapidly shifting back to her normal shape, she threw up. When she thought she was done, she threw up again. Shaking hands pulled her clothes back over her body, and she made a solemn vow: before she was done with Overhaul, that child would be out of that man's reach. Hopefully, she'd get the chance to gut him like a fish while she was at it.

"Ticking away...
the moments that make up the dull day..."

Time, as one may notice, is unreliable. Seconds may tick away as quickly as they ever did, but turn one's attention away from the clock and watch how they slip away. Years can pass in the blink of an eye, days, months, it all becomes a blur, a haze in the face of the human heart. Emotions color all that humans perceive, consciously or unconsciously, and time is just another thing to behold. Funny how a memory, no matter how recent, can alter the present; steal the mood and feel from something only to twist it to match that which one recalls, however reluctantly they may.

How much time exactly had gone by already? What was he doing tomorrow? How much time did he have left?

Did it matter?

His friends wanted it to matter, that much he knew for certain. In moments where he couldn't escape them -his ever growing social responsibilities- going through the motions of smiling, nodding, making plans and pretending he was alright was only another part of his routine now. Pretending he still had the energy to be human.

If it meant he wouldn't waste what his mother had given him, then it would all be worth it.

...Right?

Some time ago he'd been asked a question. "Who did you choose to intern with?" A smiling brunette, rosy cheeked and walking along beside him after class. Her name was Uraraka.

"Nighteye." His answer was plain, monotonous, no lilt, crack or even growl of emotion. When her expression turned to worry, he quickly altered his demeanor. "He- All Might used to work with him. He and Aizawa said he was the best option so..." He laughed, feigning nervousness. This girl used to make him feel something, now he just pretended to so she wouldn't worry. Was that normal?

"Oh." She smiled. "Do you wanna hear who I'm interning with?" A smiling brunette, rosy cheecked and walking along beside him after class. Her name was Uraraka.

"Nighteye." His answer was plain, monotonous, no lilt, crack or even growl of emotion. When her expression turned to worry, he quickly altered his demeanor. "He- All Might used to work with him. He and Aizawa said he was the best option so..." He laughed, feigning nervousness. This girl used to make him feel something, now he just pretended to so she wouldn't worry. Was that normal?

"Oh." She smiled. "Do you wanna hear who I'm interning with?" He wanted to shake his head. He nodded. "Some hero called Gunhead!" She threw a rather basic, straight-armed punch, enthusiasm brimming in her determined smile. "He was one of the heroes who actually requested that I intern with them! Guess I did something impressive during the event against Shiketsu."

Okay... "That's great, Uraraka." He smiled, and inside his head he screamed in anguish.
She giggled. "Isn't it? I hope he teaches me a lot about fighting! I need to branch out more, learn
how to be less of a one-trick-pony, ya know?" He agreed, that was indeed important. "What're you
doing after school, Deku?"

*Useless little Deku.* "Nothing really. Why?"

"Wanna hang out?" she chirped, a hint of worry showing in her eyes. "I know it's kind of...
well..." *You can say it... not saying it wont make it not real.* "I don't wanna push you into
something if you're not up for it." For a moment, her eyes flickered away, something painful on her
features. But why? "Still, we can if you want to." Then she was looking at his eyes again, some
glimmer hope in them.

Smiled though he made himself, a quiet sigh escaped him. "Yeah. That sounds nice."

"Okay! I promise we won't do anything too crazy. Just... I dunno, stargazing or something?" At his
nod, with a friendly smile, she walked away.

Once she was out of sight, no longer looking at him, the smile on his face disappeared. Replaced
with the fatigue he never seemed to be rid of anymore. Footsteps trudged along, dragging against
the ground. He'd notice this and try and stop every now and then, but a yawn or a considerable
effort to keep his eyes open soon returned the sluggish gait to his feet.

Passing by an old tree, withered and free from the burden of its leaves, he saw someone. There,
leaning against the tree, his 'for the future' notebook in his grasp, was a tall, thin man with a scared
face. His chewed lips and tired eyes twisted with some sadistic happiness. "So..." said the ghost,
"why didn't you go meet her?"

A train soared past his nose. Jolting awake, if he'd truly been asleep, his chest heaved with fearful
breath. The train had only narrowly missed his face. The subway, he was in the subway. *So
vivid...* Shuddering a last uneasy exhalation, he waited for the train to stop and climbed aboard. As
it clattered along, every now and then he thought he'd see *him* out of the corner of his eye. He'd
never forget that mop of blue hair, or the face lurking beneath it.

Elusive in his sightings, "of the two of us, you're still here," but in quiet moments he almost
thought he could hear him, "shouldn't you be... enjoying that? Or is something weighing you
down?"

Something or multiple somethings. So hard to choose which one came after- His eyes winced,
breath going into a sharp stutter. *No. Don't think about her.* His teeth gnawed at his lower lip,
fighting back tears and louder things. *Stay in control. Don't let your guard down, don't bite.*

The agency, the building it was housed in, looked like any other. Five stories of concrete and glass,
standing over the street. The only reason he knew what this was, was because his teacher had told
him. It blended into the street corner it occupied, just another plain, old office. Not surprising him
at all, the interior was much the same. Just your average offices. He was starting to think he had
the wrong address until he saw a few costumed heroes running about.

Somehow he ends up in the office of the agency's owner: Nighteye. Tall, thin with a narrow and
angular face and dark, straight hair. Imposing, serious, eyes hiding behind glasses that reflected
entirely too much light. A long fingered hand reached up and pushed the glasses as close to his
eyes as they could go. A growling hum resonated in his throat.

"Hmm... you've barely the strength to stand boy." Deku averted his gaze, eyeing the conspicuous
amount of All Might merchandise in the room. Posters, photographs, figurines... it rivaled even his
own collection. "Not a scratch on you, as expected." He sighed. "First time losing someone?"

Blinking the boy's eyes ventured back to the man's, hiding behind his spectacles, the transparent reflection of the vampire's. "... You know?"

Bony knuckles bring a cigarette to the man's lips, the other hand flicks at the lighter. "We have... a few people in common." His eyes flicker to the man standing, his back leaning against the wall, to his left. A guilty looking expression on his face, Aizawa can't look Deku in the eye. His hand massaging at his ribs indicate that they still pain him. "Can you guess the second?"

As far as guesses were concerned, it hardly seemed a stretch that he make the one that leapt to mind. "...All Might?"

The bespectacled man nodded, exhaling a cloud of smoke. "Your teachers were rather adamant that I take you under my wings." Deku shifted where he stood, uncertain he appreciated being where he was on others merits. "That aside, I suppose Mirio could use the company." Okay, he was certain he didn't appreciate it.

"...Is there a reason you wanted me here, sir?"

A dark smile crooked at the corner of Nighteye's lips. "Because I think I can help teach you something, if life hasn't already gotten it through your head."

Deku gulped. "And what's that?"

"The big picture." The young man raised an eyebrow, the older man waited patiently for him to understand. "Tell me..." another long exhalation of dark, arid vapor. "Why didn't you save your mother?"

Shocked, speechless, Aizawa's face spun to look at Nighteye, mouth agape. The question had shaken Deku to his very core, so much so that he'd unconsciously taken a step back in retreat from the hero. "I- there was- I couldn't! I didn't even see or hear-"

"You could have brought her back."

His heart stopped. Face gone pale and cold he felt his world slip away. "...I..."

Nighteye sighed. "You didn't even think of it..." His palm dug into the space between his eyes. "I'd hoped you'd made a choice, that it was something you'd decided was against everyone's best interests."

It... it was my fault...

"But in the end, you hadn't learned the lesson at all."

She's dead because I-

"Rather than understanding what complications that would bring, how that would inevitably end, you merely thought solely with your heart; just like you did the day you were turned." When his feet had started running on their own, no second thought given to his own safety. "In truth... it was probably for the best that you didn't turn her." A clawed pair of hands clenched into fists. "If you had... well, two of you running around is already most likely a death sentence for you both. With a third? The Nameless One would doubtlessly order your deaths as soon as he discovers you."

The big picture...
Words that echoed still, even as he sat there, in his room. At his desk, hunched over a technical manual, little bits of circuitry and plastic littered over the surface of the polished wood. Phone off to the side, a text gone unanswered. A friend wondering where he was. His clock struck eleven, school was less than a day away. He didn't want to sleep. Sleeping meant nightmares, nightmares meant thinking. His fingers gripped a pen that scrawled poorly written kanji on the pages of a notebook as his eyes darted occasionally to Japanese-to-English dictionary. The technical manual was in English, to understand it he had to translate it.

_The big picture._

What had the consequences of his choice that day truly been? When he'd rushed in to save Bakugo, not a second thought was given to anything but the act itself. That day, he'd died. The day after he'd attacked a man he'd beaten unconscious. Then he'd bitten an innocent girl. Attending the entrance exams for UA had nearly gotten several people killed. Even when he'd supposedly made no mistakes, Shigaraki had died. _My fault..._ Because Shigaraki had died, the Nomu had lost its mind, and run free from whatever master it served. A path to freedom and revenge against him, leading Nomu to the one who'd killed his own mother. In the big picture, he was entirely at fault.

One little decision, one little breath of wind, that had cascaded into something so much more than a hurricane on his little life.

_Mom..._ Tired arms rested on the desk, and a face upon them.

A beach, recently cleared of innumerate pieces of filth and junk, and he was lying against a tree on its border. Cobwebs, grey and thin, hung in the ocean breeze like tattered cloth of old sails. A man was walking over to him, humming merrily.

A man with shaggy, blue hair. "Funny to think what might not be, if you hadn't tried and failed to save one person in particular." Deku looked away from him. "All those terrible things you wouldn't have caused." Spider legs, curling down and around him and Deku couldn't even move enough to scream. As he was carried up, into the webs, Shigaraki smiled; his eyes wide and malice unhinged. "Shhh..." he put a finger to his lips. "Go back to sleep." And a pair of fangs sank into Deku's throat, warmth and feeling fading to black.

Arms flailing, his books scattered to the floor, he woke with ragged breath in a cold sweat. _The world will and would be just fine without you..._

The pencil in Akaguro's teeth snapped in twain. "I'm going to have words with Nighteye..." Next to him, furthest from Deku, was Uraraka, quietly avoiding him and trying not to look sad.

Of course, the boy with mismatched eyes had failed to notice.

Hoping to avoid any sort of confrontation, Deku meekly protested. "It- it's not like he was trying to be mean."

"I don't care. A man without enough tact to avoid such cruel words is no man at all and should be corrected."

Kirishima raised his glass to that. "Hear hear! But... Maybe cool off first." He put forward, perhaps more quietly. "You don't wanna go in and make a jerk of yourself. Yelling and screaming out of anger is never helpful, even if you're right." Quietly, deliberately so, Bakugo sipped at his drink by Kirishima's side. Bitting his tongue, and failing to hide that fact.

Jiro fussed at her food, the din of the little cafe the costumed teenagers were gathered at taking
center stage for a moment. She couldn't argue that Nighteye was entirely wrong, but he'd picked the worst possible way to try and get his point across. When one cares little for the cost of being right, such insensitive things are often said in order to be so. Instead of commenting on it all, she gave Deku a searching look, one he noticed. "I'm fine." He lied.

"Like hell." She murmured, their conversation carrying on at a decibel level below the other's notice. The advantage of being the only ones present to have such keen ears.

He shifted, guilty at having been caught in his deceit. "...How do you know I'm not?" the other's conversation had shifted to something else about how 'men were supposed to behave', if anyone cared enough to listen.

She wanted to reach out and take his hand, but didn't. "Because I'm still not fine, when it comes to K."

His eyes met hers, hers averted. He started to speak, then stopped, his mind in flux as to what he should say. "It never gets better, does it?"

Then her eyes returned to his. She regarded him with a reluctant feeling of understanding, maybe if she didn't acknowledge the feeling, reality would reshape into something kinder to her friend.

Sadly, Jiro knew better than that. "No," said she, "it doesn't..." he frowned, unable to face her any longer, at that admission. Funny, he thought he was getting used to facing down reality's colder, harsher sides. "But..." she breathed, "with enough time, enough help, it can get easier to carry. There will always be moments where you think back, and it hurts as much as the moment it happened. The trick is... holding out, and hoping those moments get more distance between them, as time goes by."

Not that he saw, but she offered a sad little smile, awkward as ever. "Lousy advice, but... it's all I got."

It wasn't lousy advice. Deku was about to say as much when Kirishima's arm draped around his shoulder, almost knocking him out of his chair. "Ah, enough about manly stuff! Well, for now."

Lunch was over, time to go back to their patrols. "After school, lets go do something fun!"

Uraraka's ears perked up at this. "Like what?"

Kirishima gave this some thought, but Bakugo was the one who spoke first. "Laser tag."

Jiro managed a laugh. "Alright, I'm down. Any excuse to find another way for you to get your butt kicked."

Bakugo growled under his breath, Kirishima laughed nervously. "Come on, guys..."

Akaguro merely snickered under his breath. "Sounds like fun."

One Izuku Midoriya would not be joining them.

Weeks went by, and he never did.

Months, and he never did.

Every night he would come home, feeling like a ghost, lost and taking refuge in a place he didn't belong.

Without his mother here, 'home' was... nowhere. Just a cold house that was barely used, one room he never entered. Dust collected on the door, the handle and doubtless all within. It was wrong to
enter that room. Every night he'd go to the fridge and drink just enough to stave off hunger, then he'd go to his room after a long bath.

Occasionally he'd tidy up the paperwork that was left on the dining table, things Vanessa brought with her whenever she'd try and stave off his loneliness. At least with her around the house didn't feel completely abandoned. But even still, whenever she was there, he'd just hide in his room. Leafing through the technical manuals, fiddling with circuitry and trying to comprehend not only a foreign language but also the specifics of the book kept his mind occupied.

When his mind was left to wander he just about went insane.

"Is there a point in continuing?" Moments where his mind was idle, he heard Shigaraki talking. "You clearly don't seem to want to."

What's the alternative?

"you could just die."

Flickers, seconds were the length of time he might have really considered it...I can't.

Ultimately, he never did. "Wasn't that what you wanted?" Deku was lying in a little river, unable or not wanting to move. "It wasn't so long ago so as for you to forget. You waited, unmoving for days. What you were you waiting for, if not death?"

He recognized this place. It was that part of the forest he and Bakugo used to play in, the one with the fallen tree. They'd pretended to be heroes, warriors trapped on that little 'bridge' fighting hordes of enemies, or explorers lost in a strange land. Until...

Looking to the far edge, he saw himself, back when he was five. Bakugo was at the head of the troop, as usual, and he was about to cross the bridge. "You ever wonder what would happen if your life ended?" Deku sat up, turning over in the water, preparing to stand. "You could end up anywhere, any time, as another you."

Bakugo fell, and Deku leaped after him. Both versions of Deku. Mid air, the three collided. Mid air, both Dekus merged into one. The landing was more painful than anything he ever remembered feeling. His spine, his back shattered, splitting open against the rocks below. A scream split the air, Bakugo was trashing about, covered in blood. Deku's blood. He thought, for a moment, that he was the one who'd been hurt in the fall, until he saw his green haired friend. "DEKU!" He lurched toward him, pulling his head up, keeping his face above the water. He screamed, crying out for someone to send help, shouting for anyone to some save the broken boy. "Why?" Bakugo cried, "Why did you do that!?!"

Deku just smiled, weakly. "Isn't that... what you would have done?"

Then, again, he was just a spectator. Watching as the paramedics carted away the broken body of his younger self. Shigaraki chuckled by his side. "I know this doesn't seem appealing yet..." He snapped his fingers and they were in a hospital. A hospital where-

Deku had to look away.

His mother was begging, pleading for the doctors to save his life. To do something to mend his broken back. "Keep watching," Shigaraki whispered, "This is where the real plot hook comes in!"

Type O-negative... universal donor... unable to receive any blood type but his own... no emergency supply left... A wounded man, sharing the room with little Deku, came hobbling forward and
demanded to donate his own blood. A tall, muscly man with blonde hair and black eyes, coughing up no small amount of blood.

Who’s he?

Shiagaraki chuckled. “Don’t recognize him? Well... maybe you did see him looking a little more like this.” With a click of his fingers the man instantly became emaciated, his face gone frail looking with the most angular of features. "Ringing any bells yet?"

I... Deku blinked, I think he's a staff member at UA but... I've really only seen him in passing.

The hospital staff yielded, his blood was taken, the crippled version of Deku was saved. "Look just a little bit closer..." Shigaraki draped an arm over his shoulder, hand on the back of Deku's head, making him lean forward, closer to the man. "Look at his eyes. Really look at his eyes."

Hesitantly, Deku did as he was told. Black sclera, shining blue irises. Whatever significance Shigaraki hoped this would hold, it wasn't coming through to him.

Until he looked up and saw the news.

All Might had just barely won the fight of his life, leaving a villain dead in his wake. Wait... I remember that... All Might was nowhere to be found after the battle, just the corpse of a man he'd been fighting.

"You know it's him," Shigaraki whispered in his ear, as they watched the scenery changing shape again, "almost no one has eyes like that, just you, All Might and what's her name."

Ashido.

"Whatever. " The hospital disappeared, soon replaced by a cascade of images, places. Doctor's offices, physical therapy appointments, all in the long process to get him back to a point where he could walk again. "Doesn't this look better? This life, right here? It's got more in it, more people more... love, if that exists."

Younger versions of himself, Bakugo, even Uraraka was there. All the while, as he climbed the impossible mountain to his recovery, they were by his side.

"WE'RE GONNA BE HEROES TOGETHER, GOD DAMMIT!" Bakugo's typical anger, muddled with guilt, determination to see Deku come back from a life-long wound he felt responsible for.

"You can do it, Deku!" Uraraka, ever that beam of sunshine, cheering him on.

His limbs crackled with green, electric energy. Almost like All Might, he smiled, watching his younger self run, after over a decade spent fighting against his own spine. Three children, teenagers, running through the rain. Laughing, enjoying the simple act of running together, leaping over a ditch and crashing to the ground. They looked so happy, it made Deku feel as isolated and alone as he was in waking moments.

"Wouldn't you rather be there?" Shigaraki clicked his fingers and the illusion turned to dust, drifting away in the wind. "It would be so simple, wouldn't it? To just... go there? Find a better world at the end of this one." Ashen dust, cascading away in the air, making way for a murky, grey-white expanse. There, he and Shigaraki stood alone. The dead villain faced him with a tired smile. "To be happier in another life... One where you're not so alone, where your mistakes don't weigh as much as the world itself, where it's not all only pain." It was far more tempting that he wanted to admit.
One day, after school, he was trudging his way home when he got a call.

_Todoroki?_

Answering it, he gave a simple greeting and waited for a reply.

"I... need your help."

Something in Deku's chest tightened, air pulled into his lungs in a way it hadn't in some time. "What do you need me to do?"

Todoroki drew in a sharp breath. "I want to go see my mom, but... I'm scared to do it alone."

Deku's hand tightened around his phone. "I just need someone there."

Then, it was Deku's turn to take a much needed, bracing breath. "...Okay."

Hospitals always felt strange to him. So clean, spotless, at least on the good days, like no one ever set foot in the place. As those thoughts crossed his mind, he heard Shigaraki laughing. "If that's what you think of hospitals, you had the nice insurance."

Turning his head away from the voice, he scratched at the back of his neck. "How-... where is she?"

Todoroki mumbled, his cold disposition giving way to a nervous, bumbling teenager. "Uhm... just, up this way, I think." He swallowed, breath uneven, shaky. "I've... never visited her before."

Deku bit at his upper lip, steeling himself. One of his hands patted Todoroki's shoulder. "Just tell me what you need, okay?"

Todoroki nodded, and then it was up an all too short flight of stairs. The attending nurse directed them to the furthest room down the hall, a single bedroom. "Well," Shigaraki grinned, "at least she gets sunlight."

Somehow, Deku got the feeling of someone pointing, like a shadow in the corner of his eye, only there was nothing there. "See that room? Opposite side?" Deku quickly averted his gaze. "No sunlight for that poor soul, but maybe they want it that way."

Todoroki was hesitating at the door, his fingers on the handle, staring away from it. His breathing was shaky again, short and ragged. For a moment Deku didn't know what to do, what to say.

Then he remembered why they were here.

Putting a hand, once again, on Todoroki's shoulder he spoke a few gentle words. "How many tomorrows do you have with her?"

Shocked, blinking rapidly, Todoroki turned to him. "I- I don't know."

A very sad smile crossed Deku's lips. "That's right." And he patted his friend's shoulder again. It was all Todoroki needed to knock, wait for an answer, then go inside.

Dragging hands over his tired face, the vampire slumped against the wall. His fingertips told him the bags under his eyes had gone softer than the rest of the skin on his face, smoother than the scar tissue. Lines were forming, thin ones, around the edges of his eyes. The lids felt dry, lashes saturated with oil, like his body was trying to hold itself together but was forgetting how. Lack of sleep was taking a toll. Weird thing was, that wasn't all he noticed. Something scratchy, rough on his face lined his lips, jaw, cheeks. Confused, he fussed at the strange intrusion. It wasn't stuck, no matter how much he picked or pried it stayed where it was. The strange substance on his face was
a growth.

"That substance is called 'hair', if you were wondering." Blinking, Deku turned toward the source of the voice, only there was nothing there. "Good, search for a voice that's not there. You're in the perfect place for it."

"Shut up."

Shigaraki laughed. "Yes, keep talking out loud. Only proving me right."

Wiping his hands over his face again, Deku hid the twitch of a snarl he couldn't contain. Taking a deep breath he managed to level his nerves and shut out the voice again. Instead he heard others, the voices of two Todorokis.

Gentle rustling of hair, someone petting the side of someone else's face. "You've grown up..." The voice of his mother, speaking in that way that only mothers can to their children. That tone of voice that somehow tells you that everything will be alright.

"It doesn't feel like it." Murmured he, an ache in his heart that Deku couldn't help but hear in the waver of his voice.

"No, but I can see it in your eyes, it's the kind of thing one sees there when someone had to grow up too quickly." Deku clenched his fingers tight. "I should have been there..."

There was a strain in Todoroki's voice, the effort of choking back a sob. "No, you- you're not to blame. You didn't chose to be-"

Somehow, silently she shushed him. "I did. That choice was when I put that mark on you." Deku's breathing halted, his eyes creeping further open. "Stupidest thing I've ever done..."

"That wasn't your fault!" Todoroki's hand took hers. "He hurt you! He- he made you! You didn't know what you were doing because of the pain!" A quiet desperation pleaded to be heard, in that hushed and urgent tone.

'please don't talk like that...
just let me love you...
let me forgive you.'

Her arms wrapped around him, holding his form tight. "My sweet boy..." Her voice, that waver threatening to turn to tears... 'I wish that were true.'

"So... Endeavor he... he did that to you?"

"...Not... Directly."

Even as the pair of them walked away from the hospital, what felt like ages later, Deku still felt nauseous from that particular realization. Sniveling, barely holding himself together, was Todoroki. "You okay?"

"No," he half laughed, half sobbed, "...but thanks for coming with me."

Offering a smile, one he hadn't intended to look sad, Deku murmured. "Anytime."

After such an errand, the journey home was one that felt all the emptier. Returning, venturing
through that doorway only to find an empty house, no one there to greet him. No note left on the 
table, the shoes he didn't own had gathered dust. Dust that was kicked up when he dropped his 
backpack by the door. Shoes slid off he slunk away to his room, dove into his bed and pulled his 
pillow tight against his face. In the suffocating embrace of the fabric, muffling the sound, he 
screamed as loud as he possibly could.

It wasn't enough.

So, he threw his pillow at the wall, ran from his room and forced his feet back into his shoes, 
before running out the door.

Hours later, he was at a salvage yard, throwing himself against what was left of a subway car. His 
fists punched through the metal walls, his knees scraping off skin as they shattered glass, shoes 
tearing and flaking with each shattering impact. With every blow dealt to the broken car, memories 
flickered like an old recording. Patrols spent chasing villains, times he'd been injured in all manner 
of ways. Bullets tearing through his arms, legs, grazing past his face. Knives ripping through his 
skin, muscles, claws at his acid, acid on his back, fire on his legs.

Screaming of the innocent, people begging to be saved. All he ever said, with a sad little smirk was, 
"it's going to be alright." Words always tasting of a lie, he never believed them, never felt as if 
anything was alright anymore. All the same, as time rolled on, the name 'Guren' became something 
known to the public, a name and presence that could put fears to rest.

For every life he saved, his heart weighed heavier still, reminded of the one he'd failed so entirely 
to preserve.

Eventually there was little more than a hunk of dented metal, which he hauled above his head and 
slammed into the ground until his body was too weak to continue.

Helpless, alone, frustrated and confused. Had he any way to process or recognize the state of his 
mind, perhaps this wouldn't be where he was. Standing up was like lifting the world itself, walking, 
dragging his feet home, wasn't much better. By the time he returned home, his strength had left 
him completely. As soon as he'd locked the door, kicked off his shoes and fallen onto the couch, he 
was asleep.

Many nights went by where he returned home in such a state. Waking up, arm hanging off the side 
of the couch, his clothes wrinkled and smelling of dried sweat and blood. Many nights went by 
where he dreamed of that 'other life', one where he had his family, friends who were by his side no 
matter what. Just dreams, idle fantasies that would never be. "Not if you're not willing to make it 
happen." Said that irritating, haunting voice.

"Shut up..." He murmured, rubbing at his eye.

"I didn't say anything."

The voice in his home made him leap to his feat. Vanessa's eyebrows leapt to her hairline, eyes 
fluttering rapidly. "How- When-!?"

She pointed calmly to the front door. "I came by to see how you were after last night's patrol. The 
door wasn't even closed."

It took a moment for the measure of his carelessness to settle in. When it did, a quiet, breathy sigh 
pushed past his lips. "Oh." In truth he was getting used to her visits, the nights she'd swing by to 
make sure he was alright. Most of those nights were spent in silence, she'd try to get him to talk to
her but he'd just slink away. Off to his room to keep translating those manuals.

"You need to talk to someone." His eyes shut tight for a moment, a grimace breaking out across his face. "If you haven't already, that is."

"I'm fine..." He lied, stalking off to his room to grab a fresh change of clothes, before running off to school.

He peeled himself off the hardwood floor, wiping blood from his face even as the bloody lip healed itself. Aizawa sighed, walking away to take a long drink from a water bottle he'd brought. When Deku had righted himself again, sitting up, the scraggily man threw a thermos his way. Catching it with one hand, the vampire popped off the lid and drained it in seconds.

Aizawa gave him a sympathetic look. "You've been pushing yourself pretty hard, haven't you?"

Gasping for air, after drink so much so fast, Deku gave his mentor a curious look. "What?"

The hero gestured to his face. "You're bruises, cuts, they're taking longer to heal than usual."

Sighing, settling his breath, Deku climbed back to his feet. "I'm fine."

"No you're not." Aizawa crossed his arms. "You're usually more difficult to beat than this, you're weaker than usual."

Clenching his jaw, taking a deep breath, Deku realized he was starting to feel annoyed. "Sir... I'm okay. Please drop the subject, don't make me talk about it.

Cold, tired eyes looked into that of the youth's. In more ways than one he was starting to see his own reflection in the boy. The way he carried himself, the way he fought, that persistent guilt that colored everything about him, how he was more of a ghost than actual presence in the class. His grades had been slipping too, questions turned up wrong on tests that he had no place erring. His focus was radically shifted, but to where neither could say for certain. Half the time, it seemed that someone else had the boy's ear, had his attention thoroughly in their grasp.

After toweling away his sweat, after sparring with his teacher, Deku would wander off and change into his armor. After school he went on patrol until he was made to go home, usually by Vanessa. Tonight would be just another like all the rest, save for one thing: Akaguro wanted to patrol with him, for an undisclosed reason. They'd talked about it briefly in class, something about the request seemed... urgent, so how could he refuse?

Sunglasses secured, mask over his face, he trudged along, head held as high as he could manage. He wore the same armor that he had during his first heroics class, only now the mask stood out more than the armor. All the burns, scratches, signs of wear and tear made it look almost ancient. Coupled with the battered sunglasses, the silly, round-rimmed things he'd replaced the old ones with, he might have looked like a seasoned hero.

It was just another turn round the corner, the train station to his usual route, but someone caught his eye. The tall, messy-haired boy he was meant to meet, in armor similar to his own, a katana over his back, roses in his hand. *Roses?* Deku blinked, stopping in his tracks. There was something off about the way he carried them. His fingers cradling the flowers through the plastic wrapping, how his shoulders slumped like they were weighed down, his slow dragging steps, walking almost like...

Picking up the pace, it only took a few steps to reach his friend. "Hey."
Akaguro turned around, blinking, surprised to hear Deku's voice. "Guren," he smiled, "It's been a while since we hung out."

"It doesn't feel like it has."

Akaguro shrugged. "It's good to see you either way. What's up? You seem concerned."

Deku pointed to the roses. "Just... wondering what's going on."

The dhampire's smile flinched away, holding the roses in both hands, his fingers wrung at them through their plastic sheath. "Right... these." His smile came back, sad this time, and he motioned for the boy to follow him. "I have to deliver them somewhere."

"Where?"

Akaguro beckoned for him follow. "It's better if I just show you..."

The two of them walked in silence, Stendhal and Guren Fang. Every now and then a civilian would wave at them, shout something encouraging, a kid would run up and hug Deku's legs before running away again. As they drew nearer to their destination, such occurrences became fewer. As the buildings became more unkempt, more rotten, so too did the people. Quiet desperation saturated the air, the smell of decay and neglect filling their nostrils. Eventually, in a neighborhood long abandoned, they found a pair of buildings reduced to rubble.

"What happened here?" Deku murmured taking in the sight with wide, searching eyes. There was something... haunting about this place.

Placing the flowers down, on the rightmost building's doorstep, Akaguro searched for the right words. "It's... what I have, instead of a grave to visit." He kissed his fingertips, then pressed his fingertips to the flowers. "This old motel, it's... where they died."

"...oh."

"It's the first time I've ever been back here, I... didn't want to do it alone." Hands in the pockets of his costume, Akaguro's foot fussed at the concrete of the sidewalk. "I can still the smoke, the propane, the burning concrete, the blood... hear the hunter's synthesized voice." Shaking his head, the taller boy put a hand on Deku's shoulder. "But that doesn't matter now." He gave his compatriot a sad smile. "We're the last of us now, brother." His fingers squeezed at Deku's shoulder, affectionately. "What matters is making that count."

Brother... Deku almost smiled at that. "I think I know what you mean."

Most patrols went by uneventfully. There was the occasional bit of violence, the random mugging or villain attack, but Deku always had a handle on it. His ability to scale walls, speed and agility made any attempt to flee him almost impossible for all but a few. Those same attributes, along with his strength, claws and healing factor saw to many a victory in combat. Even as the snow began to fall, a event that slowed down many a hero, didn't impede him much. When he'd started, injuries were earned every single fight. Now? Now he almost saw his own blood in combat, not unless he was up against a serious threat; an opponent with considerable skill or ability.

Tonight was a night that had no significant event. Just a walk around the snowy streets, looking for any sign of trouble, reminding the public that heroes were about, constantly vigilant. He yawned, his jaw threatening to dislocate with the exaggerated effort and to his right Uraraka did the same. "Thank goodness for boring nights."
He laughed, or scoffed, he wasn't sure which. "Yeah, nice change of pace."

Skipping, arms swaying by her sides as she made her way to walk backwards in front of him, Uraraka gave him as friendly a smile as she could manage. "You don't seem very sure of that..."

"...I'm just tired."

She frowned. "You're always tired."

Frowning now himself, he was grateful for the mask that hid such an expression. "It's nothing to worry about, really." She pouted, clearly not buying it. "Just a lot of late nights."

She deliberated what to say, mulling over what she might have been able to say that would help, or coax into talking. Ultimately, she thought of nothing. "Okay," she sighed, spinning around. Resuming their walk in silence. "...Hey," she said after a time, "are you... busy? This new years, I mean." Her hands wrung at each other, she was obviously trying to let him look at her face.

He almost stopped in his tracks. "Erm, no?"

Eyebrows raised, slightly tilted, she gave him a sidelong look. Part nervous, part vulnerable she gripped her hands together as they kept walking. "Do you... wanna hang out then?"

_Wait, she doesn't mean-? _That blush on her face, the nervous hesitance with which her feet met the ground ... _You are kidding me. _"Uh, sure? Yeah, that... sounds fun." _You're crazy. After all the times I've blown you off? _

Her mood lightened right up. "Awesome!" She threw a celebratory fist into the air. "...You're gonna make it this time, right?" There was that sad nervousness again, puppy dog, brown eyes pulling at what few heartstrings he had that could still be reached.

_Damn it... _"Yeah," he breathed, trying to smile, "I'll... I'll make it."

She too, did her best to smile. "You better mean it this time..." Guilt squared right up to punch him in the gut. "I feel like I've barely seen you in years."

Deku actually laughed. "Years? We haven't known each other that long. I mean... almost one," he gestured to the snow, "clearly..."

Uraraka blinked, apparently very taken aback by that statement. "Um..." then she sighed, a hand pushing at her forehead, fingers weaving into her hair. "Yeah... that's right, Deku. It's been a year..."

Hearing the hopelessness in her tone, he immediately felt bad for laughing. "...Sorry." His hands fell into his pockets. "Keeping track of things hasn't been much of a priority lately..."

"What has been, then?" Her tone was curious, searching not the least bit annoyed, to her credit.

Unfortunately, he had no answer. "Mostly just... trying to pick myself up. Move on, move forward." His hands gripped in his pockets. It wasn't... it wasn't entirely a lie.

Right?

She walked to his side, closer than anyone had gotten in so long, not without intent to harm. Slowly, Uraraka leaned up close to his face and closed her eyes. He didn't feel it, he wasn't sure his brain would have let him even if the mask was off, but she'd kissed his cheek. "Seeyousoonbye!"
And she ran away.

"Ah- I-" he stammered, utterly failing to formulate anything even remotely close to sentence. He felt like his face was melting, blushing with such intensity that it had spread to his shoulders. Clearing his throat he did his best to try and think what had just happened.

*That wasn't real.* His brain demanded. *That did not just happen. Lack of sleep, that's all that was!*

The sudden rining of his phone is his pocket practically gave him a heart attack. Hand over his heart, reaching for his phone, he gulped down his nerves and brought it to his ear. "H-Hello?"

A loud sniffling sound caught his ear before the voice. "Hey..."

He blinked. "Yaoyorozu?" why was she calling him? It sounded like she'd been crying. "Are- are you okay?"

"No..." her voice was quiet, weak, like the life had just been kicked out of her. "I... can you- can you meet me? I don't want to be alone right now."

"Y-yeah, sure!" He pulled his mask off, so she could hear him better. "Just send me the address."

Less than an hour late, after no small amount of running, he found her, bundled up in her winter attire on the steps of an apartment building. Breathlessly he waved, she wiped away at her nose with a handkerchief. "Thank you for coming."

He nodded, still out of breath. "Not... where I... thought you'd live..." he panted, almost laughing as he did.

Self conscious, she gripped at her shoulders. "I... it's not." She hid part of her face, her mouth and jawline, in the crook of her elbow. "I needed time away from home."

Nodding again, some of his second -more probably his third- wind had gotten him some energy back. He sat down next to her. "What happened?"

She winced. "I... did I tell you that I come from a long line of heroes?"

He shook his head. "No but... I recognized your name, the day we met."

She laughed a little, a small smile peering through he wounded state. "That's me, heir to Yaoyorozu legacy." She sighed, leaning back on her hands and staring up at the stars. "And all the expectations that go with it..."

He wasn't sure he understood. "Are they... not happy with your progress as a hero?"

Sniffling again, she nodded. "My grades were a bit behind, this last report card," He'd almost forgotten those were a thing... her fingers fussed at some snow as she went on, "couple that with a few accidents during training and... mom's angry that I'm not doing better."

His eyes fluttered, "Accidents? You're- from what I've seen you're doing better than most of us." Another sad smile crossed her lips, eyes cast to the ground. "Where'd she get that idea?"

"...That's UA's training regimen." The statement hit him right where he lived. "Not mom's."

For a moment, he had no idea what to say. That wasn't something he'd ever had experience with. He almost gave up on comforting her altogether, when a thought crossed his mind. "Can we go for a walk?"
She blinking, sniffing a little bit. "Hmm?"

He pointed down the street. "Trust me." He stood up, taking her by the hands as he pulled her to her feet, leaving her very confused. "You'll feel better soon." Letting go of her hands he started walking and she followed. A mitten clad hand at the back of her neck fussed at her pony tail, as she nervously gazed about.

She was following a vampire to some unknown location. It had her heart in her throat.


"Still here, ain't I?" The grey-bearded man laughed, giving the boy a hug. "Ain't the same since, well... my best costumer stopped coming around." Deku winced, doing his best to keep smiling. Yaoyorozu noted his smile was... strained, forced.

Midoriya...

"Well," Deku shrugged, "I brought you a new one," he gestured to Yaoyorozu, "think you could whip up a- ...a couple of Midoriya house specials?"

The bearded man laughed. "Sure thing, little man." and he set to work dressing up some sausages. Deku handed him some cash, then the food was in his hands. "Hey... thanks again, all that time ago, for that pocket money back at the doc's office." The bearded man smiled wide at him. "Got myself cleaned up enough to get a job, thanks to that."

Handing Yaorozu her hotdog, Deku pointed at the old man's beard. "Probably would've been easier to find one without that thing though."

Mocking a frown, Tsunohara stroked his beard. "You ain't suggesting I get rid of my soup catcher?" With glazed eyes, he gazed into the distance. "Can't do that. Shave this, and people no longer know I am wise." Yaoyorozu couldn't help the giggle that followed, and it put a twinkle in the old man's eyes.

Deku, perhaps sympathetically, conceded. "Yeah, they probably wouldn't."

"Well don't let me keep ya," Tsunohara tipped his hat to the teenagers, "have a good night you two."

"Nice to meet you." Yaoyaorozu offered with a smile, as she and Deku walked away. "So..." she whispered, holding up the thoroughly seasoned hotdog. "this is your cure for sadness?"

Deku shrugged. "Well, that and Tsunohara's personality." Yaoyorozu giggled again, the vampire let out a little sigh. "I was out for a walk with my mom one night and... we just found him, got to talking and it turned out he made the best hotdogs in the city." His tired smile was sad now, as he regarded said hotdog. "She used to get these whenever work got her down."

"Really?" Yaoyorozu, raised her eyebrows. "They're that good?" Deku gestured to hers, indicating she had to try a bite to know. Hesitantly, she did and her eyes fluttered before lolling nearly to the back of her head. Savoring the delicious flavor that only truly cheap food bring, she slowly finished the bite. "Oh my god." Then she hungrily took another. "Okay," she said, between bites. "You were right." Then she noticed he wasn't eating. "Not feeling well?"

He hesitated. "Well... if I eat it I wont be."
She blushed, feeling silly for having forgotten his dietary restrictions. "Right, sorry."

Shaking his head, he batted the idea away. "It's not your problem." Holding up the offending food item, he said, "however, this is mine." and before she could stop him, he took as big a bite as he could. He took a few minutes to drink in the taste of it before swallowing with a harsh grimace. Groaning, he had to stop walking for a moment gripping at his stomach.

Amused, a hand on his back, she smiled. "Was it worth it?" Nodding, obviously still uncomfortable, he took a bite that completely finished it off and she burst out laughing.

"Yes," he managed with a strained voice, "hundred percent." It sounded like he was having trouble breathing.

Sitting down, a little way's later, Deku and Yaoyorozu just sat in silence, looking at the night sky. Giving him a searching look, trying to see the real him underneath this all too amusing act, she sighed. "Thank you." Curious, he turned to look at her. "I know you haven't been yourself lately." Guilty as charged, he looked away, rubbing the back of his neck. "So... cheering me up was very kind."

He shrugged. "Isn't that what friends do?"

She opened her mouth to speak, to say something, but ultimately did not.

_I know, he thought, I've ghost lately, you don't have to tell me. Although, speaking of ghosts, "Why wasn't Jiro your first call? Or Todoroki?" She tilted her head, unsure what he meant. "I thought they were your closest friends, not- not me."_

She gave a lopsided frown. "Well, Jiro's out of town and... Todoroki has worse things going on with his own family. He'd probably just think I was being selfish if I went to him."

Deku blinked. "We're... talking about the same guy, right?" She gave him a look, he continued anyways. "He's not like that."

Looking at the ground, her fingers fussed at her mittens. "I'm not so sure..."

"You should talk to him about it," Deku suggested, feeling his stomach turning, "if nothing else, you both know what it's like. Maybe you can help each other." Biting at her lower lip, she mulled it over. "He clearly told you about his family," he shrugged, "that means he trusts you, appreciates you enough to open up about important things." She gave him a nervous, vulnerable look. "If anything, he'll probably feel happy that you feel the same way."

"After he's done feeling sorry for me..." she muttered.

Another, slow shrug. "What's wrong with sympathy?"

She squirmed a little. "It feels... tricky. Like I'd be manipulating him into feeling something for me that he wouldn't otherwise." Slowly, Deku blinked, beginning to realize what they were really talking about here. "I don't know..." she hugged herself, suddenly feeling very small. "it just feels like the sort of thing I should talk to friends about."

_Romance is in the air and on people's minds tonight, I guess... "Well... isn't he your friend."

Surprised, she turned right to him. "Of- of course!"

"So what's wrong with talking to him about your problems too?"
Eyes off to the side, she failed to think of another reason why not. Sighing, smiling, she gave him an appreciative look. "Thanks again, Midoriya." She stood up, a spring in her movements told him that she felt much better. "You're a good friend. Don't let anyone tell you otherwise."

Nodding, he did his best to just take the compliment, but wound up blushing as a result. "Anytime." After a hug, the two of them went their separate ways, and Deku failed to fight back another jaw-breaking yawn.

He fell back-first onto the couch, sighing away what stress he could. Still in his armor, no idea what day it was, he only knew how heavy his body felt. To his left, on the coffee table, his phone sat in silence. A few unread messages, probably from friends, earned no reaction. They wanted to know where he was, why he hadn't shown up again, not that it mattered. They always managed to have fun one way or another, those texts, even if he answered them wouldn't affect much of anything. Besides, if he showed up for whatever game they were playing the teams would be uneven.

"Not exactly the logic of a philosopher." Deku let out an annoyed sigh, at the sound of Shigaraki's voice. "They'll get sick of you blowing them off eventually."

Your point?

Shigaraki shrugged, kicking back in the easy-chair, dirty shoes placed up on the coffee table. "Oh, nothing I suppose."

Rolling his eyes, Deku stood up, stripping off the armor and grabbing some sweatpants from his room. Dirty shoes on the furniture reminded him that he hadn't really cleaned the house in ages. Just say it...

"Already did," Shigaraki yawned, "You're choosing not to do anything about it." And he folded his hands behind his head, closing his eyes while Deku started sweeping.

"Yeah," Muttered Deku, "because I know where this conversation is headed." In his anger, the broom was scraping against the floor, kicking up more dirt and dust than it gathered to the dustpan. "I say something about not having the energy, not seeing the point, futility. Then you come in with something about about leaving all of it behind and trying for that 'other life' you keep plaguing me about, that I keep dreaming about."

The dead villain laughed. "Ah... I do love our chats."

"They've gotten seriously old." Deku emptied the dustpan into the trashcan, trying not to stomp his way to the sinks, he filled one with water and soaped up the sponge.

Stretching, his shattered, pulpy ribs popping and crunching with the motion, Shigaraki sighed. "Just trying to help you find happiness."

Deku drew in a sharp breath. "No, you vouching for me to kill myself So I can chase after a fairy tale."

"Not necessarily," he almost sounded offended, "you haven't gotten to the good part of it yet."

The vampire scoffed out a single laugh. "What? All Might stepping in as my dad isn't the good part?"

Shigaraki grinned. "Wanna find out what's better than that?"
Deku just shook his head. "Knowing you," he turned off the tap, grabbing a glass and submerging it in the water before scrubbing it down. "It's probably something horrible." With a clatter, he set the glass in the drying rack. "Someone dies, I'm guessing. World gets spun into some form of depressing, hopeless chaos."

A laugh was the villain's reply. "Now why does that sound familiar?" Mockingly he stroked at his chin. "I swear, something like that must have happened to you already."

He practically slammed the next glass into the rack, taking a moment to breathe, center himself. His breath shuddered, in through his nose as he tried not to cry.

"And you don't really know me," Shigaraki sighed, "a minute's worth of conversation, tops, that was all we had before I wound up in the ground."

"Yeah..." Deku's shaky hands reached for another glass. "But you've been hounding me for a lot longer than that."

Slowly, the villain blinked, a wry smile stretching his chewed lips. "Who exactly... do you think I am, Deku?"

Deku shrugged. "The psychopath who tried to slaughter a bunch of teenagers?"

"No that was the real me," Shigaraki sat up, his hands on his lap now. "We both know that's not who I am."

Another roll of his mismatched eyes, "keep waxing philosophical," another two glasses cleaned, "you're just a hallucination."

Shigaraki threw up his hands, "true, but with your diagnosis it has to be significant."

Deku blinked, "I don't have a diagnosis." He turned around, confused, annoyed, seeing Shigaraki nose deep in a psychology book.

"Hmm," he mockingly hummed, "Post traumatic stress disorder..." the villain stood up, an index pointing up decidedly as he paced about, reading aloud. "Diagnostic criteria for the ailment. The patient must have experienced one of the following: One, directly experiencing a traumatic event. Two, witnessing in person a traumatic event, or three, learning of a traumatic event happening to a close family member."

Once again, Deku blinked his expression shifting from confused anger as a pit formed in his stomach. Shiagaraki nodded sagely. "Well, you've been through at least two of those."

Shoulders slumping slightly, Deku's eyes drifted to the floor. "...What else does it say?"

"Symptoms include!" Shigaraki dramatically declared, "memories of the event interrupting the day, dreams related to the incident, psychological distress when exposed to stimuli relating to the event and psychological reactions to those cues."

"...'psychological reactions' could mean anything."

Whistling, Shigaraki leafed through the pages for a moment before launching into another tangent. "Let's see... trauma's effects affects on patient's emotional life and self identity... One, inability to remember specific details about the traumatic event. Two, persistent and exaggerated negative beliefs or expectations of oneself, others or the world. 'I cannot be trusted', 'I am bad', 'no one else can be trusted.' And -this one is my favorite- 'the world is a horrible place.' Which, it is, to be fair."
Laughing, Shigaraki went on. "Three, persistent, distorted blame of self or others in relation to the cause or consequences of the traumatic events. Four, persistent fear, horror, anger guilt or shame. Five, markedly diminished interest or participation is significant activities. Six, feelings of estrangement, detachment from others. Finally, seven, persistent inability to experience positive emotions." With a sickeningly wide grin, Shigaraki looked at Deku with wild eyes. "Tell me, how many of those have you exhibited? Cause you only need one or two from each list for a diagnosis!"

He fell back, leaning against the counter, his hands resting on the edge of the sink. "You mean... since mom died?"

Shigaraki's head tilted back, howling with laughter that rattled his broken ribs. "Why start there?" He shook his head, still grinning. "You've experienced a multitude of these criteria since before even UA." He started pacing again, finger pointing up for each tally mark Deku met. "There's me -shocking, I know- your nightmares since you turned into this... thing. The amount of pain you feel every time you slip up and almost bite someone. You think you're a literal monster, you blame yourself for not only my death but your mother's death, you're definitely feeling guilt and shame most of the time, you ignore your friends and struggle with your schoolwork. You've always had trouble feeling connected to others and you barely even remember what it's like to smile without forcing it at this point."

For a long time, a long time, Deku stared at the floor, pondering. It wasn't a professional diagnosis, but, the evidence was compelling. Except... "Hallucinations weren't on that list."

Shigaraki just smiled, wickedly. "Open your eyes, Deku."

A startled breath, a jolt of his body, and he found he was back on the couch. Sitting up, his breathing heavy, quick, he put a hand on his armored chest. He'd never left the couch. "Izuku?"

Turning about, toward the kitchen, he saw Vanessa filling out paperwork, like usual. "Yeah?"

Concern plain on her face, quietly she spoke. "Are you alright?"

Gulping, legs over the side of the couch his eyes drifted to the coffee table and the open psychology book lying upon it. "...Yeah," he breathed. "I'm- I'm okay..." Standing up, he ventured to his room. He was awake, might as well do that cleaning... He was halfway into his shirt when a thought occurred. Pulling it the rest of the way on, he held his breath and opened his door. "Vanessa?"

"Hmm?"

"...What day is it?"

She shrugged, "the first of January, why?" His eyes shut slowly tight, face grimacing as it upturned toward the ceiling. Palms shoving into his eyes, fingers wringing through his hair, a feeling of utter stupidity flooded him. "Is everything alright?" When he didn't know what to say, it only took a few moments to puzzle it out. It had been a long since she'd last discussed this topic. "...Did you not want to see them?"

His face told exactly how foolish, sad he felt. "Yeah..." but then shrugged. "But no..." he winced again, biting at his upper lip. "Either way she didn't deserve to be stood up tonight."

Vanessa gave a gentle smile. "Did she on any of the other nights?"

Eyes fluttering, he looked into hers. "Did you go through my phone?"
She shook her head, "your friends talk, and you know how good my hearing is." Face buried in his
hands again he slumped against the wall and slid down, until he was sitting on the floor. "I'm sure
she'll still want to be friends."

"Do I deserve that?"

She shrugged. "No, but does anyone?"

Sighing, his head slumped back, knocking against the wall as he stared up at the ceiling. "Right..."
He dragged himself up, off the floor with a groaning sigh. "At this rate I'll be lucky to have any
friends left for class during junior year."

She raised an eyebrow at him. "Junior year?"

"Yeah, you know, eleventh grade?" he said, reaching for the broom, "I'm still going to UA then,
plan hasn't changed."

She almost didn't have the tell him. Almost. "Izuku... this *is* your junior year."

He froze, heart stopping, breath stopping completely. Eyes creeping wide, he looked her right in
the eyes. "...What?"

She gave him a very sad look. "Please go to therapy." Stunned, unable to do anything but accept
this as the truth, he slumped back against the wall, staring numbly at the floor. "If you don't, well...
I'm afraid you'll just let the rest of your life drift along like this."

A hand pressed into his forehead, fingers snaring into his hair. "You're telling me I've been a
vampire for two years?" It was all he could do not to scream, not to black out. "My- my mom died
over a year and a half ago?" He felt faint, fuzzy, weak, his legs threatened to buckle beneath him.
"I've-" he gulped, "I-"

"Izuku, breathe." He couldn't, spinning around, eyes to the back of his head, he fell.

He was unconscious even before his head hit the lip of the couch.

In his dream he saw Shigaraki, and he was smiling. Smiling like a man who had every right to
say, "I told you." and he did.

"Yeah," Deku exhaled, nodding as a feeling of numbness washed over him. "You did..."

Smiling, Shigaraki walked to him, putting a hand on his shoulder. "Want to see more of that 'other
life' again?" At Deku's urgent nod, the villain patted his shoulder, and showed him the way.

What was the difference, when life was one big bad dream anyways?

---

"The sun is the same, in a relative way, but you're older...

*shorter of breath, and one day closer to death... *
Give it Up

One of Musutafu's nicer parks, on a clear, summer night. Live music, fireworks, two teenagers dancing near and nearly in a fountain. Him, him and her probably exactly as she'd wanted last night, dancing together. Truly, his imagination was a sadistic thing when it wanted to be. Beside him, spectating along with him, Shigaraki poked at his broken ribs. "Are they supposed to be so... squishy?" Deku sighed, eyes closing in an effort to maintain his patience. "I guess not, seeing how I'm dead and all."

"You talk more now that you're dead..." Muttered the vampire.

In reply, the dead villain merely laughed. "Sassy," he elbowed Deku in the ribs, "I knew you had a spine in there somewhere."

Taking a seat, lounging against a tree, Deku put his chin his palm. "Why are you showing me this?"

Shigaraki shrugged. "Same reason as always." He sat down beside the vampire, his ribs making wet crunching noises as he did. "Is it working?"

The vampire shook his head. "Was it supposed to?"

Defeated, the villain lay back, arms stretching above his head, earning more incredibly nauseating sounds from his ribs. "Figured it might, a world where you hadn't screwed things up with her."

Tilting his head back, sighing again, Deku stared at what his believed the night sky should look like. "This may come as a surprise," he breathed, "but I don't..." something in his chest twisted, putting a queasy little pit in his stomach. "I don't..." He gulped, head lowering again, eyes at the ground. "feel that way about her..."

"Pity you didn't tell her that." Shigaraki stretched again, the sounds his body made were outright disgusting. "Ah well, I'll think of something to push over the edge yet."

At this point, Deku was having an easier time believing that he'd formed a second personality than thinking he had PTSD. "Yeah... good luck with that."

Shigaraki turned and gave him a puzzled look. "You really just don't care about yourself anymore, one way or the other, do you?"

Deku took a deep breath. "Evidence seems to point that way..."

"That's about as noncommittal as an answer can get."

"So read into it what you want," Deku snapped, "I'm tired of this... all of it." He fell back, into the grass. "This conversation, this life, this dream... I just want to rest, for my life to calm down."

Slowly, the dead villain turned his head, and looked at Deku. "What about the next life?"

Deku scoffed, "What about it?" He closed his eyes. "No, I don't want it. If there's an ending to be had, then I'll have it once this life ends. No... no next steps, no other journeys, no reincarnation."

His hand reached up, toward the sky. "It's all gotta end at some point, right?"

In disbelief, Shigaraki sat up. "...You've completely given up." It wasn't a question, and Deku didn't
disagree. "Happiness, you... you don't think it exists anymore."

Taking in a slow, deep breath, the vampire opened his eyes and smiled. He turned and looked the villain in the eyes, "I didn't say that..."

"I can see it in you," he said with a nearly breathless voice, "this place, this little dream you hold onto, something here makes you want it. Why shouldn't it be that you no longer see any such thing as happiness?"

Quietly, he sighed. "There is something here, in this little hideaway." Smiling again, he said one thing more. "But I'm not sure what it is."

...

Thrumming of a fan, a cold breeze on his face and a piercing pain that seemed to permeate every nano-meter of his skull. Okay, maybe now he wished he was dead, because lord alive was he in pain. Groaning, he fought to sit up but was soon met with a hand on his chest holding him, gently where he was.

"Easy now," Aizawa spoke with a surprising softness, "you just took quite the knock to the head."

Wincing at what little light there was in the room, Deku. "A knock from what? An anvil?"

"The couch." Said Vanessa, somewhat awkwardly.

His pride wounded, and feeling a bit silly besides, Deku only muttered one word in reply, "...oh."

Sighing, Aizawa took a seat on the floor next to the couch where Deku lay. "This isn't good, kid." Deku felt the full weight of those words, guilt digging its teeth into his chest. "This really isn't good."

Shaking his head at himself, Deku murmured. "I know..." So much lost time, so many things he simply didn't remember. Two years of his life, zoomed right by in a dissociative haze. He was about to enter into his final year at UA...

"I was really hoping you wouldn't have this damned affliction," Aizawa dragged a hand down his tired, tired face, "it's... going to complicate things, moving forward."

Deku turned to see his teacher's face, but only saw the back of his head. "Do I need to be cured before I can be a hero?"

Aizawa scoffed. "Cured?" He almost laughed. "There is no 'cure' for PTSD, kiddo. You're in for the long haul with this one..." Reaching over, he put a sympathetic hand on Deku's shoulder, squeezing a little. "I'm sorry." His voice, the vampire wasn't used to him sounding so... emotional.

Blinking, wondering if he should squeeze his teacher's hand in turn, Deku spoke quietly. "Are- ... are you okay?"

Smiling, Aizawa shook his head. "Of course... you would ask that, wouldn't you?" Hand withdrawn from Deku's shoulder, wearily, the man stood up. "Don't know why I expected anything else." His smile was tired, sad, regretful. "Take tomorrow off, kid." Deku's breath caught, eyes bolting wide. "Just take some time to rest, see a friend, do something that makes you happy."

He was sitting up in less than a second. "I can still go on patro-!"
Aizawa's hands gripped the boy's shoulders, his gaze serious and stern. "Take. The day. Off." The
vampire's mouth reluctantly shut, eyes turned to the floor. "You need it. Do you understand?"
Reluctantly, Deku nodded. "Okay," Aizawa sighed, taking a moment to breathe, "when you come
back, you're starting therapy." Deku went to protest again, but Aizawa held up a silencing hand.
"Starting. Therapy."

Thoroughly defeated, Deku shifted his gaze back to the floor. "Yes sir..."

Aizawa wanted to reach out, ruffle the kid's hair, cheer him up a little if he could. However,
ultimately, he did not. It wasn't his place, wasn't his right as the kid's teacher. He was here to guide
him, protect him and show him how to protect himself. That was all. "Get some sleep, kid." He
handed Deku a blanket -one that had been hanging over the back of the easy chair- before he
started walking toward the door. "I'll see you soon."

Once outside, at the end of the walkway, Aizawa reached into his pocket and plucked out a
cigarette. Lighting it, he took in a long, long draft before letting the smoke ease out of his lungs. It
didn't really help, but it did calm him down a little. "What on earth was that?" Vanessa's voice,
ever a source of a conflicting emotions. "If I didn't know any better I'd almost think you were
starting to care about that child."

The words carried an edge he hadn't expected them to. Slowly, his eyes drifted about half the way
open. "Why yes, I was about to thank you for calling me over here for this. You shouldn't have
reminded me." He took another long breath of smoke, letting it muddle his mind as much as it
could. Considering how long it had been since last he'd smoked, it was a considerable amount.

Vanessa rolled her eyes. "Yes, you're welcome..." muttered she, shaking her head. "I suppose I
should be glad you're so invested in taking care of him, all of a sudden."

"You mean like we should have been, two years ago?" Aizawa smirked. "Two broken people
trying to coach a child on how to survive in the world..." he laughed, bitterly as he took another
long drag. "It would almost sound like some dark comedy, were we not in the middle of it."

It was the vampire's turn to take a deep breath. "You do realize any therapist he talks to is going to
find out he's not human." Raising an eyebrow, Aizawa turned about to look at her face. She wasn't
looking at him, but rather up at the moon. "It's an central part of what's gone so wrong with his
mind, his life and what's continuing to go wrong with both."

Closing his eyes, breathing the smoke out through his nose, Aizawa turned back around, placing
the cigarette back at his lips. "The thought crossed my mind..."

She gave him a look. "Did you ever find someone you could talk to?"

Pausing for a moment, Aizawa debated the answer he would give Vanessa. In truth he'd never
really talked about it with anyone, words being spoken wouldn't undo the past. However, in the
case of his student, maybe it could help him realize what had happened wasn't the boy's fault.
"Relax," said he, "a friend once recommended someone to me, and if I could trust them, then
Young Midoriya can too."

The word tasted funny as it passed through his lips, 'young', the child was only a few months away
from legal adulthood. His status as a minor, and all that did to protect as well as hinder him, was
about to go up in smoke.

"I think now's a good time to follow up on that bit of information."
That was about as much of an actual answer as she'd expected. "Fine..." She sighed, turning back toward Deku's home. "Let me know when you set up an appointment, I'll make sure he goes to it."

One less thing to worry about in the long run, at least. Polishing off his cigarette, he threw it down a nearby storm drain and started walking away. In a few short months, they'd be entering into the class's senior year. For once, he wasn't certain of what was going to happen...

An early rise from slumber, he'd fallen asleep at his desk again. At least he'd made sufficient headway with his little project. He'd managed to hook up one bit of circuitry in particular to his laptop. Surprisingly, most of its contents was intact, but that wasn't saying much when dealing with this much data. Only seven percent of it was corrupted, but that meant he'd have to figure out what each of the dozens of files were and replace them. Sighing, he went to his backpack and fished his phone out of it. Hooking the devices together he downloaded the files onto his phone and the laptop.

*Just in case...*

Phone and pair of earbuds in his pocket he left his room. Climbing into his hoodie, socks and shoes he grabbed his student-hero ID, a thermos from the fridge, a shoulder bag, his mask and sunglasses and put them in various places on his person. Vanessa had fallen asleep at the table, doing paperwork again. Shaking his head with a tired smile, Deku draped a blanket over her shoulders before going outside. Hoodie up, mask over his face and hands to his pockets he just started walking.

Eyes as heavy as cinder blocks, his body refused to shake this feeling of fatigue. Fishing through his pockets for loose change -something in an ever decreasing supply- he found enough for at least a cup of coffee. He'd never really just... gotten a cup of coffee before, he'd always been too nervous to walk into the shops, talk to the people behind the counter. Something about this cold, cold morning told him it was time to try.

Venturing inside, it wasn't long before he got a few worried looks. The barista looked like she was about to panic when Deku sighed, pulled off his mask and hoodie, then showed her his student-hero ID. "I promise not to rob the shop."

She let out a courteous, nervous laugh. "Well, that is certainly appreciated." Inwardly, the vampire groaned, already regretting coming inside. "What'll it be?"

Unsure what to say, Deku shrugged. "What would you recommend?"

Eyes to the ceiling, she thought about this for a minute before she gave a prolonged shrug. "Hazelnut mocha?"

She might as well have been speaking another language. "Yeah, sounds good." He handed her some money, waited a few minutes and then, before long, he was out the door again.

At least it wasn't making him nauseous. Tasted good too, he found, pleasant on his tongue. Strange thing was, he'd always expected it to be hotter than this. Then again he wasn't exactly vulnerable to temperature, not like he used to be. Coffee and black pudding, well at least the list of human foods he could still enjoy was getting longer. As he continued his stroll, he noted with some quiet sense of calm that the streets were surprisingly empty. Taking another sip, enjoying the sweet and savory flavor of the coffee, he took the opportunity to just breathe. Fresh air, not something you often get in a city. It figured things would be relatively inactive, first day of the new year. Almost everyone was off work, off school, only a select few heroes -and some in training looking for extra credit-
were still active.

"Guess even villains take days off..." he murmured, taking another sip.

"They are only human."

Deku practically drowned. In his surprise at hearing the voice of another person, his coffee had almost slid directly into his lungs.

Shaking his head, sighing, Akaguro patted the poor boy's back. "For one with such exceptional hearing, people seem to have an easy time sneaking up on you."

Coughing, clearing out of his poor lungs, Deku gagged. "It's-" god dammit, he couldn't stop coughing. "Not my fault," said he, finally able to breathe, "you're very light on your feet..."

The dhampire shrugged. "My apologies then." Letting out a yawn, he stretched his neck until there was a loud pop. "Surprised to see you up and about, thought you'd still be hiding away."

Suddenly feeling guilty, self conscious, Deku fidgeted as he shyly took another sip. "Yeah... Aizawa ordered me to do something different, take the day off from being a hero." At his friend's raised, incredulous eyebrow, Deku quietly added, "long story."

"Must be," Akaguro's hands went to his pockets, and the vampire noted he was very bundled up. Ratty as his winter ensemble was, it certainly looked cozy. "There isn't much I can think of that would keep you from our work." Of course, even in his faded, puffy parka, 'Stendhal' had his katana slung over his shoulder. Silently, Deku wondered if there was a story behind its acquisition.

Mind back to his friend's words, he had observed correctly. "My time in the field helps me avoid thinking..."

Now that was a surprising thing to hear. "You? Trying not to think?" He chuckled, "must be raining in heaven." Without another word, he stepped into an alley. Leaping, he kicked his foot off of a dumpster and grabbed onto the ladder of a fire escape, climbing his way up the side of the building.

Okay then... Deku opted for the simpler tack. Dropping his empty cup into a receptacle, mask and hood obscuring his face again, he merely started climbing up the wall.

Akaguro laughed, "Paging mister MacGuire." as he continued climbing up the fire escape. From the outside, no less. "You could have just jumped to the roof."

Once upon said roof, Deku shrugged. "Wasn't in the mood."

"I suppose it is a bit early to be fooling about like this," said the dhampire, suddenly feeling very self aware. "Again, apologies. I'm still not used to the company of others, or accommodating their sense of normality."

"No, it's fine." Said Deku, as he walked along the roof. "...You never told me what your life was like." Akaguro stopped in his tracks. "Is it a... sensitive subject?" Maybe he shouldn't have brought it up.

After taking in a slow breath, Akaguro sighed the cold air back out again. "It is..." he said, quietly. "In short, I spent much of my life drifting. Osaka, Kyoto, at one point even Tokyo. Anywhere I felt people wouldn't notice me."
"You like hiding?"

The question gave the dhampire pause, as he continued walking, jumping to the next rooftop. "It's less that than a general mistrust of people." Then Deku was back at his side. "After my friend, Toya, disappeared I... well, I mistook what happened for a long time. Thought he'd just stopped liking me," he scratched at the back of his neck. "After that well, lets just say my foster parent left for some much deserved time in prison."

The way he snarled those words made Deku shudder.

"After that? I found myself with a group of vigilantes. Mostly just putting petty criminals away, the odd villain here or there. Of course, one day that had to end too." His lips twitched, brow angled down and in with glaring eyes, he ran to the rooftop's edge and leapt to the next. "Turned out they were all just a bunch of hypocrites..." He sighed, standing here he was for a time. "That's when I decided I was done with people. Figured it was better I did things on my own. I'd always felt like a black sheep, a lone wolf anyways, or something between the two."

Giving this some thought, Deku concocted an appropriate label. Something with the temperance of both animals, if given the right chances, "So... a black dog?"

To his credit, Akaguro laughed. "Sure, though it sounds weird applied to me; I knew a very strange woman with that pen name once." Batting such silly musings aside, he shook his head and smirked. "Anyways, that's about all there is to it. When I finally got back to Musutafu, I ran into an old... contact. We sat down, I told him my story, he recommended I try to be a hero." As they continued walking, he sneered at a nearby add. A billboard advertising some hair product a hero had endorsed. "Despite my... Issues with the profession."

For a few moments, Deku just looked at his friend, pondering in silence. "Why do you feel that way?" Akaguro turned to him, raising an eyebrow. "You're always talking about the things you don't like about heroes, but you never say why."

It took Akaguro a long time to consider his answer. "...Maybe some day, I'll tell you." He offered a friendly smile, a look of pain flashing across his face, "I've got to meet up with Ingenium. Patrols and whatnot."

Deku blinked. "You're still working with him? You said during your internship that you couldn't stand the guy." funny... he didn't quite remember hearing that, but it didn't feel wrong to say that at all. His mind, the state of it, was getting difficult to deny.

The dhampire shrugged. "I'll let him explain." Then he saluted his friend with a wicked grin. "Until next time, Guren." Then he hopped off the roof.

"Bye..."

Sighing, Deku took a look at where he was. Near one of the seedier parts of the city, probably not where he should spent his day off. With a running start he leapt to the next building, his fingers halting his fall, clinging to the side of the high-rise. So his friend had issues opening up about the past, he thought to himself as he climbed. Something he could relate to, among the few things he and Akaguro seemed to have in common. Honestly, he didn't want to think about it. If he thought about it then he might get curious, and he'd already learned as much as he was going to.

It only made sense to leave the past where it lay.

Of course, as reality often demands, that it rarely does. Far behind schedule and deliberately so,
months later, there he was, waiting in a lobby for his appointment with the therapist. Vanessa sat by his side, a book held between her fingers, peering at the pages from behind her sunglasses. "Nervous?" Said she.

Not that he wanted to admit it, "Yes."

She closed the book, petting at his shoulder. "Don't be. Everything you say in that room is confidential. You don't have to worry about anyone else knowing."

Of course, that wasn't what he was worried about. "I know..."

Before their conversation could continue, his name was called and he stood with some reluctance. His breathing was strained, tight in his chest. What he would give to avoid this, to be somewhere else at this point in time. If wishes were enough to shape the world...

He stepped into the office, old bookshelves lined with psychological texts, studies in self discovery. Faded, fraying furniture, obviously very lived in, and plants in various corners. A water cooler sat next to pile of pillows, a water cooler someone had taken the time to draw a little sleeping cat thereupon. Cozy, comfortable, everything his life felt like it wasn't.

The woman sitting at the lone desk offered him a friendly smile. "Welcome, Midoriya. I am doctor Kokoro."

Politely she reached out and shook his hand, a gentle grip. "Um, hey..." Fidgeting fingers in his lap, he sat down and almost sank completely into the seat he'd taken.

With a disarming look she clicked her pen, flipped a fresh notebook to its first page. "Let's start at the beginning." He winced, "tell me about you."

Then he gulped. "That's... complicated."

"In what way?"

Just this once, he figured words wouldn't do the trick. Reaching for a plastic cup, pulling it from the water cooler, he pulled his thermos from his pocket. Opening the cool, metal canister he poured some of its contents into the cup. Kokoro's eyes fluttered, brow inching upwards as he drank what was clearly blood, right in front of her. When he emptied the cup, taking a short breath, she swore she saw fangs, hiding in his mouth. Giving her a sheepish look, Deku sighed.

"Have you ever... psychoanalyzed a vampire?"

"No," She smiled, "but I'd like to."

He told her everything. One appointment to the next, he spun the complete story of his life. He paced about the room, he screamed, he cried, sometimes he experienced his old memories so vividly he swore he'd gone back in time. He was vulnerable, opened like an old chest dragged from the bottom of the sea. His very skin felt as cold as though he were naked, the extent to which she dug into his life.

It was all him, really, divulging answers. He wasn't certain if it was because he wanted to talk about it all or if it was because he had to.

"I'd like to discuss a few things you mentioned during our last visit." She flipped through her notes, scanning down the page, the tip of her pen leading eyes along. "You said something about your friend Kaminari? His grandfather if I remember correctly."
Deku sighed, "yeah, that was... it was awful, honestly."

"Would you mind telling me why?"

It had been at the start of spring, a call for help and he went running. Snow was melting, caterpillars had come out of hiding, chewing on what green had sprouted. Arriving at a small house, room enough for two he saw nothing out of order. Loose shingles, some moldy wood and broken screens. When Deku entered the home, he saw a man in a nice suit, a stethoscope hung round his neck. He was holding Kaminari's shoulder offering some unheard words of comfort.

Through an open door, to a bedroom, the vampire saw a thin, old man lying in a bed. An IV in his arm, his body hooked up to several different monitors. His chest was slow to rise and fall, his eyelids purple and blue, fingers pale and veins showing clear as day. As the doctor left the building, Kaminari wiped at the corner of his eye.

"Hey, man..."

Deku stared, shocked at his friend. "...How long?"

A bitter ghost of a laugh scoffed from Kaminari's lungs. "Has he been like this? Does he have?" Arms splayed out to his sides, falling, clapping against his legs. "Too long, and-" his eyes shut, choking back some quiet exclamation of grief. Gulping the outcry back down, he quietly kept speaking. "and I don't know."

He could only nod along, completely lost. "What's wrong with him?"

The rise and fall of Kaminari's chest was slow, tempered, his tired eyes did all the screaming that his voice could not. "Time."

Slumping against the wall, the bones of his spine poking into the wood, the vampire looked about the room. "No illness?"

Kaminari shook his head. "If it had a cure, we'd-" a shudder, a wince, "I don't even know if that would work."

There was a knock at the door, both boys turned to see who'd come by. A pair of girls, two they knew, Jiro and Ashido. For one second, the violet eyed girl looked at Deku, and he noted an apparent lack of surprise at seeing him here. Grimacing for a moment, Kaminari walked to the door and welcomed them inside. Before long two pairs of arms were around him, and a mess of pink hair had nearly tangled in his own for the face that planted a kiss on his cheek. He squeezed her hand and she squeezed it back, pain glistening in his eyes as he smiled at her and the embrace ended.

Jiro was the first to speak. "How're you holding up, Den?"

He really didn't have an answer for that. "By gravity's good graces." He shrugged, his hand still firmly in Ashido's grip.

Nodding as though she understood, Ashido murmured, "What did the doctor say?"

In reply, Kaminari spoke a few of the most unwanted words a prognosis could be. "Wait and see."

Eyes shifting to the old man, Ashido puzzled her thoughts together, for a few seconds. "Is he awake?"

The blond gestured to the room. "You're welcome to go find out, he could use some better
"Hush," Ashido leaned up, kissing his lips this time, making both others present feel somewhat awkward for having observed such a moment between their friends. "He'd never say that about you, so don't think he'd think it."

Nodding, sniveling a bit, Kaminari started walking to his grandfather's room, Ashido close behind. Before she joined them, Jiro placed a hand on Deku's arm. "Thank you for being here." So quiet he barely heard her, so quiet he wasn't sure if she meant to say it, then she went to the room too.

Deku was about to follow them when a row of pictures caught his eye. Sitting just above the fireplace, the first was of small family. A mother, father and a newborn baby. The second was of a three-year old Kaminari pretending to bite his mother, who was acting as though she'd died, his father recoiling in mocking fear. The next was of the three again, little, grinning Kaminari's face sandwiched between his parent's, their smiles identical to his. Fourth was his four year old self in a Halloween costume, striking a heroic, accusatory pose, pointing at his father, dressed as villain, holding onto a wife who'd exaggerated the motions of fainting.

The next was years later, Kaminari, sitting alone, with a tired, tired, fake smile on his face.

The next was of him and his grandfather, his real smile back again. Next he was making a silly face, and the old man was laughing.

Several more like that lined up, until the last, where Kaminari and the old man were standing outside UA. Smiles still real, a note of worry permeating that of the younger man. It was taken the day he'd first gone to attend class at the school, and from their postures, Deku could tell he was practically holding the man up.

Face slowly turning to the old man's room, he saw him smiling. Ashido was dancing about, eccentric as you please, illustrating some silly, lighthearted tale with the motions of her body. Through that smile she wore, Deku saw the scream she'd stuffed down inside, the tears she wouldn't grant freedom as the old man laughed. Jiro sat by the old man's side, her hand on his shoulder, thumb patting his barely covered bones. Her tears were not so well hidden.

Hours later, when the old man had fallen asleep, Jiro was outside with Ashido, arms around her as they cried into each other's shoulders. Deku sat on the floor, too numb to move or care that sitting there was painful. His head had fallen to the side, leaning against the wall, crumpling up his messy hair. "I saw you." Deku blinked, eyes slowly moving to Kaminari. He was lying on the couch, facing the ceiling, listless and cold. "That face you made, looking at those pictures." He sighed. "You figured it out, didn't you?"

Slowly, Deku nodded. "It's just been the two of you."

Then Kaminari nodded. "I barely even remember my folks," he practically sighed the words out, "it's more... like a vague feeling, just an empty space in my heart, no idea what's really supposed to be there."

"Sounds about right..."

The blond shook his head. "I'm scared, green." His face shifted, pained, trying to break down in tears.

Moving, adjusting his seat at long last, Deku felt some life come back into him. "What can I do?"

Kaminari exhaled, closing his eyes, trying to center himself. "What's it like?" and the vampire's
heart sank completely. "How bad does it hurt when...?" he couldn't finish asking the question, afraid of reality might bring if he did.

Eyes to the floor, forehead pressing into his palm, Deku considered how much of the truth he should tell. "Your heart breaks." Kaminari's eyes shut tight. "everything goes... cold, numb, then you just wanna scream, burn down the world, hurt someone, something. 'Just make the pain go away' or 'bring them back';" he shrugged, "either way that missing piece of your heart is there again."

"Fucking god dammit..." Kaminari's palms were against his eyes. "Why?"

He just went with the truth. "Because the part that goes missing is where they used to live inside you." A single tear fell to his lap. "Worst part is how much heavier everything feels without that piece."

For a moment, it almost looked as though Kaminari had just gone numb, unable to feel. Then he just burst out crying, his hands over his face. "Damn it..." at this point Deku was standing up, "damn it!"

He pulled his friend to sit up, then wrapped his arms around him. "I've-" hold it together, you're not the one who gets to be weak right now. "I've got you."

As Kaminari cried into his shoulder, Jiro and Ashido pulled themselves up and soon joined the embrace. While Ashido pet, lovingly at Kaminari's head, Jiro hummed as soothingly as she could. No one knew the song, the tune, but in time, so they thought, it helped to bring Kaminari's wits back around to him.

Deku sat there, somewhat numb to it all as Kokoro did her best to keep her professional attitude in play. Even still, she had to wipe away the tears in her eyes. "That's..." she had to take a deep breath, "that sounds like it was very harrowing."

Eyebrows up for a moment, shrugging in place of his shoulders, expressing silently the word 'duh', Deku took in a sharp breath. "Yeah."

"Which part of it, do you think it was that did?"

He blinked. "I'm... sorry?"

She blew her nose. "Sorry," said she, before she went on, "the comparison between having and losing or..."

"Not having at all?" he shrugged, this time with his shoulders, as he shook his head. "It's the same thing with my mom, my father. I don't even remember what he looked like, just that vague feeling of something being gone. Both hurt, one's just... quieter."

She nodded, taking another note in her now tear stained notebook. "Lost parents seem to cropping up in your life, don't they?"

"Seems to be the city for it."

She gave him a curious look. "You blame the city itself?"

Deku shook his head. "No, but I've noticed a lot of absent or uncaring adults in my time here."
Fiddling with her pen, turning it over between her fingers, she puzzled for a moment. "Do you think that's something you seek out?"

That time, he laughed in earnest, though it was only a single exhalation. "No," he shook his head again, "but when I find it these days, I try to do... something, if I can."

"Like what?"

A question that led him to another memory, this one with Ashido at the center stage. He, her and Akaguro had been wrapping up a patrol when they'd found a group of school children at a playground. In a scene all too reminiscent of his youth, Deku watched as a group of children shoved another child to the ground. Another stepped in, only serving to add a second wounded child to the scenario. Deku and Ashido went running in, stopping the violence before it could escalate. Akaguro, with an all too jaded shake of his tired head, wandered to the nearby school and knocked on the doors until a teacher emerged. Funny how he hadn't noticed until three somewhat famous students from UA had made their involvement known.

the children were sent home, the three future heroes wandering numbly along. "Can you believe that teacher's attitude!?!" Ashido fumed, her cheeks puffing up with impotent fury. "He could have at least pretended not to be annoyed with us!"

"Oh," Akaguro said with a mocking smile, "but we asked him to do his job, and we can't have that."

"Ugh!" Ashido rolled her eyes, crossing her arms. "Teachers like him are the worst. Makes me wanna...!" And just to let some of her anger out, she stomped.

In mild disbelief, Deku gave her a searching look. "...What are you? A bunny?"

Ashido blinked, "huh?"

Deku pointed at her foot, "the stomping, because you were mad. Rabbits do that." Okay, now he just felt silly for saying anything at all.

"Pffft!" Ashido waved a hand in a fanning motion. "No, no I was just doin that to-" passing by a large bay window, she saw her reflection and stopped walking. "to..." She stood there and stared at herself for a moment. Then, shoulders shaking and quietly at first, she burst into laughter, palm against her forehead.

Now, the vampire just felt totally lost. "...What?" Turning to Akaguro, clearly amused, he said, "why is she...?"

Akaguro chuckled. "Just... imagine her hero outfit with matching bunny ears for a second."

Confused, Deku actually did this, wondering what the point of it was when the realization hit him. "...Ah." he squeaked, going a bit red in the cheeks. Bunny outfit. got it.

"Awww," Ashido teased, "are you blushing, Midoriya?"

"No." he lied, hiding behind his arms.

"You totally are!" She giggled, reaching out and pinching his cheek as his eyes shut tight. "So innocent, like a delicate lil' flower!" She snickered.

Motioning for her to shoo away, Akaguro suppressed a laugh. "Okay, okay, that's enough of that."
Even as she complied, the pink troll-girl snickered. The dhampire sighed, "you think we'll have to write a report on this?"

"P-probably..." Deku managed, clearing his throat.

Ashido let out an exaggeratedly annoyed, groaning sigh. "No good deed goes unpunished..." She shrugged, apparently already over it. "A'ight. Let's write this thing."

A while later, after enough writing to make their wrists cramp, the three of them sat in UA's cafeteria, eating dinner. Well, two of them were eating. Flexing his aching wrist, Akaguro grumbled. "I'm not sure stepping in was worth it."

"Hey," Ashido pointed right at the dhampire's nose, so close and so suddenly that the'd jerked back in surprise, "stopping bullies is always worth it."

Deku blinked. His eyes immediately went to the girl's face. This time, he was surprised to see that there wasn't even a hint of her usual, jokester self. Completely serious. It wasn't often that happened, and it struck him as odd that-

"You know he probably wants to be left alone!"

"Don't care!" Ashido called back, "Speaking from experience: last thing he needs right now!"

Befuddled, Deku's eyes fell away from her face. "Can you please not do that?" Akaguro gently pushed her hand away, and Deku's eyes caught sight of it: the scar, just barley peeking at the hem of her costume, under her arm. "It's... obnoxious."

"Hmph!" Crossing her arms, she huffily turned away from Akaguro. "Well don't say stupid things like that." and she stuck out her tongue.

This left both boys unsure how to react this, though for differing reasons. Deku had suspicions about that scar he'd seen, Akaguro was just not adapted to human interaction. "...You're all over the place."

Ashido growled, "you don't know what happens if that kinda thing goes unchecked..."

Rolling his eyes, the dhampire let out an annoyed sigh. "Enlighten me. What happens?"

Now, the woman was glaring at him. "One way or another people get seriously hurt." Akaguro blinked, Deku rubbed at his scarred, right eye. "Saw it happen all the time, when I was a kid." She spoke quietly. "If you push someone hard enough, make their life painful enough, one of two things happens. They either become someone amazing or... they turn into the thing that hurt them." Neither of them knew what to say to that. Deku wasn't sure he agreed, it felt like he'd be giving himself a little too much credit if he did, but... 'turning into the thing that hurt them'... why did that strike a chord?

Shaking his head, hands up in surrender, Akaguro collected their papers. "I'll just... turn these in. Back in a few."

When he left, Ashdio smushed her cheek into her palm, leaning her elbow against the table. That empty expression on her face was all too familiar to the boy with mismatched eyes. "You didn't just see it happen, did you?" She turned her eyes toward him, blinking once. He gestured to her side. "The scar... I'm guessing there's a story."

At times, she really hated Deku's brain. A few minutes went by, in silence, as she considered the lie
she wanted to tell. Say something about a bit of carelessness on a playground, falling onto a sharp
branch, or some slip up with a knife. However... "Yeah," she sighed, "yeah, that's right."

Deku slumped back against the cushioned wall of their booth. "That's... hard to imagine." Her
eyebrows jumped. "You're just... so nice, I-"

"Look at me." Her tone was quiet, almost no emotion at all, and that caught him off guard. "Really
look at me. What do you see?"

After a few seconds, he opened his mouth to speak but then, immediately, he realized what she
meant. "...A girl with black eyes." She nodded. "Pink skin and hair. Horns."

She gave a sad smile. "What more excuse does a kid need to start making fun of someone?"

He shook his head. "To leave a scar like that? I'd hoped... I'd hoped more."

Ashido allowed herself a little laugh. "You want me to be weirder, do you?" He shushed him
before he could reply. "You know how it is. Any sign of difference or weakness? Kids break out
the spitballs and schoolyard beatings."

"Yeah..." in his experience, that was certainly true, "is that why... you're you?"

"No," Ashido waved the notion away, "I'm me because I refuse to be anything else." she smiled,
grinning really, and this time Deku saw through it; saw the pain behind it, that had always been
there. "our little secret, kay?"

He reached up with his thumb, idly cracking his knuckles one after the other. So much for that
promise...

As was her usual, Kokoro took notes at the story's conclusion. "You care deeply about your
friends." He avoided looking her in the eye, another she noted, after considering the timing. "Are
you ashamed of that?"

His eyes shot to hers, the rest of his face unmoved for about a second. "I didn't say that..."

She shrugged. "Your body language seemed to say it."

He sighed, eyes closed. "It just..." he bit his lip, "it feels wrong taking credit for that, saying you're
right."

"It's wrong to admit that you admit to caring about your friends?"

"Only when it's a complime-" and then he realized how silly it sounded to say that. He sighed,
"...yeah, I guess."

She smiled at him. "How do your friends know you care if you don't tell them?"

"I'd hope my actions would tell them."

She seemed to hold back a more scathing reply than she gave. "But... you don't hang out with them
unless they ask for help." Deku winced, shrinking into his seat a little. "Frankly, I'm surprised they
even ask you for help anymore. Most people don't ask a friend who's never there for help unless
there's no where else to go."

Admittedly, he had thought of that before. "I'm confused about that myself, doctor."
"Has there been a time recently where you didn't need such a prompt?" That he was already wracking his brain even for one instance, was telling. "An instance where you weren't just there to help?"

Hesitating, he defeatedly sighed his answer. "Well... I wasn't asked, one time."

Bakugo’s family had always been loud. Exceptionally loud, even before his quirk had manifested. There wasn’t a day that went by where someone wasn’t yelling something across the house, out the door, to a neighbor or just plain screaming. After a while, a few years, the neighborhood had gotten used to it. The volume level was never anything beyond tolerable and it never on to an unreasonable hour. They were just loud people, that was all there was to say about it.

At least, that was what almost everyone in the neighborhood thought.

One night, Deku had been outside putting out the trash when he heard them yelling. Nothing out of the ordinary, or so he thought at first. He was almost back inside when he heard a new voice in the fray, quieter than the others: Kirishima. Not quite sure his ears could be trusted, Deku turned around and listened, actually listened to the ruckus. Tones were harsh, growling. Hostility was in the air and tension seemed to be rising with it. He thought that maybe he was just being nosy, snooping in on something he shouldn’t, when a loud slap split the night.

Shocked, he spun on his heels, the continuing squabbling doing little to dissuade his growing fear. The front door tore open, Bakugo stomping his way outside, nursing a bleeding cheek. He was quietly cursing to himself, prodding at his bleeding face and hissing with the pain. That was, until he noticed Deku, a stunned look on his face, staring at him. "What?" he demanded.

"Nothing..." said he, "I just..." he looked toward Bakugo's home, the screaming match was still in full swing. "What the hell happened?"

Bakugo rolled his eyes, growling. "Same thing that always fucking happens when mom gets pissed, that's what." Hissing at the pain in his still bleeding cheek, he added. "Why? You want one to match?"

"Hey," a new voice quietly scolded, "he's just worried about you." Kirishima, evidently realizing he couldn't mediate this particular quarrel. Him putting a hand on Bakugo's shoulder was expected, comforting a friend was just what he did.

Bakugo tenderly taking that hand in his own? Now that was not something one would typically expect. Deku had been prepared to just write it off as two exceptionally close friends when the two of them had gently bumped their foreheads together.

When they nuzzled, Deku just about lost it. He had to do a double take just to make sure that it had happened. "Uh, guys?"

Kirishima smiled at him apologetically while Bakugo rolled his eyes at the interruption. "Er, sorry, are we bothering-?"

"No no no!" Deku frantically waved his hands, "Nothing like that! I just- Um... I didn't think you'd want an audience, is all..."

Bakugo growled out a sigh. "So... you're saying you don't mind?"

Deku blinked. "I- well, yeah, of course! I'd never mind."

And that was when Bakugo french kissed his boyfriend. "Then stop yammering." Kirishima's eyes
fluttered, butterflies in his chest making him smile like an idiot as soon as the kiss ended. Turning back to the house Bakugo's shoulders slumped. "God dammit... are they still screaming!?"

Frowning a little, Kirishima nodded. "Sounds like..." his foot fussed at the grass, he seemed to be very uncertain as to what to do.

Sensing that, perhaps, these two could do with time away from that house, Deku made way in front of his door. Motioning inside he waited for them to say something, but they just looked at him with varying degrees of indecisiveness. "If you don't want somewhere to hide, do you at least want to use my first aid kit?"

The two boys looked at each other. Kirishima nodded to Bakugo, a hand on his cheek, and the warhead sighed as he relented. "Yeah, okay."

Deku clicked on the lights, grabbing the first aid kit as his friends got comfortable on the couch. Handing it to Kirishima he asked, "So... what was that about? It wasn't... I mean-"

"I don't think so," Kirishima frowned, applying some disinfectant to the wound of his boyfriend who growled at the pain. "at least, none of the yelling was about that."

Bakugo shrugged. "Mom never really needed an excuse," Kirishima's frown deepened, "her and dad have always been like this."

"So..." Deku couldn't fathom it. "This entire time, all these years, it's actually been this bad?"

This, was this why Bakugo acted the way he always had? Just a child lashing out from an unstable life at home?

Sighing, Bakugo seemed at a loss as to what he should or could say. "What'd you think it was? Over enthusiastic scrabble nights?"

"Hon..." Kirishima quietly protested.

Taking a deep breath, slowly letting it back out, Bakugo let some of his angry roll away. "Sorry, Deku, I-" Biting his lips, rolling his eyes, Bakugo smiled a smile of barely contained rage. "Sorry, again. I uh, know I shouldn't call you that, Midoriya. I'm just bitchy from the pain, okay?"

For once, he was truly speechless. "Uh..." Deku blinked. "O- okay?"

Bakugo rolled his eyes again. "I figured it was a thing by now, seeing how everyone calls you 'Green' these day- OW!"

"Sorry!" Kirishima hissed, clearly meaning it. "It's hard to do this with you talking so much, handsome."

"And you didn't tell me to shut up, why?" The warhead whined, angrily.

Kirishima gave him a look. "That doesn't really sound like something I'd say, for one." after another few seconds, he placed a large band-aid over Bakugo's bleeding cheek. "there, best I can do."

Flexing his jaw, stretching his cheek, Bakugo got a feel for how much he could move his face like this. "It works." He muttered, standing up and heading for the door. "Back when they stop yelling." and the warhead resigned himself to sitting on Deku's front porch, waiting for things with his family to simmer down.
Sighing, rubbing at his face, Kirishima leaned back, falling against the couch and groaning some of his stress away in a long, long sigh. More sedately, Deku did the same. "You okay?"

Kirishima nodded. "Yeah, just, first time meet his folks." He shrugged, letting a hand drop soundly into his lap.

Deku exhaled sharply. "Fun."

"Right?" The redhead smiled, trying to bring some levity back to the scenario. "I was just wondering how I was gonna brag about how tonight went."

It was enough to make Deku wish he was any better at having friends. "Well, Kaminari usually deals with stress by being funny." He shrugged, hoping the suggestion would prove amusing.

Fortunately, his audience was one willing to laugh. "Yeah... yeah he does." When neither of them could continue the conversation as it was, Kirishima just went with what he felt that he should. "Thanks, for stepping in like that, I mean."

Deku shrugged. "What else was I supposed to do?"

Kirishima smiled. "Yeah, I guess you have had that habit lately."

"What do you mean?"

"You know," the redhead shrugged, "it's kinda what you've been doing for a long time now: whenever someone in our class needs help?" His hands clapped together, "Bam! there's Midoriya."

Eyes narrowing, Deku gave Kirishima a very skeptical look. "And... you know this how?"

For the briefest of moments, though he could never be sure, Deku swore he saw Kirishima's face flicker with fear. "Ah, well, people've been talking about it. ...here and there."

That didn't sound right at all. "Why would they?" Kirishima squirmed under Deku's questioning. "Most of the things I've been there for haven't been the kinda you just bring up in conversation." At least, he didn't think they were. Why someone would ever go around talking about any of the things he'd helped his friends deal with was beyond him.

That being said, even Kirishima didn't seem to have a good answer to that. "Well, I must've heard it somewhere," he laughed nervously, "after all, you did just confirm it."

Okay, that was a fair point. "A bit..." Deku conceded, right as Bakugo came skulking back inside.

From the look on his face, it was obvious that things hadn't calmed down at home. "Not even a little?" Kirishima frowned.

Sighing, clearly at a point where he was just plain done, Bakugo dropped back onto the couch. "No."

After a brief discussion, it was decided that at least Bakugo would be spending the night at Deku's. Another minute or so later, and Kirishima was staying too. They stayed up late, watching cheesy, badly acted action movies. 'Guy stuff' that barely entertained enough to be forgiven for the absolute lack of substance the movies bore. It was enough to convince Deku that his usual taste in movies wasn't actually that bad after all.

Still, 'Die Hard' was okay, he admitted. When the other two had passed out on his couch, snuggled
up to each other in a way Deku couldn't help but smile at, he called it a night. Turning down the
volume he draped a blanket over them and trudged to his bathroom. Teeth brushed, face splashed,
he took a moment to breathe. He hated this. that he was part of this now. It felt intrusive, rude on
his part to be butting in like this. That his friends seemed grateful for it was one thing, but he
couldn't make it feel right.

He'd crossed the line the private, family life of his childhood friend. What he'd seen beyond that
line had left him feeling awful. Years of his life, he'd spent alongside Bakugo and he simply failed
to notice. Something like this, should not have been so easy to miss. Falling onto the bed, he was
almost out like the lights as soon as he hit the sheets, were it not for a small knock on his door.

Forcing his eyes open, Deku sat back up. "Everything okay?"

Taking a seat at his desk, was Bakugo. "Yeah... no." Forever at a loss with quiet moments. "You
didn't have to help me, us, like this tonight."

"Yeah, but I wanted to."

Something the warhead's mind just couldn't parse. "Why?" His face showed every iota of his
disbelief. "Look I... after that talk we had, outside after." he hesitated, "after your mom died I get
that things are somewhat less shitty between us, but-"

"You're overthinking it." Bakugo's disbelief soared to new heights. "At this point I'm just glad we
can talk like this again."

Nodding slowly, Bakugo blinked. "...So, should I start calling you 'Green' too?" Deku shot him a
curious look, and Bakugo shrugged. "It's what your friends call you these days."

Well, he wasn't wrong. "I'd like that, but, what do I call you?"

Bakugo shrugged. "Kat?"

That made Deku laugh. "Really?"

"Oh fuck off, it's a valid nickname." His laughter only intensified and it made Bakugo growl.
"Okay, you have a better Idea-"

Holding a hand, Deku did his best to stop laughing. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry I just-" he couldn't help it.
"Oh man... I don't know why I laughed so hard at that."

Bakuko sighed. "Guess it doesn't really matter. Hell, you can call me Kacchan if you want."

He wasn't so sure about that. "I thought you hated that name."

The warhead shook his head. "Nah, it's just... you were the only one who really kept using it, after
a while." He leaned against Deku's desk, his cheek pushing into his palm. "Always kinda chalked
that up to you wishing things hadn't started changing, wanting the good times to keep going when
they were obviously ending. Life just hasn't let you have a break since then, but that's not my
point." His eyes shifted, peering right into Deku's. "My point is... well, I don't hate it. I just figured
you'd move on from it like everyone else eventually."

In the end, Deku couldn't help but smile. "Kacchan it is."

"Cool." Bakugo swiveled Deku's chair around, his elbow accidentally knocking something off his
desk. "Shit... where'd it go?"
"What was it?" The vampire said, hoping it wasn't anything fragile.

Bakugo flicked on the light. "The fuck would I know, I didn't see-" He stopped, blinking as soon as his eyes caught it. Slowly, he stooped to the floor and picked up the object that perplexed him so. Then, with equal slowness, he looked back at Deku.

"W-what? Why are you looking at me like that?"

Wasting no time, Bakugo spun the chair back around and took a good look at Deku's little project. He looked at the textbooks, the circuitry, his laptop, notes, all of it. All the while a building look of comprehension spread across his face.

He was very, very nervous now."...Kacchan?"

"How long?"

Deku blinked. "W-whu-?"

In his hand, Bakugo held up a piece of plastic, a faded word painted on it in black ink: Zune. "How long have you been trying to fix long-ears's little toy?" The accusatory tone was surprisingly friendly, calm. Though that said nothing about the face Bakugo was making, like he'd just learned the other boy's darkest secret.

Worst of all, Deku had no idea why he was acting this way. "I- I don't know." it was the truth. "Since... maybe before the sport's festival? I'm not sure."

While his perplexed brow remained as it was, Bakugo's eyes widened. It took him a moment to actually find his words. "You've been trying to fix this thing for two years?"

The words hung in the empty air, making the vampire sweat. Why? What did it matter how long he'd been trying to fix it for? He was almost done... he just had to find a few more songs. Admittedly tracking down the exact songs and albums by decoding seemingly random bits of the error messages and what of the faulty data he'd managed to sift through wasn't exactly easy, but it hadn't stopped him yet.

"Uh..."

But it was keeping him sane. The project was just as useful to him as it would turn out to be for Jiro. After all, she'd be getting back something that was truly priceless in her eyes. The day she'd found it broken had been traumatic enough to put a rift between them for a considerable length of time.

"...You almost done?"

Although maybe he was exaggerating, reading too much into it. Teenage hormones being what they are, it would be no surprise of things had simply been amplified by that between them. Hardly the first time that would be the case between friends, sharing their troubles anyways. No no, there was no other-

"Fuck's sake, do you know you're talking out loud!?"

Eyes aflutter, Deku gulped. "N-no. I... I didn't."

Not knowing what else to do, Bakugo just shook his tired head. "Shoulda seen this comin..." he chuckled to himself. When Deku blinked, entirely unaware of Bakugo's discovery, the warhead just
out and said it. "Your feelings for long-ears ain't anything so simple as 'friendship', Green."

...That... made no sense. "What are you talking about?"

In reply, Bakugo pointed at the project, two years of it, littering the Vampire's desk. "No friend I've ever heard of would go this far, for this long just to do something nice." He splayed his arms out to the sides, clearly at a loss. "The fuck else am I supposed to say here? It's- it's fucking obvious!"

Deku quietly hoped this wouldn't wake Kirishima. "It's- no! Come on, it's not like-!"

"Oh, don't bullshit me!" Bakugo rolled his eyes. "Tell you what: let's ask Ashido what she thinks of this." Bakugo pulled his phone from his pocket. "She's the expert, I'll bet she'll know-"

The speed at which Deku had moved across the room had been too fast for Bakugo's eyes to register. One minute he was holding his phone, the next he wasn't. A gust of wind had swathed over him, rustling and even turning the pages of the books on Deku's desk and the vampire stood in his own doorway, suddenly very short of breath. Rather than say anything, Bakugo simply, slowly, folded his arms and spun around in the chair, an expectant look on his face as he waited for Deku to just admit it. After a few, very short, but increasingly lengthening breaths, Deku fell against his doorway. "...I... I don't know what to say."

Bakugo held out his hand, and after a moment, Deku returned his phone to him. "If it helps, I didn't manage to text her."

Running a hand over his face, fingers pushing through his hair, Deku just breathed. "I... this doesn't make any sense."

"Does it feel wrong?"

"...no."

"Can you think of a reason why you shouldn't?"

"I- ...well, also no."

"Do you think she doesn't feel the same way?"

He blinked. "I don't know." Then he sighed. "But... after... after standing up Uraraka on new years, I-"

"Yeah," Bakugo laughed, "she's probably not gonna care too much about that."

Deku shook his head, "No- no, I mean... I'm not sure I can... if I'm ready to... Or even... GAH!"

Frustrated, pent up and now discussing something very, very new to him, had rattled the poor boy just a little too much. In a flurry of motion his hands frantically shoved and tugged through his hair in a frenzy, leaving him with even more of a rats nest than usual. Eventually, after a few moments silence, his feelings just came out. "...I can't."

He wanted to tell Deku that life didn't work that way, that karma wasn't really a thing that would bite him for just trying to be happy. However, something stopped him. Perhaps it was understanding that he'd been through so much over the course of his life. Perhaps it was knowing that the man simply needed a break, but he tried to accept it.

"Okay." Putting the piece of the Zune down, he stood up. "we should... probably sleep but," he held up a finger, pointing at nowhere in particular, "just promise me one thing?" Deku waited for
him to elaborate, and elaborate he did. "If you ever find out that she feels the same way, just fucking go for it."

"But I-"

"No no no, but nuthin." Bakugo wasn't having it. "Everyone, and I mean everyone, is sick of seeing you miserable. If that's really gonna make you happy, then why not go for it?" His hands flopped by his sides, clearly, still at a loss here. "Hell, you'd be making her happy too if it turns out the way everyone thinks it will!"

"It's not-!" He had to quiet himself, taking a deep breath. "It's not that simple..."

"Why the hell not!?"

"I don't know!" Bakugo was taken almost blindingly by surprise, hearing Deku snap back like that. "There's no logic in it, alright!? Whenever the thought, whenever the feeling crosses my mind my head starts hurting until I just decide that I can't! Pressure builds up, under my skull and splits my head down the middle until I just..." he pressed a hand to his forehead, face wincing from the pain in his heart.

In the silence, Bakugo came to another realization. It was the reason behind this, behind his isolation and almost definitely a major part of what made him sabotage his friendship and potential relationship with Uraraka. "You're afraid to be happy."

He let out something that resembled a sob, face twisted with giref. "Look what happens every time I start getting there. First my face," Bakugo flinched at that, "then I killed Shigaraki-"

"The fuck- no you didn't!"

"Then mom!" Bakugo looked the other way, any other way. "It's just not- I don't get to be happy. Maybe if I don't go after it, no one else gets hurt. Maybe I don't get hurt again."

"Oh my god, are you even listening to yourself!?"

"I know it sounds crazy!"

"GOOD!"

"FINE!"

"Guys!" They both jumped at Kirishima's sudden leap into the argument. "you're gonna wake the neighbors..."

Both the other boys facepalmed. "Thanks, Eiji..." Bakugo groaned.

Kirishima shook his head, exhaustion taking hold of him again. "You coming back to be- er, the couch?"

"...Yeah, be right there." And Kirishima laid back down, Bakugo gave Deku a look that said the conversation wasn't over.

Something Deku made sure to cut off right away. "Don't."

The warhead just shook his head again. "Fine. Just don't regret it, Green." Then he wandered back to the couch.
Deku closed the door behind him, taking a moment to bang his head against it with a dull thud. Switching off the lights, he fell back into his chair. When the hell did his life get so backwards so as to necessitate Bakugo being the one one to point out his own feelings? Holding up the Zune, the case he was still fixing, he wondered still how he'd managed to be right while he was at it. He knew even when he hadn't, all the obvious evidence right under his nose. Literally! How could he have failed to notice? It was an entirely new feeling, a new emotion that he had for someone he knew. There was no good reason why he wouldn't have been aware, PTSD be damned.

Unless... it wasn't a new feeling, per say...

Slowly, with painful reluctance, Deku felt the realization crawl across his brain. "You've got to be fucking kidding me." he laughed, once, feeling no joy for it. "What moron bunch of brain-dead hormones decided this was a good time to fa-" No. Nuh uh, nope, NO NO NO, no, NO. Jaw clenched tight, it was like his mouth wouldn't let him say the words. With a last, very slow, very deep breath, he shook his head at himself. "I wonder if alcohol is one of those things my body doesn't handle any more..."

"you're so afraid...
all that you have...
is all that you deserve.

Maybe it is...
maybe it is...
oh baby..

it is..."
Komm, süßer Tod

July 4th: 2211

A girl is born to quirkless parents. Quirk: Attraction of small objects.

April: 2237

Half a dozen letters, sent to her friends in the area. Bittersweet goodbyes met with lukewarm replies. A man and a woman leaving the countryside to the big city, expecting child.

June 15th: 2237

A child with messy green hair is born.

June: 2242

Child is diagnosed 'quirkless'.

August: 2242

A man is naturalized into a foreign country, Japanese citizenship renounced. Legal ties to all resident family and property rescinded.

Phone calls are made to friends, friends all with unopened letters, met with no reply.

A mother cries alone.

October 15th: 2242, 3:53am

Patient admitted to Musutafu General Hospital. Affliction: severed radial arteries. Blood alcohol content:0.25%

Diagnosis: Clinical depression, suicidal tendencies.

December 11th: 2242

Courts rule a mother is permitted to return home to raise her child.

A mother who will dedicate her life to her child.

July 19th: 2255

In a cold house, a young man with green and white hair finds a bundle of legal documents and unsent letters; along with the deed to a house. He reads them all, and goes for a battle of alcohol.

It's drained in seconds flat.

Glass set down, he briefly considered going for the alcohol in the cupboard. Would've been easy, just to go for it. Not like anyone was there to stop him, not now. Three days after his last appointment with Doctor Kokoro and he was still thinking about going for the bottle. Therapy is a beautiful thing, but only helps when the patient wants it to.
When the patient mentions everything going on.

"Curious that you still haven't told her about me." Shigaraki mused, flexing his wrists. Could hallucinations get stiff in the joints? "I thought you wanted to get better."

Deku rolled his eyes, shaking his head. "And I thought that was the last thing you wanted." His hand went to the fridge, rather than the cupboard.

The dead villain shrugged, a wry smile tugging at one corner of his mouth. "What makes you think I want any one thing in particular?"

Pulling a gallon of blood from the fridge -about the only thing in it these days- he poured himself a glass. "You sure advocate death a lot for someone who doesn't care, one way or the other."

A hand of the corpse batted dismissively at the air. "That was then, and you've made it clear since then that it doesn't matter what I want."

As Deku dragged out a chair to sit down, settling in at the table with the technical manuals, so did Shigaraki. "and yet, you're still here..." He muttered, taking a sip from his glass.

Again, the corpse shrugged. "Take it up with your brain, I'm just along for the ride at this point."

"No chance you can do so quietly?"

Shigaraki reared back his head and laughed. "Just keeping the pilot company, on his long flight. Can't have you going totally insane, then they might start treating you and I'd go away entirely."

Deku could only scoff. "How altruistic of you..." Another sip later and he was setting down the glass. Time to get to reading, translating and re-compiling the instructions, one last time.

Gesturing to the group of books littering the table, Shigaraki sighed. "Is all that really necessary?"

"At this point? Probably not." Deku admitted, pen already furiously scribbling away. "Just wanna be sure I do this right the first time. I'd hate to reassemble it only to have to undo everything because I made a mistake."

"How thoughtful..." Mused the villain, scratching at the back of his neck. "and what's you're little plan once it's done?"

Deku shrugged. "Honestly haven't decided."

"You could just walk up and hand it to her," he stretched, his back and ribs making popping noises to varying degrees of unpleasant. "Simplest solution."

Of all the conversations to be having with a dead villain. A dead villain inside his head. "Yeah, no. Not doing that."

"Why not?"

Another shrug. "I'd rather not take credit for this if I can help it."

The villain cackled under his breath. "You mean now that you know how you feel and can't ignore it or pretend it's not there."

A sharp exhalation pushed its way through Deku's nose. "Assuming I jumped to the right conclusion, you mean."
Now it was the villain's turn to shrug. "Haven't you?"

Deku actually gulped. "I... guess I'll have to find out."

Shigaraki grinned. "And won't that be fun?"

Deku let out an exasperated sighed, rolling his eyes. "Of all the people I've let get hurt, that I feel any level of guilt about and it's you I end up with as a hallucination..."

He shrugged, "Well, you are something of a masochist."

The vampire could not believe what had just been said to him. "Ex...cuse me?"

Another round of raspy cackling. "Remind me... how did you feel when Jiro called you a 'good bo-
"

"Changing subjects. Right now," As the villain howled with laughter, Deku continued his indignant protest. "And that's not masochism!"

The laughter only intensified. "And yet, you'd know!" He almost fell out of the chair, his calamitous laughter leaving the vampire feeling completely foolish.

Deku dragged hands over his face, obscuring scarlet features as he groaned in frustration, embarrassment. "...This is what going crazy is. Isn't it? Arguing with a hallucination that overreacts to everything I say..."

Then the laughter died down. "Ahhh, who among us would know?"

The boy with mismatched eyes shook his head. "probably my therapist..."

Shigaraki chuckled, putting his feet up on the table. "So she might."

Rubbing at his eyes, Deku tried to stave off the feeling of exhaustion that washed over him. "I'm starting to think I should tell her about you."

"You could stop going on patrol so much."

Deku sighed, giving up on taking notes for the time being. "Can't do that." He took another long sip from his glass.

"And why on earth not?" Shigaraki actually seemed annoyed. "It's not as if you're really doing anything all that important most days. You're not the symbol of peace."

Biting his lower lip, Deku did his best not growl. "No, but he's... not doing well."

Shigaraki blinked, letting his confusion show plainly on his face. "You know this how? You haven't spoken to him about anything non-class related in two years."

Rather than dignify this with his own thoughts, Deku pulled out his phone and opened up a page he'd bookmarked. Sliding his phone across the table, letting the villain look at it, he spoke. "He doesn't do hero work for more than an hour now, not that anyone's gotten footage of."

The corpse raised an eyebrow. "And... you'd trust these message boards?"

"I trust the evidence." Deku mumbled. "Every time All Might is anywhere, doing anything, someone's got a cell phone out recording him or there's a security camera or the news..." a raised
hand clapped against his lap, "If you look at the time stamps, you see it's almost never past an hour a day."

Even the nay-saying, argumentative hallucination couldn't disagree. "Hrrrm... well, that's going to make things ugly... when villains start noticing."

"Who's to say they already haven't?"

Distressingly, he kept on agreeing. "Does he know?" Confused, his turn for it, Deku looked back up at Shigaraki. "You know who he is, does he know that?"

Deku had to laugh. "Why would I tell him that? He has enough on his plate without my adding to it."

"That's exactly my point," Said Shigaraki, "don't you think he should know how easy it was to figure out? All you needed was the eyes, his hair color and you had it. Someone else has no doubt put the evidence together by now."

For a cold, worrisome moment, Deku felt the comprehension of frightening truth crawl across his mind. "...You're right."

"Exactly," Replied he, "So maybe you should-"

"You keep doing that," Deku interrupted, "bringing things up like that, things I don't know but should." He was puzzling something together, but was completely uncertain of what. "I fall asleep reading about PTSD, then dream about you going on about it when it should be me processing that information alone or through some abstract, now this..." His eyes searched about, scanning the table and floor in front of him as if the answer were there somewhere. "You're not a hallucination," he breathed, a chill running down his spine, "you're something else. A manifestation of some kind... some thing..."

Shrugging, Shigaraki didn't seem very concerned about this revelation. "So what am I then?"

"No idea," Deku admitted, tapping a decisive finger against his notes, "but I'd bet this isn't real right now, I probably fell asleep at the table, already did this..." he sighed.

The dead villain let out a solitary laugh. "Well it's not another nightmare, at least."

"I'd almost prefer the nightmare..." Deku groaned, "gives the illusion that I have a life."

"Which," Shigaraki raised a finger, wagging it at Deku's nose, "you would have if you went out and talked to any of your friends, beyond being their go-to for their problems."

A painful memory flickered at those words. At one point, he'd had a chance not to be that guy, to just be there with a friend and enjoy a rather specific night. A friend he was very afraid to talk to again. "Yeah..."

Rolling his eyes, the villain groaned. "You're not gonna make me talk to you about her are you?"

Deku glared at him. "Uraraka."

"Whatever," he batted dismissively at the air, "seems to me your solution there is very obvious."

"But I-" he faltered, biting at his lip, "How do I know apologizing would be anything she'd want? How do I know if she doesn't just want to keep ignoring each other?" He fell back against the back
into his chair with a loud clatter of his spine against the wood. "It could just be completely selfish on my part..."

"Asking never hurt." The villain shrugged, exaggeratedly and with an unsettlingly wide grin.

The feeling of sunlight, stinging his eyes forced him to wake up. Wincing from the pain he sat up, covering his face as he fished about the table in front of him for his sunglasses. Once in hand, on his face they went. Tired feet fumbled to his restroom, equally clumsy hands went for the door, opening it just a touch too hastily. The coat hanging on the door shook and something dropped from one of its pockets. A phone, long forgotten in a disused coat on the bathroom door. As it bounced on the floor it booted back up. Brow furrowing in confusion he stooped and gingerly picked it up. His thumb started flicking through various screens, no password needed to unlock the device. Old pictures of-

It took everything he had not to cry.

This... this was his mom's old phone. If there was one thing he remembered about his father, it was that he never took pictures. Old pictures of his mom and dad. There was a face he barely remembered, suddenly looking back at him like he were still here. Quivering lip and twitching nose, he flipped through picture after picture until there were no more to find. The last one had been taken the day before that fateful visit to the doctor. It's not gonna happen. Closing the folder, he was about ready to jam the phone back where it had fallen from when he noticed a file folder. Its title was one, two letter word: Me: Created Dec 11th, 2242.

He'd almost clicked right on it when he noticed the time. Almost time to leave. Pocketing the phone, he decided to see what was in the folder later and walked to the bathroom faucet, turning it on. He's almost put his hands under the running water when his brain kicked in. Giving the faucet an accusatory look and quiet growl he reached for plastic bin and filled it. Shaking his head at himself, with a roll of his eyes, he caught a look at his reflection.

He hated his reflection.

Long, eternally messy, cow-lick-ridden hair, half white and half green. One eye, the sclera burned black, the other very much as it always was. Ridiculous, green stubble he hadn't bothered to shave yet, not in days. He'd lost the round cheeks of his earlier teenage years, childhood. In place of them were sharp cheekbones he couldn't help but notice were slightly too high for his face. Sunken cheeks and a pronounced jawline only accentuated his gaunt, malnourished look.

The skin around his eyes was purple, if you looked close enough in the right lighting, veins peaking faintly from beneath. Bags under said eyes were decidedly difficult to ignore as well, making him look almost half way through his twenties instead of only almost eighteen. In as little clothing as he was wearing, an undone, rolled up button up, undershirt and slacks, he could see many of his scars. Blades, bullets, claws, fire, jagged edges of all manner, acid, teeth, he'd been marked by them all. He almost wished he remembered how most of them had happened, aside from the ones he hid beneath that extra layer his undershirt provided. Those had all been the work of Bakugo, long ago.

It was lucky he never really explicitly enjoyed swimming, one less opportunity to go shirtless where anyone would see. One less thing to explain to a concerned, onlooking crowd. Then again, maybe if Bakugo had seen those scars, back when they were younger, his eyes might still match. The only consolation for any of it was the layer of muscle his hero work had earned him. It wasn't very much, just enough to partially disguise the fact he never ate enough. Enough to let any who might see him in such an exposed state know he led an active life. Not that he'd ever been fond of
the musclebound look, wanted it for himself.

He didn't know why but being skinny never bothered him. Although, that might have been due to the fact he lived in Japan; a very warm part of Japan. Still, one good thing about it was how it felt. In a way, it made him feel more human, a feeling he desperately needed to feel more. Gaining muscle meant something about his strength was almost natural, it could be built upon like anyone else's. It wasn't just some byproduct of supernatural powers, magic or anything he couldn't explain. Being able to explain it felt human.

Splashing the hot water against his face, he rubbed it into his eyes, his skin. For precious seconds, he thought he saw his old self in the mirror, for how young his skin appeared to be. Color brought back by the warmth of the water, his skin smushed up against his bones bringing back some of the roundness now missed in his cheeks.

Then it was back to staring back at the vampire.

On one half of his face, he saw humanity, on the other? The terrible truth of what he'd become. True reflections, the opposite image on either side. His struggle, forever at odds with his own nature, his humanity versus the predator he fought not to let out, into the light of day. A bitter laugh shook his chest, just once, and a matching smile quirked one corner of his lips. He remembered, long ago, a dream that rather brought out the poet in him. Now such poetic musings seemed to flow from his thoughts as surely as his efforts to ignore his own emotions, his own inner thoughts. In truth, it wasn't that poetic, not really, even he knew that. But it was more so than he'd ever dabbled with intent.

That it came so easily and without prompt, it left him wondering why. How many of those long remembered poets had suffered such as he? Was pain the true instrument they played? Life, for all it's beauty, never seemed to inspire such beautiful as that which was born of darkness, literal or otherwise. Now a smile of bemusement crossed his lips, as he followed the thought like a black rabbit. Could life, in lighter times, produce such works as those we now remember? Such as those that have lingered in books by bedsides, like so many nights before. The answer came from one such tale, a bird perched upon the door. Feathers black and eyes no different than, it answered much the same as it had about little, lost Lenore. Quoth the raven, 'Nevermore.' Write as many love songs, ballads or inspiring tunes as you please, you'll be met with an ever silent dare to make it more memorable than the works of Poe.

Time to read, afforded him by long years of solitude, had evidently not gone to waste. It left the lad wondering what else he might remember with such musings. Another splash of water, running a towel over his face, and the bin emptied. It was time to face the day, and his sunglasses soon perched upon his nose.

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July 20th: 2255

Trips to school were more a symbolic act these days. Once there, climb into your costume, meet up with your classmates for patrol and hop to it. Senior year was about putting everything into practice, the academia was, for the most part, behind them. Considering it was the middle of July, Deku wondered if this was technically extra credit. As always, he slunk off to the disused restroom near the support department to change. Dents, scratches, tears in the materials marked the numerous times he'd worn the armor. Stitches marked the seems and various places the armor had been cobbled back together, like old scars that had been sewn shut with indelicate hands.

From his vague memories of the last two years patrols were usually done in groups. Considering how long it took to don his armor, Deku was usually left patrolling with whoever had decided to
wait for him. How little he remembered of these patrols, brief, visceral flashes of violence. Frantic scrambling to keep civilian's safe, protect vague shadows of classmates that eluded recollection. In perfect, vivid detail he could recall every scratch, every wound endured and attack he'd made, but not the faces of those around him. Like his mind was programmed to zero in on the worst of it, and the worst of it alone.

Today, it seemed life was following much the same pattern. Who should be waiting for him but three of his friends: Akaguro, Jiro and Uraraka. One he was happy to see, two he was not at all prepared to talk to for explicitly differing reasons. It was enough to make him feel as though he’d had a stroke. Waving, Akaguro smiled behind his mask, still bearing the burns from the USJ incident. "Hello, Guren." Ever the insistence on calling him by his chosen name.

Jiro, with that little, persistently awkward half-smile of her's, waved. "Heya."

Meekly returning the gesture, Deku squawked his reply. "H-hey." Earning a raised eyebrow from the girl. Odd, considering he didn't usually react in such a way to her presence. Keep it together, you idiot. Deku inwardly chided himself with a sigh. They were just good friends, fixing the Zune was only something she'd asked him to do. No amount of butterflies or flutters of the heart were going to convince anyone otherwise.

Killing those butterflies outright-as if with unholy fire- was the reluctant regard he received from a certain brunette. "Hi, Deku..." Utterly flat, her delivery of the greeting put an anvil on his heart. Regretfully, doing his best to obscure the emotion, he replied. "Um, hey... Uraraka." Bitterly, he wondered what sort of life he'd lived before this one. Karma, should such force exist, had it out for him and he begged to know why.

Even Akaguro could sense the mood that followed their reunion. He went to say something about it when Jiro kicked his foot, shaking her head wordlessly at him. Silently, the vampire thanked her for sparing him and Uraraka from explaining their present lack of enthusiasm. With a shrug, Akaguro announced the patrol they’d be taking, the only one left to take of course. The route went through the least likely locals for any sort of disturbance to erupt. Safest parts of the city with the heaviest police presence.

With one major exception: in the middle of the trek they'd be headed though one of the seediest parts of the city, one with little to no police presence. Run down buildings, shabby inhabitants, schools without windows, homes without doors, ghastly sights en masse. Naturally, this was the place the future heroes would be spending the majority of their time. This was no accident on their part and was largely the arena in which Deku had fought many of his battles as a hero these last two years.

Glancing around the derelict neighborhood, Jiro frowned. "I didn't know Musutafu had police deserts..." glaring at her surroundings, like the culprits for the place's mere existence lurked behind the ramshackle walls, she muttered. "the hell happened to make the cops abandon this place?"

In reply, Akaguro shrugged. "Who knows, at least we're here now, in case someone needs us."

Nervously peeking down an alley, Uraraka gulped. "You wouldn't think UA would allow its students to patrol places like this..."

"Ordinarily it doesn't," Akaguro said, index finger raised, "but thanks to... a friend I was able to convince the principal to add it to the patrol roster."

Blinking, flabbergasted, Uraraka almost yelped her reply. "Why!?"
Equally so, though more sedately expressed, the dhampire was in turn perplexed by her outburst. "...Why not? The people living here need protection as well, do they not?"

"Yeah but..." Uraraka murmured, rubbing at the back of her head, "by professionals, not a bunch of rookies like us."

"Ha!" Jiro laughed, "I don't think we think we qualify for amateur status these days." With a shrug, and wry smirk, she added, "a lot of us are already getting courted by agencies and we haven't even graduated yet."

"Everyone wants the recruits making it out of UA," Deku murmured, "either for skill or the prestige associated with earning a diploma here."

Akaguro rolled his eyes. "Some are so greedy for it they'll try to convince youths still attending the school to sign up before they graduate." He scoffed. "Uncle heroics wants you for hero work..."

Sighing, Uraraka shook her head. "Ever the optimist, Stendhal..."

Then it was the dhampire's turn to sigh. "If ever the optimistic outlook matches the realistic one? I shall hold such a viewpoint. Until then..." he gestured to the dilapidated buildings around them. "I'll just keep my eyes open to the truth of things..."

By Deku's side, Jiro bitterly laughed under her breath. "Never thought I'd see the day..." At Deku's quizzical look, she elaborated. "She's barely said a word to you, talking to him of all people instead."

The vampire rubbed at the back of his neck, averting his eyes from hers. "Yeah... they've never really had the most compatible personalities."

There was a phrase that drummed up memories. "No kidding," the optimistic upbeat girl with the glowering king of doom and gloom, "he's the oil to her water, and I don't mean because of his hair." A jab that Deku was very relieved their friend hadn't overheard.

From what he knew, Akaguro was lucky to have running water at all most days. His living situation was nothing shy of abysmal, not that Deku had ever visited the guy. When your friend shows up to school smelling like he had after an intense workout the day before? You don't just not notice.

"...you're in a mood today." Deku commented, not really sure what was going through her head at this moment.

Stuffing her hands into her pockets, Jiro looked away from him completely. "Well..." she sighed, "it's just sad, looking at you two avoiding each other for, what? Half a year at this point." Keeping her voice low, low enough that no one but them could possibly hear, she went on. "I know something happened with you guys." Her tone was almost accusatory. "I wont push but... the fuck, Green? I thought you two were sweet on each other."

*I'll never understand where people get that idea from...* the vampire sighed. "She... she definitely felt that way about me once." She didn't say anything, instead she merely waited for him to keep talking, if he was going to keep talking. "I... kind of stood her up on new years."

She almost looked offended by that statement. "What the hell for?"

"It wasn't on purpose!" His reply indignant. "I forgot what day it was and, well... when I woke up at maybe three AM, January first? I realized I'd messed up and-" Wait, no. If he told her he'd
fainted that would raise questions, questions he didn't want to answer. "...and calling her to apologize at three AM seemed like insult to injury." Well, at least that much was true, even if it omitted his fainting spell.

Frowning, considering what he'd said, she evidently believed him. That didn't mean she liked believing him. "Jeez, Green... were you trying to make her hate you?" She cast a sympathetic look to Uraraka, who was blissfully unaware of their conversation. "Poor thing..."

Once again, Deku sighed. "Guess I was..." What else could it have been? He didn't have an answer to that, wasn't sure he wanted it if there was one.

Jiro on the other hand, wasn't so pessimistic. "You know I wasn't really asking that." her hands wrung at her jacket's lapels for a moment or two. "Well... she's here, right?" Reluctantly, he nodded. "so, she's clearly at least willing to talk to you." Easier said than done though that was. "Maybe not right this minute but, you definitely should."

Not like he could really say she was wrong about that one. "I- yeah, okay." Just as soon as I figure out what to say...

Hands back to her jacket pockets, the hearing hero was somewhat surprised at how quickly he'd agreed with her reasoning. Then again, she hadn't said anything that he could exactly refute. "Good." She said, more calmly now. "You two need to be friends again."

If that's even possible. "Yeah..."

It felt like days, days spent just walking along. In reality it had only been a matter of hours. One half of another patrol done, another day of the final year at UA gone. Four friends sat at a table, gathered round in relative silence. One of them was comfortable with it, not paying the quiet any mind as he bit into a slab or raw meat. Another was trying to keep herself quiet, her metaphorical foot quite comfortable remaining out of her mouth as she twirled a long earlobe with her fingers. As for the last two, they seemed to be avoiding eye contact like it might set them ablaze.

Deku wanted to say something, anything if it meant making Uraraka feel better. But maybe that was the problem, saying anything might have been the thing that got them here. Being to afraid of hurting his friend leading them to this scenario, where if he'd just said no to begin with she might be fine right now. But then, he wasn't even sure if that was he wanted. How he felt right now was difficult to discern. Being nervous around Jiro was par for the course, always had been for various reasons. Was he wrong about- about... okay, he couldn't even think the actual words. Whenever his mind approached them it would just freeze. Was it fear, or that he didn't feel that way at all? Even if it he did feel that way, fear of what?

"Deku?"

He blinked, and suddenly he realized he and Uraraka were alone at their table. She sat across from him, a wounded expression on her face, shoulders bunched up tense. Nervous, hurt and yet not backing away from whatever they were about to say to each other. There was a certain bravery about her, something he'd never really appreciated. She was the one mediating the moment when Bakugo had first tried to apologize to him. She'd volunteered to be his partner during that first heroics class. Risked almost certain death to save his life from the zero pointer all the way back at the entrance exams. She'd even been the one to ask him out for new years, different sort of courage though that was.

It... it made him wish he felt something other than empty. "Hey." he said lamely.
She waved, timid gesture though it was. "I- can we talk?"

Something inside him twisted, nauseating him and welling up a need to squirm in his seat. "Yeah."

She drew in a deep breath. "...What happened, back during new years?" He winced. "Was it... was it something I said?" Then his eyes crept back open. "Something I-" she was visibly trembling, a shine pooling in the bottom of her eyes as she fought to keep her voice level, even. "I'm sorry I kissed you, I should've asked, I should've-"

"Whoa, hey, hey!" He stood up and walked to other side of the table, gently gripping her shoulder as he sat beside her. She just lowered her head, shaking body steadied only a fraction by his hand as her face hid behind her hair. "No, it- it wasn't like that, honest. I completely lost track of what day it was and... well..." he sighed, "I'm sorry. I should have said something sooner, I should have apologized ages ago, I just wasn't thinking... Trying not to think."

She reached up and squeezed the hand, the armored hand on her shoulder, still unable to look him in the eye. "Why?" He blinked, his stunned silence prompting elaboration. "What's so bad about thinking?"

Indeed, a question he yearned for an answer to. Analysis, puzzling out how quirks functioned, this sort of thing used to give him life.

But now... "Its more what happens with unfocused thought. When my mind wanders." She sniffled, giving him a moment to think before he continued. "I hate- I hate guilt, feeling guilty about the people I've let, I've watched die." Now she was looking at him, sidelong. "When I'm distracted, when I'm focused on things other than my life? I can almost forget what seeing that, feeling that felt like."

He shook his head, at himself mostly, "But it doesn't leave me alone... It's like a voice in my head, a noise that won't. Go. Away." He had to take a breath, having harshly pushed those last few words through his teeth. "I keep thinking... I keep wanting to be anywhere else, thinking about any other life than this... and I let that hurt you."

He let go of her shoulder, and she reluctantly released his hand. "I'm tired, Uraraka." His voice was barely strong enough to be heard. "Just... so tired. Tired of pain, tired of not feeling, tired of feeling insane, lost." With a final pause, time enough to breathe for a moment, he concluded his ramble. "Tired of feeling lonely, when it feels like I'm better off alone."

For about a minute, no one said a word. The nearly abandoned outdoor area of the restaurant offered naught but wind in terms of sound. As they sat there, together in silence, the terribly honest truth of Deku's heart hung over them. It was pitiable tale of self hatred, isolation. Something Uraraka, rather dismally, knew all about. "Deku," she weakly said, "Stop me if you've heard this one but... I need to tell you a story..."

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Once upon a time there was a little girl. Born to a loving a mother and father she smiled so bright her cheeks were burned forever red. They lived in a small, rural village, far to the north. The girl's parents worked together. Born without the abilities of most in the world, there was only so much they could really do; building houses for all the villagers of all the towns nearby. For a time, they were happy. Their living more than enough to keep food on the table, and warmth in home and hearth.

Until one day when no one needed them to build another house. The two parents had no idea what to do. Struggling to think of anything that would keep feeding them and their little girl, they finally..."
came up with a solution. So they packed up their things, said their farewells to friend and family alike and traveled away. From then on out the family was always moving from place to place. No matter where they went, their time there was always short. No point in them ever settling in, they'd just be leaving soon anyways.

Saddest of them three was the little girl. No matter who she met or made friends with it always became pointless, because they'd just be leaving again soon.

She cried.

Despite her parents love, despite all they sacrificed for her to be warm and happy, she was so lonely. But she could never tell them that. Her parents could never know how ungrateful she must have been.

So she smiled.

She smiled like she remembered smiling back home. Putting on a brave face she made herself learn for mom and dad. As long as they were trying so hard to make things work... well, crying just would've been selfish.

So she smiled.

Home was everywhere, so home was nowhere. So they wandered, their little girl learning to burn and shine bright in the face of the lonely black she carried with her, in her heart. Blackness that knew the truth of humans and the trees. Both are creatures that put down roots, spreading and connecting to the world around them. Their surroundings and their young as much family as the other. All the friends, so sweet and accepting of her though they were, were the forest to the tree who was always blown away in the wind.

So she didn't put down roots. She kept them to herself, and thus she felt less and less hurt as they traveled on and on.

Until one day, she traveled away from them. By a train she went to a strange land with towering buildings all round her. It was time to start her own journey. But all the girl wanted was to stop. No more wandering, no more journeys. Just a place to call her own, a place for her and her family to finally stop.

If only that wasn't the kind of thing that only happened in fairy tales. No happily ever after for anyone in the real world.

But then... the most unexpected thing happened. She saw someone trip and fall. So she caught this nervous, clumsy boy. Secretly hoping they'd never be friends, she gave him that smile she'd gotten so good at faking. He just... looked so nice and genuine. Saying goodbye to someone like that after so many others... she didn't know how she could.

Then... he saved her life, and neither of them had to leave.

As time went on, she started to think that maybe she saw a lot of herself, her past in his eyes. That same determined spirit, that same smile worn for others. His kind heart, she thought it could warm the sun were ever it cold but that's not something she ever thought about herself. While her goals were to care for her family, that was never a trait she'd really associated with herself. Secretly, she was afraid that the boy thought the same thing in return.

Years passed, and she thought she might have fallen for this nervous, clumsy boy. Watching him struggle through some of the most difficult things, watching him refuse to give up despite his
broken heart...

He could only sit there, blinking, as she sniffled a little, wiping her nose. Why... why did it sound so familiar? "And that brings us to today," she said with a blow of her nose, on a rough, paper napkin. "just..." a bitter, grief wrought laugh shook her shoulders. "Now I just don't know what to do about that last part, if there's anything I can... I don't even know what to think of that part anymore."

He should have felt something. Sadness, remorse, pain. No, just the void in his chest, like always. Even still, his friend's tale made his mind stir. There was something there, a hint, something tangible to help her with. Put down roots... "You want my thoughts?"

She'd gotten used to his lifeless tone. Sniffling again, she turned to look at him. "Yeah..."

A deep breath, slowly exhaled. "I don't think... I don't think it was me you fell for." She flinched, but he wasn't looking at her. He was looking up at the sky, wondering at the dark clouds above, wondering when it would rain. "You're like that tree, constantly being uprooted." Her eyes fluttered, eeking open just a touch wider. "It's the most unnatural thing to you, not having a place to just... grow."

He gave a mirthless, lone laugh. "Yeah, you've had that for three years now. But you didn't really remember what that feeling was, right?" Tightness in her chest, tingling in her eyes warned of tears. "You're- I don't think you're in love." Sure, now he could say it.

Proof enough he didn't feel it at all anymore. He could still say the word where it felt like truth to pass through his lips. Idiot... he had no business, no right to consider love at all. Not for himself. "I think... I think you want this to be a place you'd long forgotten." I don't feel anything... why don't I feel anything?

Cautiously, sniffling again, she gulped before she squeaked out her reply. "What place is that?"

When he turned to look at her, she saw the real him in his eyes. Even behind those sunglasses, in those vacant, lifeless eyes, she saw the glassy eyes that failed to hide a broken heart. There wasn't any warmth there anymore. Even still, he smiled. "Home."

The dam burst. Arms flung around him, his neck, his middle. So shocked was he that he could only blink as she sobbed into his shoulder. He was right, he was so observant and he was right, but... "Deku, I-" the words, his name, choked their way out between sobs. "I love you..."

His face flinched with his grief, regret as he embraced her in turn. "I'm sorry."

"I love you..."

"I'm sorry..."

...

At the front entrance to UA, sheltered from the rain, Uraraka took in a long breath. She was smiling again, uniform on instead of her hero costume. The sun was almost down, rain had darkened the walkway back to the city.

"Well," said she, in her usual, bright voice, "it ah, almost feels silly to feel okay so soon, but... never look a gift horse in the mouth you, know?" She spun around, hair and skirt swaying with the motion, a grin at her friend.
Deku tried to smile in turn, but it wasn't very convincing.

"Sorry I got so... well, you know." she gave an awkward, breathy laugh, rubbing at the back of her head. "Usually I just let it outta my system on my own but, I guess I couldn't really do that this time."

"Don't worry about it." His fake, one sided smile widened a little, "you didn't do anything wrong, Uraraka."

Her eyes flickered a bit of that sadness, that hurt. "Heh," and then it was gone, "well, as long as we're hanging out again, right?" she walked over, offering him a hug which he was hesitant to accept. "Mind if I tag along again tomorrow?"

"...not at all."

Smiling, she stepped away from him and gave a little wave. "I'll see for patrol then... Green." With a flick of her wrist, her umbrella opened and she turned around, walking away.

Alone. All he heard was the rain, coming down by the bucketful. Slumping against the wall his head hit with a dull thud. Well... now he felt something: cold. He'd almost forgotten what that felt like. Not the sort of cold you feel on your skin, then kind that seeps out from within, from your very core. When had he felt this? What time in his life had let him to... no. That wasn't important.

His friends were important, graduating was important. Living up to everything his mother had done for him was important, not that, not his feelings, not now. His hand went to his pocket, plucking his umbrella therefrom and as it was retrieved something else fell from that pocket. A clattering of glass and plastic and his head turned to see it. A phone, his mother's old phone from when he was a kid.

Wincing at a sigh, he stooped over and picked it up again. There, right in the middle of the last home screen, was that file: **Me: Created Dec 11th, 2242**. Opening his umbrella, he pushed on the folder and saw it open. **My song, dot MP3.**

A... *a song?*

Reaching into his school bag he procured a pair of earbuds and plugged them in. Walking out into the rain, umbrella held with his other hand, he hesitated at the button to play the song. This was... this was a piece of her, her past, her life. The last tangible part of her he had in reach that wasn't her room, her space.

Alone in the streets, standing still with closed eyes, he knew that he had to. He **had** to, so he did.

Abruptly, at his press of the button, came the light and chipper melody of a piano. Played to a rythym of drums, jazzy and upbeat. He smiled. Yeah, that was her...

"I know...
I know I've let you down...
I've been a fool to myself,
I thought that I could
live for no one else..."

His heart felt like it was about to snap. That voice, that woman's voice... why did it sound like- looking up, he almost screamed.
"But now through all the hurt and pain...
It's time for me to respect,
the ones you love mean more than anything."

She was there. He saw her! Singing the damn song, how?! He'd never hallucinated in waking moments...

"So with sadness in my heart,
I feel the best thing I could do
is end it all and leave forever...
what's done is done, it feels so bad
what once was happy now is sad
I'll never love again
my world is ending!"

Why... His hands griped so tight his palms began to bleed. Why did it have to be her singing it? Why did his own brain hate him so much?

A gentle hand at his shoulder dragged those thoughts away. Turning around, drenched from the rain, he saw Shigaraki offering a kind smile. With a glum nod, Deku started walking, Shigaraki at his side, twirling serenely in the rain.

His mother's voice following them all the way home.

"I wish...
that I could turn back time...
cause now the guilt is all mine!
can't live without the trust from those you love...
I know...
we can't forget the past...
you can't forget love and pride,
because of that, it's killing me inside..."

Tucked away in their homes were his friends, having taken shelter from the rain. Uraraka kicked off her shoes, umbrella put away as she settled in at her apartment, smiling at the portrait she kept of her mom and dad. Kaminari was by his grandfather's side, while the old man slept peacefully. Ashido was home with her mother, father and little sisters, the family dog snuggled up to her little brother -'his boy'- while she took a snapshot of the moment.

Akaguro lay on his back in a single room apartment, his hand reaching toward the sky like someone there was reaching for his own. Todoroki sat locked in his room with glassy eyes, talking on the phone with a certain patient, vising hours now restricted by her husband's decree. Bakugo and Kirishima snuggled together, in the Kirishima household, sleeping through the rain.

Yaoyorozu, cup of tea in hand, looked longingly out the window as she sat at her desk, her notes and various textbooks scattered before her. Lastly, Jiro stood alone in her room, a picture of her, K and Himiko in her hands as she lingered by the window watching the rain.

She got a text, and a tired hand went to her phone. 'hey,' Kaminari, 'not to be all needy but would you mind coming over? I'd ask Mina but... she's all happy with her family right now and I don't wanna get in the way of that.'

Her reply was the same as always, as it had been for over two years now: 'I'll be there, but you should ask Green to be there too.'
This time, someone dared to have a question. 'Why? I mean, I will, I love the guy and all, but why do you always say that? I don't get it.'

Her eyes flickered to photo in her hands, thumb petting at K’s face. 'Because as much as you need you need someone to be there, he needs to be there.' Taking a slow breath, she added. 'I know you need help. I know he needs help, but he won't let anyone help. Being alone is killing him. He's only human, after all.'

'heh... guess he is at that. Okay, lady. I let him know. Now will you get your skinny butt over here? I need my other best friend too.'

Jiro actually smiled. 'Already on my way, Den.' Gently setting down the old photo she walked back out her door. Raincoat on, rainboots on she started away to Kaminari’s family home. Turning her face toward the sky, she let the rain wash over her as took another, deep breath. With a bitter smirk she shook her head. "Life... god you're a bitch."

"It all returns to nothing...
 it all comes tumbling down,
 tumbling down,
 tumbling down...

 It all returns to nothing...
 I just keep letting me down,
 letting me down,
 letting me down..."
It was drawing to a conclusion. Months of hunting, hounding rumors about 'The Coven' had drawn him here, to this old, crumbling motel. Four of them, all that remained in Japan, lurked within. These were odds he'd never faced before. His battles with them had always been one on one. A feat of his ability to remain unnoticed, and his prowess at one who hunted these predators.

His hands were shaking as he put his binoculars back into his pocket, the chill brought from the rain did little to help him cease such movement. He really wanted one of the cigarettes in his pocket, but the smell of smoke, even through the rain, would be a warning that humans were in the area. Patting the packet of cigarettes where they resided, he felt the lighter dig lightly into his leg. After this was done, he'd likely dig into the pack and then some. Knives up his sleeves, caltrops at the ready he pulled his mask down over his face, hood over his head and crept toward the building. None of these things would escape.

As the door creaked open, and he peered inside, sound was swallowed up by the emptiness within. Dust lingered in the air, light from the streets casting shadows across broken floorboards. Only the faintest sound of an exhalation said he was not alone. Lounging forward, into a somersault across dusty wood, he narrowly avoided a hand wreathed in barbed wire swinging for his throat.

Feet scraping at the rotting wood, he skidded to a stop and lashed out with his scarf. When it wrapped around the monster's throat it hissed at him. The male grabbed the scarf and used it like the chain of a mourning star to fling Aizawa into a wall. Upon impact with the decrepit barrier, he smashed right through it. Wind knocked out of him left the hero stunned, sense screaming to recenter themselves. As reality came rushing back, he saw the thing flying toward him and, out of the corner of his eye, his savior: A broken plank, hanging loosely in the floor.

With a savage kick, he propped the jagged hunk of wood up like a spear aimed at a charging boar. Pulling the monster by the same scarf that had been only just been used against him, Aizawa winced at the sound of its ribs snapping, and the organs beneath being shredded. It was almost like the sound of celery and strawberries being chopped.

Momentum of the monster so rudely interrupted snapped the plank in two. Spinning in the air like a projectile penny, the dead beast crashed through what was left of the wall and twitched. Lying dead, bleeding on the dusty floor its death rattle almost sounded pitiful. Breath slowly returning to him, Aizawa peeled himself from the shards of the old wall. A sharp pang, just above his hip, informed him that he too had been lacerated by the decrepit wall.

Not good...

with these injuries they'd smell him long before they could even see him. To make matters worse, his scarf was snarled around the corpse and would take too long to free from it. If only that had remained his only concern, as from upstairs he heard the sound of a child screaming and nothing else mattered. Sprinting up the stairs, knife in hand he leapt toward the source of the cry. Three of them, gathered around a small child. A boy, face hidden from view by one of the females, throwing him behind her.

All he saw was the tangled mess of disastrously unkempt black hair, hanging over the boy's face.

Activating the voice synthesizer in his mask, Aizawa growled. "Let the boy go." They were in the
middle of another wide open room, it smelled faintly of propane. Someone had rigged up an old gas powered generator.

Rather than reply, two of them charged right at him, the third taking the boy and running. Cursing under his breath, Aizawa leapt from their paths. Somersaulting despite his pained hip left him shaky. One of them was already on him, claws narrowly missing his throat. Stabbing the hand with one of his knives, he used it like an over sized thumbtack to pin his arm to a wall.

While Aizawa backed away from him, the second female had grabbed him from behind, hauling his throat to her mouth. When her fangs pierced into his skin he let out a pained growl. Second knife sliding into his palm he lanced it up, into her face. The resulting sound was like... spearing a partially crunchy tomato. Warm blood splattered over his neck and shoulder, her muscles went limp, spasming as he wrenched her off him with his newfound leverage.

The male let loose a guttural snarl. Tearing his hand through the blade of the knife -still stuck in the old, dusty wall- he gave the hero a savage backhand to the side of his head. Aizawa went sailing across the room, smashing into the generator, knocking the propane tanks over. One of them was hissing, its precious fuel leaking into the room. The male had torn the knife from the female's skull, allowing her to heal, before making his way over to him. Weaponless, Aizawa went with the one plan his frenzied, dazed mind could formulate.

"So..." the male darkly mused, "this is Eraser Head, Japan's great vampire hunter." While the vampire spun him onto his pack, the hero's hand went to his pocket. The male gripped Aizawa's throat, claws from his other hand savagely destroying the mask on his face, cutting into his skin and drenching him in his own blood this time.

"A young fool without a quirk that works on us at all, murdering with reckless glee." His hand slowly withdrew from the pocket, lighter in hand. "Say hello to the devil for me, murderer."

Before his hand could spear claws through Aizawa's chest, his thumb flicked at the lighter and the room exploded.

The male was sent careening through the opposite wall, the still healing female was set ablaze moments before she threw herself, flailing out the window. She crashed into the adjoining building, the flames on her body licking at the old, dry wood. One could faintly make out the words 'gas storage' on the sign sitting upon the building's roof, if one cared enough to look.

Aizawa was not so lucky. His chest was seared, most of his right arm too and he was sent crashing against the same wall as the now screaming male. Stars in his eyes, his hands fumbled for the knife now by his side as he fell into a crawl. Standing on shaky legs, he limped forward, eyes scanning. No sign of the either female, nor the boy, one of the propane tanks was left miraculously intact.

"I'LL KILL YOU!" The male screamed. "I'LL KILL YOU!" Sighing, a gasping exhalation really, Aizawa reached down and turned the valve on the remaining propane tank, letting the gas into the air.

He said nothing as he turned around, seeing the burning monster flail about helplessly against the flames, and kicked the tank toward him. As it rolled toward the burning monster he limped around the corner and the tank exploded. There was no scream, no cry of pain, just the sound of bones turning to dust.

"Takes care of the cremation..." His voice synthesizer mangled the tone, making him sound like a dying machine.
As he continued limping, he spotted a pair of chains on the wall. Gripping them with his empty hand, he kept his wits about him, watching, listening for the last one. She still had the boy. No further than half way down the hall was he when an arm came through the wall, claws raking his back.

Growling pain, he lurched forward only to then see a leg smashing through the wall. Only by falling to one side as he staggered did he evade the killing stroke. She tore through the wall like paper, her eyes blazoned with fury, claws outstretched. Even then, she had an elegance about herself, her poise as she strode toward him preparing to carve him into shredded meat. Unsteady, shaky, he rolled to his feet and backpedaled. This one was cautious, experienced. She hadn't let her rage blind her and was watching his every move closely, waiting for an opening. Attacking a vampire head on was a death sentence. The only viable tactic was using their momentum against them, playing it defensively and counter attacking.

But she'd seen right through it. Her mind was sharp enough to realize this and expect it from her enemies. "I'm impressed," Aizawa's mechanically inflected voice made her eye twitch, "you seem to have some understanding of tactics."

She said nothing, rather than attack she raked her claws along the wall, picking up chunks of wood and dust that she flung at his face. Only by hurling himself at the wall did he manage to evade. When she charged, he lashed out with the chain, wrapping it around her neck and yanking her toward him. He'd have speared her heart with his knife if she hadn't flung her arm in front of her chest. Yet her momentum, along with his, carried them through the wood and they fell into the neighboring room.

The adjacent building exploded.

Flames from the other female had ignited something, the gas stored within had burst into rushing fire. As they hit the floor, it yielded to the weight of their bones. Crashing through wood, concrete and mortar they finally came to a stop on the second floor. The neighboring fire spread to the old motel, concrete dust carried over in the smoke of the storage building flooded the rooms thereof. Groaning, rolling onto his front, Aizawa came to the grim realization that most of his ribs were broken and his left leg wasn't much better.

Hand on his knife -his one remaining weapon- he looked up to see the female lying against a piece of concrete. Her head had spun completely around, healing factor slowly correcting the broken neck with awkward, stuttering jerking motions punctuated by cracking and snapping of bone. She'd be up in a matter of seconds. Panic setting in, his moment of success so close, he gripped the knife in hand and pulled his arm back behind himself. Roaring from pain and surging adrenaline he brought his body lurching forward, the knife soaring toward her chest as her eyes went wide with fear.

Someone, somewhere in the room, screamed out a solitary, anguished word: No. The second female, flying through the air -her body still smoldering- hurled herself between them. When the knife pierced her chest, the human and vampire crashing to the ground, he felt his heart grow still. Rising, slowly, eyes agape he looked at her. The look on her face... sadness? Worry?

Another anguished cry split the night, and Aizawa was flung aside. His broken body clattered against the floor, and he could barely feel it anymore. Straining, forcing himself to rise, he took in a sight that gripped at his frozen heart. The last one, the last vampire was... sobbing. Cradling her dead companion in her arms, a hand on the other's cheek as her tears dripped onto the dead one's face.

What? He barely staggered to his feet. But... but they're- Monsters weren't supposed to feel.
Monsters weren't supposed to cry, to mourn. Why was this one-

...It was all wrong. Everything he and Nameless had ever known about them and their status as unfeeling beasts.

These things he'd been killing, been sent to kill... they were-

Above, the sound of the building collapsing warned of imminent death. Limping to her side, he gripped her shoulder, she violently pushed his hand away, sending him back to the floor. Cradling the body tighter once he was away. "We have to get out." He said, staggering back to his knees and her. "Now!" She ignored him, and the ceiling came crashing down. Arms around her middle, his one good leg kicking against the floor, he flung he and her backwards; into the streets, into the rain.

While the smoke billowed upward, the collapsed storage building sizzling in the rain as the motel burned, he dragged them both away. She continued sobbing, shaking from grief, only to abruptly snap out of it, lurching for the burning motel.

"CHI-" and the second building collapsed in a roar of bursting flame, smoke and fire billowing into the sky the same as its neighbor. Falling to her knees she let loose an anguished wail. Face in her hands she let her grief wrack her body, as the rain soaked her to the bone. Aizawa couldn't stand up, his strength had abandoned him completely.

The boy... Had he just killed him too?

She was on him in a flash. Hands on his collar she pinned him to a brick wall, rattling his broken ribs. "Why?" her voice cracked, lip quivering. "What reason do you have for this!?"

He couldn't look her in the eye, he couldn't even look at her. It took him a long time to voice an answer. "The wrong one..." Shaking his head eyes closed, shame, guilt and a broken heart weighed his body like stone. "No reason I can give would ever be good enough." His voice was cold, devoid of will. "I wont justify this, I can't." Slowly, he turned his eyes to hers. She bore no anger, no rage, just the face of a woman whose world had ended. "If you want to kill me... you have every right."

She dropped him. Fingers releasing his rain and blood soaked collar, she let him slump to the street. "Live with it." She turned away. "That's your punishment." He looked at her in stunned, disbelieving grief. "You clearly have something resembling a conscience." her clenched fists shook, the effort of steeling her resolve. "Someone should feel that for us... before we are extinguished forever." And she walked away, disappearing into the night.

Aizawa lay against the brick wall, making no attempt to stand. He didn't want to, didn't care. The blaring of sirens, fire trucks, soon approached but someone else had beat them to the scene. Landing with an impact that shook the ground was All Might. "Never fear," said he, "FOR I AM HERE!" Aizawa didn't even look up when he approached. "Hang on there, citizen!" Said the hero, gingerly putting hand on his arm. "Help is on the way!"

Aizawa looked up, into the man's eyes. Funny... he hadn't remembered them being black like that. "Doesn't matter." And his head lowered again. "The damage is already done..."

All Might picked him up, carrying him to the approaching ambulance and he was put on a gurney. As the EMTs set to work, keeping him alive, his eyes closed and he drifted off. Had he stayed awake a moment longer, he might have seen All Might carrying a boy with messy hair, his small body shaking with violent coughing, to another ambulance.
RING, RING.

Startling awake, hand reaching for his phone, Aizawa tried to calm his racing heart. He was in his classroom, at his desk, a series of newspaper clippings strewn upon it. Disappearances, all in the last two years, of heroes, villains and civilians alike. All had an article featuring an initial disappearance, and then one where they'd mysteriously come back, only then free of their quirks. Occurrences that had All Might acting as though the world might be ending, something Aizawa had assured him was not happening. Until they knew the cause, had a hint at least, there was no point jumping to conclusions.

Sighing, swallowing, he rubbed at his eyes as he answered the infernal, ringing phone. "Yes?" Said he, chair spinning around as he spoke.

"He's back," the voice of Nezu, the oft unpresent school Principal, "The Nameless One just returned to Japan." Aizawa felt his heart skip, his breath halted. "He just called, said it was a productive trip, asked how you were."

Gulping, a shaking hand reaching for his hip-flask, Aizawa took a sizable swig. Gone for over ten years... why come back now? "Still here." After a moment's silence, his nerves demanded he break it. "Did he say anything else?"

"Only for you to be careful," Nezu spoke gently, "he thinks some nasty storms are about to enter all our lives... he sounded worried."

Taking in a shuddering, stabilizing breath, Aizawa couldn't help the fear that was building in his bones. "Let's hope we're ready..."

Arterial spray painted the concrete walls, bodies losing their last embers of warmth lay motionless next to a single, steel door. Boot prints left a trail, first through the crimson puddles, exposing the metal and concrete beneath, then again as they left perfect outlines of their treads in red along the rest of the corridor. Overhaul didn't care about any of this. All that had his attention was the open door and empty room beyond. When Dabi approached, shaking his head, the man snarled behind his plague mask.

"Find her." Turning on his heels he went to stomp away.

He'd only made it a few steps when Dabi replied. "According to my guys, she was last seen headed to the lab with Shuyen. I'll start there."

Overhaul's boot scuffed against the floor, his retreat from the scene halted. Eyes narrowing, he slowly turned around, approaching one of the dead bodies. Stooping low, he reached out and peeled off a dead subordinate's mask. Giving Dabi a very impatient look, he gestured to the dead man's face. "Looks like Shuyen never left his post."

Expression flush with disbelief, Dabi considered the corpse. "That's not possible..."

Overhaul's hands clenched into fists, knuckles popping audibly. "It seems we've had a shape-shifter pay us a visit, old friend." His hand clapped down on Dabi's shoulder, earning a flinch from the mutilated man. He knew full well what a simple touch from his boss could and would do to a man, he had no reservations for ending up like that.

As Dabi gulped, his fight or flight response warring in his mind and body, Overhaul whispered. "I don't need to tell you how important that girl is, both to myself and the mission." Dabi nodded,
Overhaul gently patted the man's shoulder. "Take Muscular, Mooney and whoever else to the surface, follow the tracker in her arm and bring her back." He released Dabi, carefully. "quietly, if you please. I'll not see her fall into the wrong hands." and he began to stomp away.

Mind still stirring with adrenaline and fear, Dabi blurted out the first words that came to mind. "Who's hands are the wrong ones?"

"Anyone else's," Overhaul barked, "now bring her home!"

Monday, July 23rd: 2255

Broad daylight, just outside a cafe known for its hazelnut mocha, a group of heroes sat gathered round a table. Hunched over his coffee, a mask by the saucer his cup occasionally rested on, was a boy wearing a red and black hood. His body was clad in a suit of lightweight armor, same color scheme as the hood over his white and green hair. As he took a sip of his coffee, hazelnut mocha of course, sunlight glinted off his sunglasses. As he exhaled after the sip, the scent of his drink, toothpaste and the alcohol the it failed to mask, wafted gently into the air. No one but him would smell it, but he didn't need them to notice to feel ashamed of himself. Anything that helped him sleep, so long as his friends didn't know about it.

A hererochromic lad, wearing a white button up and slacks to match, broke the momentary silence. "You guys hear about that villain that got brought in the other day?" Todoroki, 'real name yet to be chosen'.

Akaguro -or Stendhal, as he preferred- shook his head with a sarcastic chuckle. "You mean that fool, Gentle Criminal?"

Kyoka "Earphone Jack" (usually just "Jack") Jiro rolled her eyes. "A Saturday morning cartoon villain come to life... yeah, we heard."

Sensing more to this story, Uraraka chimed in. "What about him? Weird for you to bring up old news like that..."

Not bothering to chime in, Bakugo just crooked an eyebrow and looked to Todoroki, who glared in return. While the warhead rolled his eyes, crossing his arms, sulking back into his chair and staring out the window, the heterochrome explained. "Well... apparently he's quirkless."

"What?" Yaoyorozu -"Creati"- sounded shocked. "That's- but just the other week he was engaging several heroes with some form of body altering quirk!"

"Elasticity." Deku put forward, taking a slow sip of his coffee.

Yaoyorozu nodded appreciatively. "Precisely. How can he be quirkless now?"

"Well..." Uraraka put forward, uneasy. "You guys saw Aizawa asleep at his desk, right?" Everyone nodded. "Did you see what he fell asleep looking into?"

Deku's eye twitched. "Yeah... creepy stuff. Some psycho's been going around taking people's quirks." The group was standing up now, preparing to head back outside to finish their patrol.

Todoroki nodded, as they exited the shop. "What's strange about it is the lack of discrimination. Heroes, Villains, regular people, anyone seems likely to be a target."

"Wait..." Bakugo rubbed at his chin, "Kirishima said something about that the other day..."
Uraraka blinked, gulping nervously as she did. "What did he say?"

Bakugo growled. "I don't know! If I knew I'd just- ah, fuck it." He got out his phone and started texting. How he was able to navigate without tripping and kissing pavement was anyone's guess.

Rolling his eyes, Akaguro muttered under his breath. "Charismatic as ever..."

"Fuck off, crow face."

Holding up his hands, Deku hoped to diffuse the situation before it could erupt into something worse. "Easy, guys." He said soothingly. "There's no need be confrontational, ri-?" _Vrrm_ _Vrrrmrmrm._ Eyes aflutter, Deku reached into his pocket for his phone.

Ashido: "Hey! Heard about your little 'project' from Kami, (Kiri told him, and I think he found out from Bakugo?) I think I remember her listening to this one!" What followed was link to some video streaming service. "Best of luck~! ;D"

...okay then. As the link took its sweet time loading, Deku placed his phone back in his pocket as he adjusted his mask. If he was blushing, he wanted to hide.

"In any case," Jiro sighed, "he was apprehended by the local police, here in Musutafu, right?. We should be on the lookout for anything related to this." And the group had begun wandering toward the most run down part of the city.

Akaguro laughed his unsettling laugh. "Please, the worst we've had to deal with lately was that bunch of Yakuza who'd acquired machine guns. The chances of us actually dealing with-"

"ACK!" Deku nearly fell over. Someone, a very small someone, had run up and grabbed him around his middle from the side. Akaguro and Jiro turned around, very confused by what they heard and then what they saw. Soon the others had turned around as well, having similar reactions. Astoundingly, when Deku looked to see who had embraced him, he saw a little girl. She couldn't have been even ten years old, for how small she was. Grey hair, a horn protruding from the right corner of her skull, a shabby dress and arms covered in bandages. She- she reeked of blood. "Hey," Deku said, kneeling down, "what's wrong, little one-?"

She jumped into his arms, clinging to his armored chest as if for dear life. Reflexively, Deku felt himself cradling the little one. "Please..." her voice was tiny, utterly afraid. "I don't wanna go back..." her tiny body was shaking violently, but it was the middle of the summer, and Deku's nose had already detected the cause of her tremors: fear. He could actually smell the fear on her.

"Uh..." Jiro knelt beside them both. "Friend of yours green?" She seemed to have no idea what to make of the situation.

Though it wasn't like anyone else did either. "I- no, I've never seen her before." Deku pet soothingly at her head, hoping to at least calm her down a bit.

"Looks like we're taking a trip to the MCPD precinct..." Akaguro sighed, rubbing at the back of his sweaty head. "can't have her running around without supervision." Even without knowing anything of his childhood, his tone told that he spoke from experience.

Uraraka nodded as Jiro reached out and started petting soothingly at the child's head, but she seemed to flinch at the initial touch. "We don't all have to go though, one of us could take her there while the rest keep up with the patrol."

At the mere suggestion Eri's grip on Deku tightened. "I- I guess that'll be me." Said the vampire,
squeezing her in turn. Something in his chest... fluttered, ached. What was that feeling? He knew it so well but...

A trash can clattered in the alley, hopping on one foot as she clawed her foot into a sock, was a girl. "Drn it Eri!" Her other shoe was in her mouth, "I sed WAI a seh!" A mess of blonde hair, somehow made messier by the buns she kept it in. Yellow eyes and pale skin, the veins in her throat, forearms and lower jaw were dark blue, distended Yaoyorozu went white at the sight of her, a hand clasped over her mouth, and it was plain to see why. In her hand was something bloody, something that smelled like the blood on the girl, apparently named Eri. "I only cut yer arm like that so those sickos couldn't find ya again!" Eyeing the object accusingly, she threw it away, as far as she could. Todoroki's eyes went wide at the sheer altitude the object reached.

Jiro's jaw dropped, standing up as though she'd been stunned into a trance. Deku's arms formed a protective layer around Eri. "Who are you?" He demanded as Eri chanced a look at her pursuer.

The girl rolled her eyes. "We've got goons from the Yakuza on our butts. Now ain't the best time for a meet and greet."

"Himiko? Everyone, even the blond with the bloody hand, turned toward Jiro. "I- I thought you were dead!" Deku's gaze shifted rapidly between them. This was her old friend? This was Toga? Toga, backpedaling a step, looked about ready to scream. "...Kyoka gurl, I-" she shook her head vigorously, growling as she did. "Now's not the time! We have to-

"Have to what?" Then, everyone suddenly found someone else to pay attention to. Multiple someones. "Go on, I just have to hear what you were planning to do with that child." A man, his hands mutilated by ancient burn scars, wearing a scarecrow-like mask stepped forward, a towering behemoth of a man in a cloak and hokey-mask behind him. "Or, if you prefer, I could just take her back quietly." Eri's grip on Deku went so tight it almost hurt.

As the men stepped forward, tailed by a few others in similar outfits, Akaguro drew his sword. "That sounds about legit as a back alley card trick." His blade came to bear, forming a barrier between Deku, Eri and the approaching men.

Jiro's eyes were searching frantically between all these new arrivals. Total overload, no idea what to react to first or what any of the appropriate reactions were anymore. Himiko, her Himiko, was back and on the run from actual Yakuza. ...If she was telling the truth. She'd been all but a ghost for the past 5 years, that entire time she'd never reached out, said one word to her. Now she comes back, after wounding a child, telling tales about an all but extinguished criminal organization? There was no appropriate reaction, none that didn't come with an alternative that wasn't just as valid.

Uraraka was not so uncertain. "Hey, we don't know what's going yet! There's no need to go drawing weapons!" She interposed herself between the two groups, eyeing one and then other, watching for any sign of combat.

Bakugo's eyes were fixed on one man in the other group. Lurking behind that hockey-mask was an eye, just one that he could see. It barely registered as human, more like the eye of a starving beast, yearning for the kill. It was stuck, right on the little girl. Lightly tapping on Todoroki's hand, he whispered. "I think the girl is telling the truth. See the eyes on the big guy?"

Slowly, almost imperceptibly, Todoroki nodded. "Kinda reminds me of my father." Among others. He did not add. At least in this particular instance, he was able to find it within himself to take the warhead's side.
Overhearing the conversation, Yaoyorozu started drafting a metal quarterstaff from one of her palms. "Any chance we can just flee? Get... Eri to safety." She only hoped she'd gotten the name right, and that such an option was indeed possible.

Although he'd overheard everything, Deku hadn't had to. Every instinct in his body was screaming to protect Eri, pulling at his heart. ...Ah, now he remembered the feeling: empathy. It had his heart pounding, blood surging through him with an indomitable strength, making him feel again. This little girl, this scared child... he remembered being, feeling like that once. The big picture... if we risk a confrontation now, without knowing what's going on there could be incredibly collateral damage, injured civilians or worse, worst case scenario.

"You merely thought solely with your heart; just like you did the day you were turned."

...Yeah, okay. Maybe that was a lesson he hadn't learned. If learning that lesson meant abandoning a girl to a fate at the hands of possible Yakuza, he didn't want to learn it. Standing up, Eri held protectively in his arms, Deku cleared his throat. "Who are you? What's your relationship with Eri?"

The man in the scarecrow mask paused. "Excuse me?"

"You heard me," Deku's eyes narrowed, "explain your relationship to this child, but I'm going to ask that you prove whatever claims you make. Otherwise, if you insist on taking her into your custody, you'll have to follow us peacefully to the police station." Eri gave him a look that was somewhere between wanting to cry, relief and joy. She buried her face in his shoulder, her trembling finally subsiding almost entirely away.

Toga let out an inaudible sigh of relief, giving Deku a grateful -if not partially mischievous- smile. Spinning on her heels, she stuck her tongue out at the group of men and backpedaled toward the UA students. Growling a warning, Akaguro leveled his sword again, preventing her from reaching Deku and Eri. Toga gave him a disdainful, impatient look but ultimately shrugged it off. Evidently, things were going somewhat the way she wanted.

Jiro grabbed Toga's shoulder and pulled her up beside her, as distant from Eri as she could manage but also out of reach of these 'Yakuza'. Leaning to Toga's ear, she hissed. "I don't even know where to begin right now, but don't you dare run away again." Even Deku could hear the trembling waver in her voice. Something bordering on heartbreak and rage.

Toga cackled to herself. "No promises, Kyoka Gurl. Yer girl Himiko is a busy bee," casting a vengeful eye to the man in the scarecrow mask she grinned like a crocodile, "Ain't that right... Dabi?" for a brief second, unseen by all but 'Dabi', her eyes changed to the color a man named Tsubasa.

Dabi let out a savage snarl. "What. Did you do. To Tsubasa!?!" Uraraka, sensing the inevitable, motioned for everyone to start backing away, which they did.

All except for Jiro. "Himiko-"

Toga pushed her out of the way. "Wuddaya think I did to him?!" With a flick of her wrist, a knife was in her hand, making Jiro's eyes go wide. "I could show ya, if ya want..." Roaring, tearing through the air where had been, was a rush of blue flame. Cackling as she sailed into the air, another knife in her hand, Toga cheered. "Run for it Kyoka gurl! Imma skin me some bad guys!"

Dabi's arms cradled Eri as his body tensed, "Hang on to me..." he murmured, and she did. Eri's foot jammed against his pocket, Akaguro's eyes widened at the sight of the blue flames, Jiro fell
over in her mad dash to escape Dabi's attack and the others prepared for combat. Yaoyorozu pulled her quarterstaff from her skin, Todoroki's ride sight encased itself in ice and Bakugo lowered to his usual stance.

And music started blaring from Deku's pocket. The lively, energetic tune of an alternative rock song.

He'd forgotten that he'd left that song loading... Eri's foot must have-

"BRING IT ON, ASSHOLES!" And Bakugo was the first to go tearing into the fray. He was met with an inferno of blue flame, but his quick reflexes and quirk turned the fire to a massive cloud of smoke.

Coughing violently, Akaguro backed away, gagging for air as he dropped his sword. "Guren-" he actually fell over, his body so weakened by the smoke. "RUN!"

"Uravity!" At his yelling of her name, She ran to Eri and Deke, flinging her arms around them and Deku felt his weight vanish.

"GO!" She didn't have to tell him twice. One kick off the ground, his arms securing Eri perfectly, and they were flying away.

Snarling, Dabi pointed to the sky. "MOONEY!"

With the added sound of the music, Deku was too easy to track. "Damn it Ashido..."

When they landed on a nearby roof, Deku almost pried, Eri off of himself and put her in Uraraka's arms. "NO!" Eri screamed. "Don't go!" Her hands reached after him.

A purple behemoth -its head shouded by some fleshy, leathery hood- crashed onto the roof. At the sight of the armored teenager, it snarled. "Murderer..."

"RUN!" Deku screamed, hurling himself at the thing with everything he had. Even as he and the monster feel from view.

Eri started sobbing as Uraraka started running, jumping as fast and far as she could away. "Don't worry," she cooed, cradling the child as reassuringly as she could, "That's my friend Izuku Midoriya..."

Back at the erupting scene of violence, Deku had only just succeeded in throwing the monster into the street below, landing with the grace of a cat as he surveyed the area. Hockey-mask was currently charging at a fallen, nearly incapacitated, Akaguro, Yaoyorozu standing over and defending him. Toga was busy, her knife slicing through the soft flesh of the men yet to speak. Jiro's earlobes clicked into the devices she'd apparently mounted on her gloves as her eyes searched frantically for an opening to attack.

He's one of the most amazing people and heroes I've ever met...

While the monster groaned, its flesh putting itself back together, Deku's fists clenched and he readied to charge ahead.

Everything's going to be alright.

With one push off the ground, he was soaring like comet, fist sending Hockey-mask flying.
Time to be a hero.

"I" Deku almost didn't stick the landing because of the song. "biding my time at the end of the line," he fumbled after his phone for a moment, nearly getting flattened by an incredibly muscled arm for his trouble, had he not leapt into the air. "no compromise in sight so I'LL!"

Never again would he leave any apps open on patrol... Feet connecting with the wall, he kicked off of it and uppercut Hockey-mask into the street. No sooner had he landed when a pillar of blue flame threatened to engulf him.

"walk through the fire..." Thank goodness for Todoroki and his ice quirk, shielding his armored, flammable body. "break through the blinds to find my desire..."

Todoroki sighed. "Midoriya... why?"

"But I'm slipping back again!"

"I didn't mean to-" Blue fire all but evaporated Todoroki's ice barrier, the heterochrome's eyes went wide as he frantically put up another one.

"Back to the start again,"

Snarling, eplosions splitting the air, Bakugo roared at Dabi. "I'M NOT DONE WITH YOU YET!" Deku could just make out the Yakuza man's smoldering form, skidding across the street as Bakugo chased after him.

"Back where I ought've been,"

The smoke had Akaguro's body wracking with each, violent cough. It sounded like he was tearing vocal chords with each of his body's attempts to clear his lungs. A purple limb raised onto the street, threatening to snare his neck.

"Feels like the tide is turning back again!"

Deku pointed after Dabi. "Help Bakguo!" and he leapt at the monster, his fist sending its body careening into a brick wall. With a begrudging nod, Todoroki skated along an icy trail of his own making to help his classmate.

"No sign of settlin," Where the hell was Jiro? Neither she not Toga were anywhere in sight... "just like there's never been," Yayorozu's quarterstaff twirled about, sending one thug with the head of a velociraptor to the ground, spinning around just in time to parry an attack from Hockey-mask. She let out a roar, spinning her body about in an elegant, violent swing, her weapon sundering the man's mask and staggering him. From his amused smile, he'd barely felt it. Springing to, Deku's body twisted as flew, bringing his boot into the side of the man's skull and sending him through a neighboring wall. "sounds like the record's broken!"

Grumbling Deku punched and grabbed at his pocket. "Shut up! We're in the middle of-"

"Look out!" Yaoyorozu tackled him, barely saving him from their assailant's wild punch. Deku's eyes went wide when he felt the rush of air that followed. This guy was strong all right... To his horror, he saw the man had spouted additional muscle fibers, exposed to the air and pulsating around his arms. His face bore the look of a rabid animal, let out to slaughter whatever couldn't escape it. His left eye bore a nasty, jagged scar and the glass eye within the socket looked like that of an eldritch horror. To make matters worse, he was laughing.
"Creati..." Deku breathed.

"It's been up and down,"

"Yes?" said she, as they got to their feet. Behind them the monster was re-entering the fray.

"But I know I'm fine..."

Deku gulped, keeping an eye on Akaguro as he prepared to counter attack both their enemies. "We need backup." Nodding, a communications device started spouting from her ear, and the violence really got going: both Hockey-mask and the monster charged. While Yaoyorozu clung to his back, Deku leapt into the air.

"I'm alive!"

The villains crashed together mid air, Deku threw Yaoyorozu while a grappling hook shot from her wrist to carry her to safety, the vampire plummeting toward the tangled villains. His heels made contact with their skulls, driving them into the ground as he sprang away, between them and his allies. This was not going to be easy...

"I've been justified..."

The monster was the first back on its feet, and it moved faster than Deku anticipated. Only by falling back, his body at a ninety degree angle only his feet barely remained in contact with the ground as it soared past him.

"I..."

It landed just over Akaguro. Body pivoting, twisting, Deku's propelled himself into something of a backward somersault as his foot kicked into the monster's ribs a football player during playoffs. Ribs shattered, a scream was produced and it crashed into another neighboring wall. He landed over his wheezing friend, prepared to protect him from whatever came next.

"Panic attack, I'm slippin through the cracks..."

Hockey mask seemed to have doubled his size for all the muscle fibers covering his upper body. The same could be said for his speed, it was enough to catch Deku completely by surprise and his fist connected with the vampire's skull. His neck broke like a twig, sending him spinning in the air like a rag doll and sprawling over Akaguro.

"Everything's turning black..."

He might had followed after the agonizing teenager, his body screaming in pain so severe he almost blacked out, if not for Yaoyorozu. She was on a nearby roof, nearly instantly solidifying riot foam spraying from her palms, coating the muscular man. "This is creati broadcasting on an open frequency! We need backup! Villains are attacking, possible nearby civilians! Repeat: We need backup!"

"still don't know how I'm gonna make it back..."

The riot foam was enough to keep the man almost total immobilized. Shaky hands, pushing past his sword, reached Deku's head. "S-sorry... Guren..." with a tug, he spun his friend's skull back into place and as his body healed, Deku took a gasping breath.

"Back where the other side, back where the other's lie..."
Staggering back to his feet, shaky breaths making his body tingle with cold, he stood over his still incapacitated friend. "Th-thanks." Muscular shattered his way through the riot foam, Yoayorozu looked about ready to pass out from the exertion of making so much material, and the monster leapt right at Deku. Its hands grabbed his shoulders, forcing him to the ground and smashing his spine directly into the concrete. This thing... it felt like fighting the Nomu all over again.

"Feels like it always drags me back again, back where it all began..."

Feet kicking up into the thing's chest, he hurled it over his head with a savage roar, slamming into Muscular and the street beneath them. With a twist of his body, he was back on his feet, spine forcing itself back into alignment as he flexed his wrist and unsheathed a set of claws. "Stendhal..."

"back to the start again,"

Still coughing, the dhampire gave a wicked grin and peeled off his mask with a nod, and Deku flew. In a blur of motion, he sliced through the skin of the monster and the man, sending the blood into Akaguro's awaiting maw. The man went limp, the monster did not. If anything, it only seemed to be slower.

"back to the start again,"

Akaguro growled. "No." Staggering to his feet, he glared at the monster. "First the nomu, now you?" His legs were shaking, threatening to buckle beneath him. "My quirk can incapacitate anyone!

"back where I ought've been,"

Deku landed, skidding to a stop, eyes going wide at the sight of what his friend was doing. "Don't!"

"Feels like the clock keeps turning back again,"

With a snarl, Akaguro charged, sword poised to strike. "FALL!" His sword impaled the monster right through, slicing the limp muscle fibers of Muscular's left side off. Just like the Nomu, it was already healing. With a howl, the monster ripped the sword free and punched Akaguro so hard he went flying, bouncing off the street like a stone on water. Amazingly, he'd kept a grip on that sword of his.

"back where it all began, comin around again, yeah but I know this time-"

Mooney looked about ready to charge after Akaguro, something Deku could now allow. So he flung himself at the thing. "No you don't!" Both sets of claws at the ready, he dug into the thing's flesh and shredded the muscle and tendons at the shoulder blades, making it fall onto its face. In a surprise move, it kicked off the ground, sending them hundreds and hundreds of feet into the air. It was everything Deku could do to keep from sailing away from it in the wind.

"I'M ALIVE!"

He grappled at it in the air, trying to position it between him and the ground, and it seemed to have the same idea. Raking his claws across the thing's face, shredding through bone, muscle and brain. He saw an eye go sailing away as it punched him, grazing his jaw and spinning him about like a boomerang. Thinking quickly, he hooked his ankles around it's neck and hauled, bringing just barely between and the street.

"AND IT FEELS LIKE-"
They crashed into and through the road with a near roaring split of the pavement and splatter of blood and bone.

"I'M ON FIRE!"

The twitching mass of purple flesh and bone gurgled beneath him as the word around him spun. If only the damn song would turn off, or his center of balance would come back, or- ...something!

"BUT IT'S RIGHT ON TIME!"

A fumbling hand found Mooney's face, less than a second later Deku punched it as hard as he could. The gurgling subsided, the motion reduced to next to nothing and all it seemed to be doing at that moment was healing. Staggering to his feet, finally getting a grip on his phone, Deku managed to turn the audio off.

Just in time for muscular to hit the back of his head with the force of a jetliner at full speed.

To say that Deku saw stars would have been a drastic understatement. A veritable galaxy sprang to life, dancing in front of his eyes, cascading in a brilliant display of cognitive malfunction the likes of which he had never thought to imagine. It took a full three seconds for his body to register what had happened, another second for him to realize he'd hit a wall and then a second further the pain to final reach his synapses. His nervous system had been overwhelmed, overloaded and overstimulated to the point that a lesser creature would have died instantaneously -and rather painlessly- from the shock of such extreme stimuli alone.

Deku was no such creature. He was, in fact, a full blooded, physically matured-to-his-prime vampire with all the durability and redundant healing of the most overwhelmingly gifted heroes. So when it is stated that he fully processed and fully felt the extreme pain of that attack, it should be known that his nervous system recognized every single minute impulse of electrical activity in every available pain receptor. Unlike humans, Vampires do not have a threshold to cross at which point dopamine and serotonin will be flooded into the endocrine system to block out the pain. Luckily, this meant that Deku was not immediately loopy or mildly intoxicated by the contents of his own brain. Unfortunately, this meant that he saw no relief, no shielding and no blissful escape from the pain until it had subsided moments later.

Perhaps most unfortunate of all, those precious moments were all it took for Mooney and Muscular to get back up. Yaoyorozu had done everything she could -exhausted herself to a point of unconsciousness- but this only prolonged the inevitable. So, with shaking bones barely supported by shell-shocked muscles and signals from his poor brain, Deku stood back up as well. Until his friends were safe, he refused to stay down. A decision he would regret later, but in that moment, it was exactly what he should have done.

"You're a tough kid," Muscular laughed, his mad-dog grin bursting with life, "this might be the first fight I've actually enjoyed in nearly ten years." He let out another, cackling laugh. "It's never any good when your opponent goes down too easily.

A shaky, staggering footstep met the concrete and Deku's knee nearly buckled. One step forward almost had him on the ground again. "Yeah... I have a knack for that." Swaying under the forces of gravity, he brought his fists up, preparing to fend off whatever happened next or to attack if he saw an opening.

He only hoped his body would follow through with the decision. Strangely, he wasn't exactly afraid anymore. Seeing how much his adrenal glands had already pumped into his system had easily gone over the amount they typically produced in a day, his body was having a fit. Heart rate was through
the roof, his eyes seemed to pick up every spec of dust and debris in the air, every sound rang in
his ears like a gunshot and he could swear he felt the air pressure around him fluctuating. His limbs
were shaking, sweat soaked into his armor and clothes underneath, and for the life of him he
couldn't slow his breathing.

Muscular's already inhumanly wide grin went wider still. "Oh really?" His legs tensed, clearly
getting ready to strike, Deku braced for impact. "HERE I COME, LITTLE HERO-ULGH!"

A rush of wind akin to a hurricane tore through the area, blood spattered and sprayed at the ground
making Deku's stomach growl louder than he though he could yell. A wave of sound hit his
eardrums, two impacts -the first was the crunching of flesh and bone, the next was of a body being
sent through at least one building- hit Deku's ears with enough force to make him scream as blood
trickled down the sides of his head.

As he staggered, clutching at his ears, he became dimly aware that he was in someone's shadow.
"You're not hurting another hair on any of my student's heads..." The booming, herculean voice of
the world's greatest hero put Deku's battered at east. "Because I AM HERE!" All Might's voice
bellowed like a warrior from eons past, standing between Deku and Mooney. "You okay, Young
Midoriya? I didn't see any injuries just now but that was one nasty punch you took."

Weakly, barely able to stand, Deku nodded. "Wh-..." he had to breathe, "what do you need me to
do?"

All Might smiled. "Just stay back, you did an admirable job keeping everyone safe until help
arrived." While All Might spoke, Mooney seemed to hesitating, his eye twitching.

Deku fought to keep talking, even as his vision threatened to go completely black. "The- ... the
others..." stay. awake... "Fighting a... flame guy... Jiro ran..." He fell, hand clutching at the wall to
keep him upright as he pointed, "that way, I... think..." his hand slipped, and then he was on the
ground. At least he was still awake.

"Don't worry," Said All Might, "I didn't come alone..." As Deku surrendered the fight, a row of
teeth erupted like lava out of a volcano from Mooney's mouth, right at him. With the back of his
hand, All Might shattered the assailing teeth, a spatter of blood bursting from his hand. With a
glare in his eyes, All Might demanded something. "And just who might you be, evildoer?"

Mooney seemed to smile at this. "Me?" He drew up, standing only his legs, towering over All
Might. "I am the sins your precious world tired, and failed, to erase, obscure from the eyes of this
fragile, fragile world. I am my friend's, and my Sensei's creation."

All Might's breath caught. "...Sensei?"

Mooney grinned. "I am... at the High End of your evolution, pushed beyond what humans will
reach for millennia." He was on All Might before he could think to dodge. Grappling with him,
trying to throw him away from Midoriya, he found that his usual efforts didn't so much as budge
the creature. Putting everything he had into one savage haul, Mooney was able to meet the effort
and their bodies spun with enough force to stir up a small twister. When the wind finally settled,
All Might had a nast gash in is side, bleeding profusely and Mooney was standing over him.
"But you can just call me 'Mooney', everyone else does."

As Deku's vision faded away, he only hoped that this would end with minimal bloodshed.
It's a sad thing, realizing that everything changes.

Change marks the beginning, and the end.

Stories are rarely started by any good kind of change.

Change marks a person, one way or another, whenever it happens.

You ever think about the kind of change that *your* story will end with?

You know...

Stories don't always have happy endings.

...

Wind...

He was very faintly aware of wind, brushing past his face.

Lungs heavy in his chest, throat raw and ragged, his tongue tasted iron, sticky and warm. Short breaths, pained and gurgling, eyelids clinging to each other as he willed them open. The weight of his skull threatened to drag him down, through the ground and into the depths of the earth itself. Yet still conscious he remained, fingers stubbornly gripping the hilt of his sword. Vocal chords rasping out a groan freed themselves of some stinging substance, like cobwebs on the cogs of a disused clock-tower. When the wind faded, he missed the kiss of its cold embrace. It was very warm where he lay, under the beating sun. Bedraggled, messy hair caked with sweat and blood slid from his face as he looked about.

Voices spoke, though close their owners were they sounded distant as they echoed incoherently. Bakugo was screaming, rage and pain, and then he was on the ground too. Smoke billowed from his costume, sizzling skin and fabric, as he writhed with stubborn ire. His mind refused to surrender, yet his body already had. It was irritating to see himself in that boy, but difficult to deny once seen. A similar sort of will, an unyielding drive to succeed, though in very differing ways. At least so far as he knew.

Another bout of staggeringly forceful, painful coughing shook his body, rattling his bones against the street. How could such a simple thing as breathing become such an impossible thing? Another wave of heat wafted over him, a dizzying display of physical prowess caught his useless ears long before his eyes. A man with the physique of Charles Atlas's true ideal striking, trading hit for hit, against a beast that could not possibly have been made by nature's hands. Neither seemed to have an edge over the other, All Might's overwhelming strength was counter by near equal strength from his enemy.

Long, prehensile teeth that could grow as their owner please occasionally threatened to carve his flesh from his bones. Any time the hero would land a blow that turned his enemy's body to a broken lump of bleeding skin and bone, its body would pull itself back together, snapping anything out of place back where it belonged. Just like the Nomu.

Watching a man like him fight something, anything to a near standstill was awe inspiring and dreadful. If memory served, their other purple adversary had fought he, his teacher and friends to a
standstill; until it was revealed the creature had energy, yet untapped strength to spare as it lost its fragile mind after killing its master. Of course, now the beastly thing was lord knew where.

Whatever this thing was, fighting All Might, it gave both he and the Nomu a run for their money. A flurry of blows, traded at such speed that the eye could scarcely follow; a wind so fierce erupted at the impact of each fist that windows burst, cars overturned and buildings groaned as though they might crumble into ruin. Such was their battle that many of them did, before All Might hit the creature with such force that it shot into the sky like a comet. As it flew, the inhuman scream that split the air threatened to rupture eardrums, until distance subsided it.

As this was unfolding, Bakugo remained on the ground, leaving only Todoroki standing between the pair of boys and Dabi. The heterochrome wasn't wounded, but his body was caked in a thin layer of ice, frost on his flesh that slowed him considerably. Icy, vaporous breath came in haggard, slow gasps, knees trembled and defiant eyes stared down a scare-crow mask.

Eyes that narrowed at the other man's lack of aggression. "You're hesitating." Said Todoroki.

The other man seemed to twitch, his hands threatening to lash out with fire but stopping themselves short. "So are you. Or are you unable to fight any longer?"

Todoroki's features softened, curiosity coaxing at his eyes. "And that matters to you?" Dabi took an unconscious step back, away from the teenagers. "You seemed not to have a problem with murdering my friends, or that girl a few minutes ago. What caused the change of heart?"

A rush of hot air, flame tore into the arena. Todoroki only narrowly avoided being incinerated, Dabi's clothes were set ablaze and it wasn't long before his hands frantically scrambled to remove the burning jacket and mask. A broad, heavy boot narrowly missed Stendhal's face, its heel trampling his bloody, sweaty hair. "I'll not have you killing that boy, criminal." The voice of Endeavor almost made Stendhal strike out with his sword, but fatigue and presence of mind stayed his temper.

"Yeah, wouldn't want to deny you the pleasure." Muttered the heterochrome, checking his clothes for any sign of flame.

Rolling his eyes, Endeavor stomped forward into the field of battle. He and Dabi circled each other, eyes searching for an opening to attack and Stendhal's eyes followed the two of them. Endeavor was an impressive figure, muscled and tall, broad of build and the fire of his quirk radiated from almost every part of him. His calves, along the lengths of his arms, an X across his chest, pauldrons crafted from the orange heat, his very beard was wrought of flame and circles around his piercing, strikingly blue eyes.

Dabi was quite the contrast. Lean, lanky, perhaps three inches shorter and covered not in flame, but in burns. Through the gaps in his clothing it was easy to get a road map of them: His forearms and much of his hands, calves, the entirety of his neck and lower jawline, perhaps even parts of his chest, and around-

...around his piercing, bright blue eyes.

Burns and fire in the same places.

Similar heights, now that he looked more closely, a similar jawline to the youngest in the Todoroki family.

The similarly spiky hair.
Eyes matching Endeavor's and that of Todoroki's left side, his blue flame quirk...

Stendhal felt some of the pain leave his body and he righted himself enough to no longer be completely prone. With undsteady legs and shaky arms he stood, face plainly marked with disbelief. It couldn't be... "Toya?" Dabi halted all motion, a fearful, startled gaze shifting to Stendhal. Both Endeavor and the youngest Todoroki turned to him with similar expressions. Daringly, Stendhal took a step toward the Yakuza man, grip on his sword looser than before. "Toya Todoroki?"

The tragic look of recognition of his face was enough to confirm the dhampire's suspicion. "Chizome?" The instant his guard was lowered, Endeavor sprung his attack. A rush of orange flame lanced out and struck the smaller man's chest, along his left side and he fell to ground screaming in agony.

Reflexively, Todoroki's right hand sprung forward and coated a thing layer of frost over the now wounded chest of his older brother. With a snarl, Endeavor stepped forward to teach both boys a lesson.

Only Stendhal had stepped between them all, sword brandished at Endeavor's throat. "What the hell do you think you're doing!?" Endeavor demanded.

Stendhal met the hash words with a quiet glare. "Protecting them. This fight is already over." As if to punctuate this, All Might's battle with Mooney came to an abrupt, ear splitting end as the beast was rocketed away.

Collectively, the gathered men winced as their ears screamed, but it wasn't long before their attention was back on each other. "Protecting a villain and my own son? From me?" Endeavor's smile almost looked amused. "They don't need it, although for differing reasons."

Oh how he longed to skewer the man's heart. His other hand pointed in a harsh, swift motion to the younger Todorokis behind him, pointing first at the extensive burns on Toya's flesh, then at Todoroki's left eye. "They have always needed protection from you."

Endeavor laughed. "And it falls to you?" he gestured to the dhampire's shaking limbs. "You barely even stand, boy."

"Don't much care if I win," Stendhal smirked, "my aim is only toward what's right."

Another mocking chuckle. "So you defend a criminal from a hero? Aiding and abetting is now 'right'?"

"Once upon a time, was legal to hunt down jews for a certain madman." Endeavor's smile was nigh instantly replaced with a vicious scowl at such a comparison. "What's legal and what's right don't always align." His sword inched just a bit closer to Endeavor's skin. "This fight's over, Toya obviously can't fight back. Anything further is excessive force and I will not allow it."

Todoroki saw the rage building on his father's face and moved himself between Toya and the brute of a man. His teeth bared in a murderous fashion, Endeavor growled. "You're in no position to not allow me to do anything, boy."

A weak, raspy chuckle cut into the conversation. "No..." said Toya. "But he's right about this being done." Suddenly, as soon as he'd finished speaking, his palms erupted with flame, soon dissipating into a thick cloud of black smoke.

Stendhal's lungs seized, forcing all that entered them to vacate. Vision gone faint, blurry, the
dhampire's knees buckled and he fell to the ground. As he hit the pavement, body violently convulsing with a powerful, lung rending coughs, he felt some vast amount of fluid fountain up his throat. His lungs had just forced their contents free, and the red liquid pooling in front of his face could only have one label. As the icy black of unconsciousness claimed him, he saw Toya running away, Endeavor clueless as to where. A smile parted his lips and as a final waking gesture, he raised his middle finger and flipped Endeavor off.

Whatever hell there'd be to pay would have to wait until he was awake again.

Deku was left stunned in the wake of All Might's battle with Mooney. Like a hurricane clashing with a tornado, there was no description truly fitting. Both were forces of nature, and in the chaos of their tangling much of the city block was left in shattered decay. Righting himself, shaking limbs struggling to hold his weight, the vampire took a nervous step toward his teacher. His herculean form seemed fragile, like a glass sculpture that had been batted into one to many times. Steam poured off his shoulders, he staggered to take a step for the alley but faltered at the sight of his student. His smile vanished, replaced with worry. Deku eventually came to the reluctant conclusion that this expressed fear was directed at him.

The man's muscles were shaking, almost like they were verging on breaking, and the steam pouring off him was only growing. He understood, he didn't want to understand, but he understood. "It's okay." Said Deku. "I know..." All Might blinked, confused, leaving to to Deku to explain. "I know what you really look like, your real face."

Gulping, chancing a look at his surroundings, All Might saw they were still very much not alone. While Endeavor and the others were otherwise distracted he leapt into the alleyway and let his body collapse. In an instant, the herculean hero was replaced with the emaciated form of a ghoulish looking man. Gasping for air, his body trembling weakly like an old tree in the wind he gave the boy a pitiful look. "How...? When did you figure it out?"

Deku pointed between his two different eyes. "You didn't used to have eyes like my right one. Then all of a sudden you show up with them along with another staff member at UA with the same eyes." All Might winced, suddenly appearing to be sheepishly embarrassed. "you um..." he gestured to the ghoul's face. "Might wanna get contacts, for this version of yourself." At the hero's questioning gaze, Deku whispered. "I won't tell anyone."

All Might smiled, allowing himself to take a seat in the alley. "I appreciate it, though I'm not surprised." This time it was his turn to answer the younger man's questioning look. "Keeping secrets on another's behalf, it's not something you're unfamiliar with and I wouldn't expect you to avoid returning such an important favor."

Deku nodded slowly. "Fair..." Noticing how quiet it was he took a few shaky steps out of the alley. "It's over but... Where are the other Yakuza? Jiro and-" he thought better of saying her name. "and-and that other girl?"

Sighing, All Might stood up. "I'm not sure," clutching his bleeding side he forced his body to turn back into his more heroic form, "but we'd better find out."

The chase had taken them a considerable distance from the fight's origin. Jiro was scarcely able to keep up, she half suspected the only reason she could was because of Toga's injured leg. How she'd gotten injured was unknown to her, but it was enough to keep their paces about even for all the blond's limping about. "Would you wait!" Jiro called, her lungs protesting with a stinging that now accompanied her every breath.
Toga either didn't hear or didn't listen, with her next staggering limp she hauled herself over a fence. With a groan, Jiro raced after her and climbed. Once atop the chain-link barrier, she planted her feet as squarely as she could. Toga hadn't made it far, her gait was slow and unsteady and landing after that frantic climb up the fence had left her momentarily sprawled on the ground. Jiro was about to spring off the fence like a cat and tackle her old friend when she went crashing down, wheezing.

It took her a moment to start moving, to hop down the side of the fence and approach Toga. Her eyes drifted to the blond's skin, finding her blackened and distended veins throbbing. "What happened to you?" She knelt beside her, a hand ghosting over her shoulder as the other girl fought to catch her breath.

Toga laughed, her eyes flickering between three different colors. "I never did explain my quirk, did I?"

Jiro blinked. "I- not that I remember."

Dragging herself up against a nearby trashcan, her chest heaving slowly with each breath, Toga sighed. "If I drink a glass of someone's blood, I can be them for a day." She held up one of her arms, rolling up the sleeve of her oversized sweater, exposing the vast tree of black lurking beneath her paper white skin. Jiro's jaw dropped, and her hand reflexively reached out, fingers trailing over Toga's arm. "But if I drink all they have?" Her eyes flickered a bright blue. "I can be them for as long as I want."

The purple eyed girl's eyes went wide, horror slipping onto every inch of her face. "At what cost?"

For a moment Toga looked like she was about to cry. Then a bright smile crossed her face, but her eyes stayed the same. "Does it matter?"

"Of course it matters!" Jiro reached out, gripping Toga's shoulders. "If this is making you sick-" "All we wanted," Toga breathed, her chest finally at ease, "back then was to be somebody else." The words were like a brick on her heart, and Jiro had no idea what to say. "I wanted to be anyone, You wanted to be you, not the person you'd been your whole life, and so did Magne."

"...her name was K."

Toga laughed, reaching into her pocket and pulling out a necklace. It was little more than an old horseshoe magnet tied to a piece of string. "yeah... but you never read her diary."

Jiro's eyes fluttered, her brain struggling to keep track of everything Toga was saying. "What- I-"

Toga's hand reached and shoved itself into her old friend's jacket pocket. The purple eyed girl was about to cry out with indignation when Toga's hand drew back, fingers splayed wide open, empty, and all Jiro could was blink. "Hey, Kyoka Gurl?"

Her heart and mind were spinning, barely able to process everything that was happening. Her friend was back, alive and using her quirk in a way that was threatening her health. On top of it all, perhaps most flustering of all, her Himiko was alive. "Y-yes?"

Himiko's hand came to rest gently on the back of Jiro's head, and she smiled a sad, loving smile. "I'm sorry." She pulled her head forward, racing her own toward her's and the last thing Jiro would remember would be the impact of their foreheads before she blacked out.
An oxygen mask was on his face, back to the surface of a gurney, and lights on a ceiling drifted like headlights at night. Vision so faded, so blurry, it was like the world had been swallowed up in darkness. His sword... where was his sword? Hands fumbled about, head turning to find the silly thing, but a gentle hand reached out and stopped him from moving.

Medical terminology, numbers were listed off one by one, a sense of panic, worry. Familiar voices mingled with them, classmates, teachers he thought. As one thought crossed his mind, so too did another: why couldn't he feel himself breathing? Oxygen was being pumped through the mask, same as it was when he'd noticed it, but he didn't feel the flow of air in his lungs. He would have laughed, but then his eyes closed.

...  

Dumbwaiters had always been something of a fascination to him. As a child of five years old, one who'd lived his entire life in one abandoned building to the next, the idea of food having its own elevator was so enthralling. How could anyone be so important so as to have a dumbwaiter? Now, he hated them. His home was on fire, a scary man was fighting mom and dad, and he'd been sent all the way downstairs so the bad man wouldn't hurt him too.

The door was stuck, and fear wrapped icy fingers around his mind. Hauling with all his strength, little Chizome did all he could to pry the thing open.

It wouldn't budge.

A desperate scream parted his lips. "HELP!" He hauled at the door, kicked it, battered his little hands against it. "LET ME OUT!" Everything he had and then some was thrown against the simple, wooden barrier, his lungs and throat went raw from screaming.

But nobody came.

...  

Eyes fluttered open, surgery lights shone above him, something had been pushed down his throat. He winced at a twinge in his arm, turning to see a nurse having planted an IV. Brow furrowing, he wanted to ask what was going on but his mouth was full. When he tried to speak, he felt the obstruction in his throat was also in his mouth and lungs. what the hell?

As the cold fluid of the IV traveled into his vein, the world started to fade again. Out of the corner of his eyes, he saw surgeons reaching for their various tools.

...  

It had taken forever to haul the little door open. As it finally slid free, Chizome's face was wreathed in smoke. It smelled like concrete, tasted almost the same too and his chest felt like it was burning from within as he breathed. It took what little strength he had left, and all he could do was fall out of the dumb waiter.

Fire. The building was on fire! Coughing, gagging for breath he started crawling, then forced himself up to walk. Smoke clouded everything, his eyes, nose, throat, tongue. What was going on? Why was everything burning? "Mom?" His little voice called out, echoing down the smokey, dusty walls.

No answer.

"MOM!" Where was she? She had to be here. That bad man couldn't have hurt her! He stumbled
forward, little shoes nearly tripping with every step. His chest felt like it had sharp, hot coals rattling inside it, but he kept on going. Glass shattered, something burst and he was nearly knocked over by the blast. He screamed, tears starting to roll down his face. He had to find mom, had to get out here, make sure she was safe too! "Mom, I'm here!"

The building shook, something overhead had smashed through completely. He flung himself sideways and the roof caved in.

Wooden shards, bits of concrete, something wet and warm covered him. His head was hurting, felt like something had cut him. Even still, he pushed through the heavy, heavy rubble like a chick from an egg. His eyes were barely working now, limbs were so weak.

Coughing, tasting blood in his mouth, Chizome's fingers fumbled about and felt a familiar shoulder. A smile spread instantly across his face. "Mom?" Strength somewhat renewed, he crawled the scant distance between them and-

...she wasn't moving.

Panic set in. "Mom, we have to go! Get up!" He shook her, pushed her, trying to rouse her but nothing worked. The building shook again, and she was shaken just enough to roll down the rubble. Chizome grabbed on and was dragged along with her, battering against the smoldering rubble before being pinned beneath her. She- she was cold. Why was she cold?! When he saw her face, his eyes went wide. Open, lifeless, dry, those familiar warm eyes, those loving things she'd always looked at him with... something wet was spilling onto his chest, an object digging into his side. When he looked down, what he saw would be etched into his eyes forever.

A knife, jutting right out of her heart.

Chizome screamed, and the building exploded.

...

Beep...

Beep...

Beep...

Slowly, his eyes fluttered open and his mouth wasn't full anymore.

That dream...

He gazed up at the ceiling of his hospital room, numb to all the world. His chest was slow to rise and fall, labored and heavy. He reached up to his face, arm slow and dragging with the motion, and his fingers felt at his pale skin. Fingertips dragging down a face now worn and thin, tracing over the ridge of his long, hooked, crow-like nose. It took eons to right himself, to sit in his bed, but do so he did.

So light headed was he at the simple effort that he nearly fainted. Hand to his aching chest, he swung his legs over the edge of the bed as a doctor rushed in. "You shouldn't be moving."

Stendhal held up a hand, waving him away. "I'm fine."

"Son, you're anything but."
Stendhal growled. "I am not your son." Then he coughed so hard he almost fell from the bed, had the doctor not caught him by the shoulder.

Weak as he was, he had strength enough to avoid being made to lie down again. "You really should-"

Stendhal pushed his hand away, struggling to breathe. "What's going on with me?" The doctor gave him a pitiable look, one that made him want to snarl. "It's never been this bad."

A guilty look muddled the man's wrinkled face, his white eyebrows furrowing with sympathy. "Son... I'm afraid you have silicosis." There was a long pause. "Accelerated, complicated silicosis."

Stendhal gave the man a very confounded look. "What's that?"

The doctor swallowed. "It's also called 'Potter's rot' or 'Grinder's asthma', it's..." he shifted uncomfortably where he sat on the floor. "it's contracted by breathing in large quantities of silica. A... a substance typically found slate, granite, sandstone, gneiss..."

A look of comprehensive fear crossed Stendhal's face. "Concrete..."

The doctor nodded, his sympathy grimacing his face. "You ever breathe in dust that was made up of anything like that?"

"...A whole building's worth when I was a kid." Slowly, his eyes went to the doctor's. "How... how bad?" The doctor had to look away for a moment, and Stendhal no longer had to guess. "...How long do I have?"

The last of the man's resolve seemed to slip away. "Half a year." Another long paused, and Stendhal stared at the floor. "A year at most, if you avoid smoke, take the right medications."

The rest of the conversation seemed to fade into the distance, Stendhal didn't want to hear it. Couldn't bear to.

Why?

*My time... why is there so little left?*

But nobody answered.

The doctor eventually left, leaving the young man alone. Shaking feet went to the floor, he stumbled to the closet in his room and grabbed his armored costume. Slipping back into it, nearly falling over several times, coughing with each major exertion or ungentle motion, he started walking from the room.

Air, he just wanted fresh air...

Down the stairs of the emergency exit, more light headed with every step, he threw himself out the doors. Sunlight stung at his eyes, his chest heaved with every breath and he felt dizzy, wobbling as though he might fall any moment as he stared pleadingly at the sky.

Toya was back, mixed up in the worst of things... Guren's heart was in ruins... Jack had her own missing, criminally inclined friend to deal with... Chargebolt's grandfather... Creati's miserable home situation...

He staggered forward, anger and sorrow twisting up his face. His feet started moving, a buzz in his
pocket and he reached for his phone.

'We're at the MCPD, everyone is more or less fine. Are you okay?' - Jack

He winced. 'Yes.' hesitating, he sent another message. 'We capture any of the Yakuza?'

'One. He's in interrogation. You're going to love Eri. She's been by Green's side since we got here, and she keeps asking to see the 'sword guy.' - Jack

He allowed himself a bitter, chuckling smile. 'On my way.'

Phone back in his pocket, a few staggering steps more and then he was running.

His lungs burned, vision blurred with white spots and his senses dulled.

Not yet, his time couldn't be ending yet. There was too much to do, too many things to take care of, to much wrong with the world. He wanted to change it, fix it, fight! He wasn't that helpless little kid any more, he wasn't some victim of death or unfortunate circumstance; some mad man's rage and hate. He could change things, save people, he could ki-

He flinched. No, no he wouldn't do that. That wasn't...

...Wasn't right... wasn't it?

That's right. No matter how many times good people died, it wasn't right to kill. It was a horrid thing to do, to rip someone away from their loved ones like that. Someone's son, someone's daughter, father, mother, husband, wife, boyfriend, girlfriend, hero.

Someone with hopes, fears and dreams...

He fought back the tears, growling in pain of all kinds and started running faster.

Some day... I'd like murder to only happen to monsters, terrible people who make the world a darker place...

Sound had all but faded away, his ears barely registered the dull thud of his feet and heart.

Some day... I'd like to stop watching good people feel pain.

World rushed around him, his hero's mask clattering against his side, hanging from his belt.

Damn it all... my sisters and brothers in this solemn work... I want you all happy before I die!

Lungs struggled, fought to take in air so polluted as this city made it. His chest grew heavy, hot coals in them all over again and his legs, his entire body pushed harder still.

I want you all safe...

Sound came roaring back into his ears, a sharp clarity forced its way back into his awareness. Conviction fueling every fiber in his body, even as his lungs filled with fluids.

Up till now... I've had no family but you...

A comradery formed in the fires of the USJ, the trials of the festival, their years in the field.

I will see this through. This time I wont see anything happen to any of you! You'll all make it into a
better, brighter world!

It wasn't much longer before he was racing through the doors of the station.

No matter what it takes...

"Did I... hear a thunder?

Did I... hear you break?

I can't quite remember... just what guided...

me this way..."
Jiro stood outside the old building, the "closed" sign telling her she'd wasted a perfectly good two hours of her life. Grumbling out a sigh, she shoved her hands into her pockets and started sulking away. "Great... give me a big stupid hint like that only to knock me unconscious so I can't actually act on it." She kicked a loose stone in frustration. "Damn it, Himiko..." She reached up and massaged at the stinging welt of a bruise her old friend had given her, just above her left eye.

With the other hand, she pocketed the business card that Himiko had snuck into her pocket, just before turning out her lights. What was the point of this? In luring her out to this squalid neighborhood? Bringing up K, like that, saying she'd wanted to be a hero... what kind of game was she playing at?

As Jiro walked, skulking her away along the empty streets, she looked up and saw the sun was going down. Frowning, she realized there was nothing she could do right now. Head lowered in defeat, she just kept walking away.

"It's cold..." she realized, drawing her jacket around herself. "Almost like a bad omen."

So many things seemed to be threatening to go wrong all at once. That quirk erasure that Aizawa was looking into, Den's granddad was on death's door, Himiko was back and apparently running with the worst of crowds. A helpless little girl was caught up in something she was sure could only be something hellish, from the state od her. That Yakuza guy was apparently related to Todoroki, Akaguro's friend no less and...

...Yeah. There was him to worry about.

For some reason, no matter what else was going on, she couldn't avoid thinking about him too. Wondering about him, what he would do, if he was okay, if... She shook her head. Pointless to consider, whatever that thought was. He was barely even him any more.

But then, that was something she understood all too well. Regardless of any of that, if this little lead turned out to be what she thought it was, she'd need someone here with her when she went to check it out tomorrow. In her current state, she was worried if she'd even be able to handle it even if nothing violent happened. Her heart was teetering on the edge of something.

One of her friends was all but completely surrendering to depression -she had very traumatic memories of the last time that had happened- one was in the hospital, another, well, that was Den again.

A quiet two years, but at the cost of any levity, particularly now.

Another sigh pushed past her lips, eyes closing for a moment as she walked. "Can't things be normal without also sucking the whole time?" She reached into her pocket and got out her phone. A few presses of her fingers against the screen and she'd started, then concluded, three conversations. One was with Den, another was with Ashido, the last was with Yaomomo.

Jiro: "I'm following a lead that might lead me to a potentially dangerous situation tomorrow. Can you come with me?"

All but Momo had said yes, and she had simply said "If I can, I will be there." Followed by a hug emoji.
She was about to pocket her phone when a thought occurred. She wasn't exactly living up to something here, something... She groaned out a sigh. "Well... never thought it'd be one of my problems that'd go his way..." with a slight grimace she dialed the number and brought the phone to her ear.

It was just a request for help. What more than that could possibly come of it?

Time was just slipping by today. Kirishima kicked off his shoes, being the only home he worried not for the amount of noise he made. The neighbors were seldom home, even if they were he rarely did anything that would reach a decibel level high enough to bother them. Checking his phone, for the umpteenth time, he saw that all was quiet. Some news article about All Might and Endeavor getting into a fight with some bestial being and a bunch of criminals. He was about to just ignore the article when he caught a glimpse of who else had been involved. He practically dropped his phone when he saw Bakugo clutching at his ribs, costume pluming smoke into the air. Of course, after that, he scrolled through the entire article to see exactly what had happened.

"No casualties..." he breathed, relief overtaking him. A harsh exhalation marked another attempt to release his tension with limited success. He was about to call Bakugo when there was a knock at his door. Sighing, biting his upper lip and drawing in a sharp breath he went to the door. "Hello?"

As he opened the door, he found himself eye to eye with the male he'd been intending to contact. "Hey..." he sounded all manner of displeased with himself.

"Hey!" Kirishima, a smile instantly appearing on his face, he flung his arms around the ashen blond.

An action that was immediately met with a growling outcry of pain. "ARGH!" His hands gripped at Kirishima's elbows. "Damn it, Eiji! My ribs got-"

"Crap, sorry." Kirishima drew his arms back, eyeing where Bakugo's injury was supposed to be but saw only the fabric of his school uniform. "I just got excited when I saw you were okay." He gave him an apologetic look, taking a step back and letting him step inside.

Bakugo sighed, lifting up one corner of his shirt, revealing the bandages underneath. "Recovery Girl patched me up. It just smarts..." Somewhere in the back of his mind he realized he didn't really care about the injury; or the scar it would leave behind. It was high time karma added some scars to his body, for all he'd left on De- ...Green, all those years ago.

Closing the door behind him, Kirishima took some comfort in the lack of blood on the wound's dressing. "Only so much she could do?"

Bakugo flinched. "No. I asked her to leave it like this."

A notion that thoroughly confused Kirishima. "Wait, what? Why?"

Rolling his eyes, Bakugo quipped, "who and when." before shaking his head, then another sigh passed through his lips. "I let my temper get the better of me again, because of it that..." he thought better against telling Kirishima about Todoroki's older brother being a supposed member of the Yakuza. "...Bastard blindsided me. I gotta learn to not just fly off the handle."

Nodding, the redhead thought he might understand. "Okay, that... makes sense." He watched as Bakugo padded along, his socks dragging on the carpet somewhat as he went to just stare out the window. "Is everyone else okay?"
Bakugo nodded, almost numbly. "Akaguro's in the hospital, last I know. He's sleeping off whatever went wrong with him, doc said he just needed rest." The warhead laughed bitterly. "Come to think of it, that's basically everyone who got into the fight."

"Heh... seems like that's how things usually go for us. If it's a real fight, almost no one is left standing afterwards." Bakugo grunted in something resembling agreement, and the kettle started whistling. "Want some tea?"

"Sure..."

Smiling, the redhead nodded. "You gotcha."

Eyes following after him, Bakugo silently wondered exactly what he'd done to get a man like Kirishima. *Definitely not my winning personality...* Images of Endeavor haunted him as the thought crossed his mind. Violent images of a man venting his temper on someone incapable of retaliation. ...*damn it.* Rubbing the back of his neck, heart thudding in his ears, Bakugo tramped off to Kirishima's room. Eyeing the place somewhat skeptically, he realized he never really felt right in this room. The exercise equipment, posters of the ocean, curtains with flames on them and a camouflage patterned bed-spread. Manly? yes. Over the top? Also yes, but he was hardly one to cast stones now, wasn't he?

Damn it all, he could have died today. Hell, he outright thought he was going to for a few seconds. Lying there in pain, bleeding onto the pavement and unable to do anything but wait for whatever happened next. If he'd died there and then... there were just too many things he still wanted, still had to do and might have been left undone.

That was a thought that scared him.

"Hey," said Kirishima, not knowing he was interrupting his boyfriend's thoughts, "we only really have the one kind, so I hope you like chamomile."

Bakugo grunted, accepting it with barely noticeable gratitude. "Thanks..."

Kirishima took a sip, closing the door with his foot as he stepped further into the room, going to open the window. "Eh, I was making it anyway." As he wandered across the room, Bakugo's eyes followed him. His shapes, that stupidly-cute look on his face, the way his eyes just screamed how much of a puppy he was. His muscles, the way he moved, that slight gravel of his vocal chords as he hummed to himself for a second.

How he might not have been here to notice any of this if things had worked out just slightly differently.

...*yeah, the tea can wait.*

Setting down the mug, carefully on Kirishima's desk, he walked over to him and put a hand on his shoulder. "Hey."

"Hmm?" As Kirishima turned around he saw Bakugo leaning in for a kiss. Momentary surprise quickly gave way to anticipation as he closed his eyes. Not quite what he expected from the evening, or Bakugo's visit, but he was definitely not complaining. A hand took his mug from him, setting it aside as he grabbed one of Kirishima's shoulders. Then, once the scalding drink was removed from the equation, Bakugo wrapped an arm around him and pulled him close.

Very close.
Kirishima's eyebrow's jumped, almost pulling away from his boyfriend's lips. Is he...? He almost grinned, squirming a little in Bakugo's arms. Okay, this was definitely headed somewhere he had not anticipated. When their kiss broke, Bakugo stared into Kirishima's eyes with obvious intent. "I uh..." he licked his lips, eyes darting away and back again, uncertainty gnawing at him. "Shit, I'm actually not sure how to say it."

Kirishima chuckled. "I think I get the idea." He leaned back in for another kiss, but Bakugo stopped him.

"No no, words have to happen here," Amused and touched, Kirishima grinned. "Look, I want to-" the warhead gulped. "what I- that is-"

"Yes." Said Kirishima, waiting for his certainty to register with the man in his arms.

Bakugo just frowned, obviously not entirely pleased with himself as -for once in his life- being bold had failed him. "I should be able to say it."

Kissing one of Bakugo's crimson cheeks, Kirishma whispered. "I don't think you have to, handsome," as he slid a hand down Bakugo's front, eliciting a pleasurable hiss from the man's teeth. "Unless you really want to."

His fingers fluctuated between gripping tightly at Kirishima and trying not to scratch him. "Don't think I'm any less of a man for not?"

Kirishma gave a quiet, breathy laugh. "Never crossed my mind." And as the last of Bakugo's reluctance vanished, their lips went back together, his hands exploring the readhead's body. Slowly at first, but his groping soon transformed into something urgent, heated.

It wasn't long before clothing was very much no longer part of the equation.

Aizawa's apartment was... barren. Deku had absolutely no other way to describe it. Bare bones furnishing, an old, sagging couch, no tv and a dinner table with only one chair; none on standby for if he had any guests. No decorations, pictures or memorabilia of any kind. If Aizawa's home said anything about the man, it was how incredibly alone he was. This? Deku thought. This is where they want Eri to stay?

"Agree with me yet?" Deku looked over his shoulder, past the sleeping face of Eri -whom he carried on his back- to the scraggly, exhausted face of his teacher.

Slowly, Deku nodded. "Yeah... I don't think she should stay here.

"Thank you." Aizawa sighed, resisting the urge to fall back onto his couch. "When this comes up tomorrow, you can vouch for that."

Again, the Vampire nodded. "Will do..."

Almost smiling, the motions were certainly made on his face, Aizawa patted his ward's shoulder. "Come on," he motioned for Deku to follow him back out of the apartment.

Not quite sure where they were going, Deku chanced a last look back at the other man's home. "Where are we going?"

"Plan B was she'd stay with you, right?" seeing the obvious apprehension on Deku's face, Aizawa tried to adopt a more reassuring tone. "Relax, it's just for one night."
Nodding, Deku murmured, trying to keep from waking Eri. "While the police try and track down any record of her... you wouldn't think it would be so hard, Eri's not exactly a common name."

"True," Said Aizawa, "but without a family name to work with finding out who she is will not be easy."

Unable to think of any further reply, Deku just nodded, adjusting Eri carefully on his back. Still unconscious, her little fingers clung to his shoulder. It simultaneously tugged at his heartstrings, making him happy, and made him want to cry.

Aizawa let out a solitary chuckle. "She's really imprinted on you, hasn't she?"

Deku wasn't sure how he felt about that. "Well... I guess."

Despite himself, his usually cold exterior, the old vampire hunter smiled with one corner of his mouth. "Honestly, you did good today, Kid."

Surprised, Deku turned to look at his teacher, as they walked along the now darkened streets. Furthering that feeling of astonishment, was seeing the man smiling approvingly at him. "I- huh?"

Aizawa actually chuckled. "I mean it. Who knows what kind of life that kid has had up to this point." Eyes back on the path ahead of them the man pulled a cigarette from his pocket and lit it. Indulging the old habit, he was starting to do that more and more lately. "Now look at her, smiling in her sleep." Deku looked away from him, frowning, conflicted and biting his lip. "You're probably the first person who's ever really looked out for her."

Without also carving into her flesh, that is.

Looking in the total opposite direction of the man, Deku seemed to sulk, his head and shoulders drawing closer to the ground. If only his heart had indeed been so altruistically placed. In truth, it was more spite and growing distaste for Nighteye that had really spurred him to be so bold. Had he not had so much ire in him... "I didn't realize you were the kind of man who liked kids..."

Aizawa actually blinked in surprise. Then, once he considered the attitude he oft left on display for his students, he conceded that his statement was not unfounded. Chancing a look around them, eyeing for anyone who might be listening as they walked, he adopted a much quieter tone. "I actually wanted kids once."

Now it was the vampire's turn, once again, to be surprised. "You did?"

The former hunter nodded. "A long time ago now." His tone was stricken with a cold sadness his young counterpart had not anticipated, his eyes shifting to the skyline as he spoke. As if staring out at a dream, left unfulfilled.

Considering the weight of the man's words, Deku murmured his next query. "So... why didn't you...?"

Aizawa's smile returned, this time being a grim, dull melancholy. "You really think a serial killer would make a good father?" He gave a dark chuckle. "After fifty two lives claimed by my hands... No. It was best that I abandon that idea." He took a long drag from the cigarette, letting the smoke drift away in the wind. "Damaged people make lousy guardians."

Deku was about to speak, to say something when he looked over and saw the man's face. There was a quiet, miserable certainty in him that reminded Deku of himself. An unseen injury clinging to his heart that served as the real motivation behind everything he did.
Aizawa scoffed. "Cured?" He almost laughed. "There is no 'cure' for PTSD, kiddo. You're in for the long haul with this one..."

Then, much longer ago, there was that first night, the night he'd met both him and Vanessa.

"My sister, she..." her hand gripped the couch, face scrunching to hold in her tears. "Well, she's not around any more..." and she relaxed, having avoided the statement altogether, but it was obvious what had happened...

Sympathetically, Deku turned his prying eyes away. Why is it the things I have in common with people are always awful?

So it was that simple after all. A guilt ridden man trying desperately to leave a better mark on the world than the scar he already had. But... why did that feel like something they had in common?

Deku winced. A sharp pain had made itself known inside his head. Ringing in his ears, eyes shut tight he did his best to block out the pain, hissing through his teeth.

A bloody razor clattered to the floor.

Another scream split the night.

Her body fell like-

"Kiddo?" Inhaling a sharp, stuttering breath, Deku's head jerked to face his teacher. Seeing the clammy, bone white face of the young vampire, he almost looked worried. "Is something wrong?"

Shaking in his shoes, even as he walked along, Deku nodded. "I'm... fine."

A laugh only he could hear. "That's right... just keep burying it, or drinking it away; as you usually get to sleep these days." His laugh was mocking, dripping with condescending glee. "How many bottles are left in that old cupboard, I wonder... enough to keep this up forever? No way that'll damage you any." And Shigaraki's haunting laugh echoed away into the night.

Not buying the act, Aizawa frowned at him with narrow eyes. "If you don't want to talk to me, that's fine. But you should tell your therapist about it. Understand?"

Gulping, Deku nodded numbly. "Yes sir..." As he briefly considered what exactly he was going to say -whatever was hurting him had failed to make itself known- his phone started ringing. "Um, c-can you...?"

Sighing, rolling his eyes, Aizawa fished the phone from Deku's school bag. "It's Jiro." hitting answer, he held it up to the side of the young man's face as they walked.

"H-hello?"

At the sound of his voice, his friend gave a brief exhalation. It almost sounded... relieved. "Hey," despite her apparent release of tension, she still sounded incredibly stressed. "I um... can we talk? In person I mean..." If he could see her, he imagined she'd be chewing her lip. "I've uh... damn it, I hate asking for help like some damsel in distress like this..." she growled in frustration. "It's fine if you say no, I just wanted..."

Before she could figure out the rest of that sentence, Deku nodded -then realized this was a conversation taking place on the phone- and quickly said, "sure, um, do you mind meeting me at
home? I've uh..." he gave Eri another glance, making sure she hadn't been disturbed. "Kinda got something going on and can't go anywhere." Then, turning to Aizawa while rolling his eyes at himself, he muttered, "why did I nod?" and the former hunter laughed out loud.

"Okay... yeah, I can do that." Now, he almost thought she might be smiling. "rather not be somewhere folks can overhear us anyways. I'm on my way."

Blinking, Deku raised an eyebrow. "Is it that serious?"

Hesitantly, Jiro was very slow with her answer. "Little bit..."

With a frown, Deku's eyes went slightly narrow. *Toga related...* "I understand. See you soon then."

"Mhmm." Aizawa was about to hang up for him when she spoke again. "Hey, Green?"

Another round of uncertain blinking. "Yeah?"

"...thanks." then she hung up.

Shaking his head, Aizawa dropped the phone back into Deku's school bag. "you've got a lot going on."

Laughing nervously, Deku nodded. "I think that's just part of being a hero."

"Both in actuality and in the profession." Aizawa took another, very long drag from his cigarette.

Deku gave Aizawa a very thoughtful look. "You know... I never realized that you and Akaguro had such similar attitudes towards hero work." Surprised, Aizawa turned his eyes directly to those of his pupil. "You I can understand, but... what's your take on him?" Aizawa frowned, looking off to one side almost as if in a fit of shyness. "Why do you think he's so... jaded?"

It took some time for an answer to come forth, the former hunter just walked along and smoked as he pondered this. "If the world has any kindness at all, hopefully nothing like why I am." Sighing, he polished off the cigarette and threw it down a storm drain. "but then I gave up on optimism a long time ago."

Silently, Deku could only agree with the sentiment. Life, so experience had said, was a thing best approached warily and without any delusions about just how pulled the punches would be when it cast its eye on you.

The rest of their trip back would be spent without speaking another word.

Their tea had undoubtedly gone ice cold by now. An arm was draped over his eyes, the nook of his elbow resting over the ridge of his nose as his vision was encased in total black. By his side, breath still taking a moment to calm down, Kirishima gave a breathy laugh. It was enough to make Bakugo smirk, quietly to himself. Rolling over under the covers, an arm and leg draped themselves over him, a chin resting on his shoulder.

"What was...?" Kirishima was clearly smiling. "Where'd that come from?"

Bakugo shrugged. "Just felt like the thing to do." Kirishima gently pushed the arm on his boyfriend's face away, trying to get him to look at him. Self conscious, Bakugo went to look away but Kirishima, gently, drew his gaze back by his jaw. The warhead sighed. "You're really gonna make me talk about this?"
Not sure how to take that, the redhead smiled. "Only if I can."

Expression going very, uncharacteristically soft, Bakugo looked as vulnerable as he was in that moment; naked, lying in bed, totally exhausted and about to expose a part of himself yet unseen. "That -with you- wasn't something I wanted to... not do, in case something happened."

His smile faded, drawing himself closer to the other male. "Well. That's a bit heavy for you..."

"Tell me about it..." Lazily tracing a fingertip along Bakugo's collarbone, he pressed his mouth against his shoulder, waiting for him to continue. "I got scared. Started... thinking about things I-" he grimaced at himself, eyes darting everywhere else in the room. "There's a lot I got left to do. Both and want and have to." Kirishima squeezed his hand. "People I want to... do right by and not be like before time runs out." Gulping from his nerves, turning away, his vulnerable state making him all manner of fidgety, he manged to squeeze his boyfriend's hand in return. "This was one of the more selfish ones but-

Kirishima shushed him with a kiss. "Well, it was mutually selfish then." Bakugo actually smiled, for once it was devoid of any aggression, anger. Just a pure, soft smile. "This has been on your mind a lot lately, hasn't it?"

Bakugo nodded. "For a couple years."

The redhead squeezed him. "That encounter you almost had with Endeavor really got to you..."

The warhead sighed. "Yep."

"You know you're not like him."

Then he scoffed. "No. I don't, and until I actually do something to prove otherwise, I'm not gonna see it that way."

Kirishima frowned. "Even though Izuku forgave you?"

Bakugo winced again. "Kinda especially because of that." With how fragile that boy was, it was unfair to really accept that he wanted to be friends again. He shook his head, slowly. "Redemption ain't a thing you get just by askin for it, or without undue strain to you and yours."

With a saddened smile, the redhead patted Bakugo's chest. "When you find that redemption you're after, I hope I'm there." Sitting up with a stretch of his back, arms splaying out toward the ceiling, he let out a long sigh. "Anyways, I think people are gonna be home soon."

Aizawa opened the door to Deku's home without so much as a creak. The kid had finally gotten around to oiling the hinges. "It never ceases to amaze me how clean you manage to keep this place." he murmured, slipping out of his shoes as took stock of the place for the first time.

Books filled the few bookshelves that were scattered about, some of them children's books even, though they were long disused. Decorations -mostly paintings, plants, the walls were a pleasant shade of forest green. Windows were primarily uncovered, curtains tied back. Spare blankets were draped over both the couch and the easy chair, and from the looks of it that same couch could unfold into a bed if it had to. Yeah, Eri would be comfortable enough in this place. It kept Deku...
relatively sane throughout his childhood after all.

In reply to Aizawa's observation, Deku shrugged. "Old habits..." and he gently laid Eri down on the couch, putting a blanket over her as he did.

No sooner than when he was done making sure she was comfortable had he reached for his phone. Opening up the texting application he sent a message to Akaguro: *when you wake up, let me know. I want to know if you're alright.* Looking up as he pocketed his phone - discarding his tie while he was at it - he saw that Aizawa had taken a seat at the kitchen table. Elbows resting on the table, fingers laced together just below his nose, he looked rather ponderous.

Cautiously, Deke approached him, taking the seat opposite of the former hunter. Rather than ask what he was considering, he simply waited for the man to speak. Eventually, Aizawa noticed him and exhaled a little. "It's nothing important."

Deku wasn't the least bit convinced. "Anything to do with those articles on your desk?"

With closed eyes, the man deflated slightly. "Yes." Unfolding his hands, he leaned back in his seat, tapping idly at the polished surface of the table. "I'm having trouble thinking of what it could mean."

Scratching behind the ear hidden by white hair, Deku thought he might remember something. "Bakugo mentioned Kirshima running into something related to that."

Aizawa half smiled. "Unfortunately that can't be it. The incident you're referring to was with some criminal who shot him with some of quirk-cancelling bullet. In that instance, the effects wore off. In all other scenarios the consequences were... permanent."

The vampire frowned, crossing his arms as he too leaned back in his chair. "Well... what if that was just a prototype? It could be they perfected the formula of whatever those bullets had in them or were made of since then."

Considering this for a moment, Aizawa slowly nodded. "It's worth following up at least, but I doubt it."

Deku gave his teacher a searching once over. "You think it's something else..."

Then, the old hunter's eyes fixed right on those of his student. "I can't say." Standing up he grabbed a glass and poured himself some water. "Chances are it's nothing more than All Might worrying over an old ghost." Sitting back down, he seemed to look older, weighted with a thought of considerable asperity.

Clearly concerned by the level of distress his teacher felt, Deku's expression softened. "And if it is that old ghost?"

Aizawa took a few moments to consider his answer, biting his lower lip before turning to look Deku in the eyes again. "Then I hope you listen when I say 'run', should that be the case."

*Knock, knock*

Both of them startled, having been too distracted by their conversation to notice the approaching footsteps. Clearing his throat, Deku stood up and walked to the door. When he opened it, he saw none other than his best friend, sporting a particularly nasty bruise above her left eye. "Hey." It looked it really hurt.
Though she smiled, it was difficult not to notice how clearly unhappy Jiro was. "hey..." she stepped inside, and Deku closed the door. Noticing both Aizawa and Eri she raised an eyebrow. "You didn't mention them." she whispered, knowing only he could hear her.

Deku scratched at the back of his head. "Sorry."

She shook her head, putting her purse down. "It's fine." She waved to Aizawa, who politely waved back as he sipped his water. "Um... can we go to your room for a sec?"

At the vampire's nod, she wasted no time walking into the door that hadn't been cordoned off with tape. It was only seconds after she'd ventured in that Deku remembered the project on his desk. Stepping into the room with a very hastened pulse he reached into his closet and grabbed a hoodie to throw over his desk.

If only he'd been a few seconds faster.

Blinking, almost completely uncertain what she was looking at, Jiro reached down and picked up the old Zune. "No, Wait-!" Without so much as a second wasted she turned it over, then turned it on.

She couldn't believe her eyes and it showed. "...What?" she breathed, scrolling through the entire library in disbelief. Astonished, unable to hide it, she looked at him briefly before looking back to the device. "How did-?" Deku could only stand there like a frightened statue, biting his lips and hoping she'd stop freaking out.

Instead she wheeled about, taking stock of the entirety of his desk. His notes, the manuals, the tedious process he'd devised to translate error codes into file names; and then use the file names to track down the songs they represented. Wincing his eyes closed, he sighed, bracing for the impending freak out. "It's... not done yet." She turned back to him, eyes fluttering, completely in disbelief. Averting his eyes from her, his foot fussed at the carpet. "There's still a few songs left, but other than that, it's more or less the way it was."

Actually that wasn't true. He'd managed to not only repair the power supply but upgrade it in the process. That and the storage space was now Terabytes instead of Gigabytes.

The advancement of technology...

Her hand clutched the ancient mp3 player like some long misplaced treasure; an artifact from some forgotten empire. "Green, I..."

She was holding it almost to her chest, her expression was... it was something Deku had never seen on her face before. She was touched, almost like she wanted to cry from being happy, surprised.

"I don't know what to say. This must have taken you-" she stopped, blinking as a memory flitted across her brain. As the realization dawned, Deku took an unintentional step back. "You- when I blurted out that nonsense about you fixing it?" very timid, guilty expression crossed his face, unable to look at her he silently wished to just disappear into thin air.

His wish was not granted.

"Why?"

At her awed tone, breathy and unfathomimg, he chanced a look back at her. How she must have felt, looking at him like that. You'd almost think it was the first time anyone had done something kind for her. It made his heart clench, putting butterflies in his stomach.
"Ah- well- I-" He grew extremely fidgety, unable to keep his arms or hands still. "It seemed to mean a lot to you and, after hearing about you and K and Toga I, well..." he was scratching behind his ear, eyes at the window briefly considering fleeing through it. If he'd been looking at her, he'd have noticed the happiest smile she'd ever worn. As his eyes chanced a look back, he finally did notice and it made his heart almost stop.

She knew.

Eyes fluttering, trying and failing to hide her smile, she turned her attention to the Zune. "I uh..." she was blushing slightly, one hand brushing some of her hair behind one ear. "I have all the songs saved on my computer already."

He felt like the word's biggest idiot. "Y-you do?"

She nodded, looking at him again for a moment, but she quickly stopped. It only made her blush intensify and she wanted it to go away. "Yup." she said, hurriedly. "I've got them on my phone too."

In a display of self consciousness -and an attempt to hide- Deku dug one of his palms into his forehead. "Right... of course, that makes a lot of sense. Why wouldn't you do that?" Note to self, I am an idiot.

"Yes you are." Whispered Shigaraki's haunting voice, eliciting a groan from the boy.

Pocketing the Zune, Jiro cleared her throat. She stepped forward and gently grabbed his arm, moving away his hiding place. "Don't feel like that." She gave him a squeeze, as she looked at his blushing face. "That's probably the sweetest thing anyone's ever done for me."

His shoulder bunched up and he gave a nervous smile. "H-hey, I- I mean... I needed something to keep me sane for the last two years, it wasn't entirely-" He couldn't say another word. Not because she'd shushed him or told him to stop talking, but because she'd leaned up and kissed his cheek. In seconds flat, the boy was red down to his sternum, a barely audible squeak was his only further reply. For a few moments anyways. "Whu vzeh huwuh huh?"

She couldn't stop the giggle that came forth at his brain being broken. "I wanted to say 'thank you', but I wasn't sure that would cut it." Why was she still smiling like that? She never outright smiled!

Nodding hurriedly, his brain scrambling for anything resembling a reasonable reply, he just blurted out whatever he thought of. "Ah, well, you're welcome, Jiro." His shoulders were so fidgety he was practically wiggling where he stood. Then his mind latched onto something that would mercifully deviate this conversation. "Y-you mentioned you had to talk about something? On the phone?"

Almost immediately she deflated. "Right..." reaching into her pocket, she pulled out a small business card and handed it to him.

He blinked, reading it over. "...'Madam Kuro's lost emporium of forgotten treasures?" He looked back up at her, half expecting her to say it was a joke. She didn't. "This is for real?"

Jiro nodded, taking a seat on his bed and picking up one of his All Might figurines. "Himiko slipped that into my pocket, shortly before she knocked me out." She pointed to her very visible bruise. "She put it there only after she'd mentioned something about K's diary."

"She had one?" Deku sat in his chair, finally feeling as though he could relax a little.

Jiro shrugged. "First I've heard of it. I was going to go and read it but..." she bit at her lower lip,
"there's no mention of the place online. I couldn't find an official website or anything." Deku was about to suggest going to the address listed on the card when Jiro held up a silencing hand. "I already saw the address on the card and went there, it was closed."

Slowly nodding, Deku frowned. "This wasn't what you wanted to talk about, was it?"

A guilty look crossed her features. "I... I'm going after Himiko. If K's diary gives me any idea where she is, I have to go after her. Only thing is..."

He concluded the thought for her. "After today you're not sure if she's still the same girl."

She pushed one of her palms over her face, sliding her hand up into hair. "She tried to kill those Yakuza today, Green. Hell, I think one of them lost a hand." She shook her head, dejected and vulnerable. "The Himiko I knew was a tussler, sure, but she wasn't a killer."

"I wouldn't imagine so."

Jiro just looked so lost, like part of her world was collapsing in on itself. "I... will you come with me, tomorrow?" Her hand unconsciously squeezed around the Zune in her pocket. "It's bad timing, what with Eri and all, and..." she couldn't stop the smile from coming back, and Deku's cheeks went faintly red. "Seriously, Green; what the hell? I wasn't being serious back then." When his eyes went back to hers, any trace of nerves or embarrassment went away. Who knew that her looking so happy, despite everything else, would be so calming to him? "I was just upset, angry at myself for letting it get broken. You really didn't have to fix it."

What was that tone? It sounded so-no, don't think like that. Forcing his mind away from such musings, he went with the truth. "Because I wanted to." if it was possible for her to look happier, she did. "You're my best friend, you trusted me, forgave me after I..." he sheepishly gestured to the side of his neck, the implication obvious. "Then there's all those times you stood up for me, supported me when I was still dealing with Bakugo's... Bakugo."

Jiro laughed once. "Yeah, well, you know why I did that."

Now it was Deku's turn to smile, nervous as he was. "And you know you were the first to do that who wasn't..." he swallowed, fighting back the tears that threatened to emerge. my mom..."

She reached forward and squeezed his knee. "You don't have to say it."

That gesture, sentiment alone almost made him break down, but he managed not to. "You also placed a lot of faith in me during the USJ incident." She rubbed at the side of her head, remembering how the Nomu had tossed her and the others around. "Honestly, our friendship makes no sense to me." Concerned, blinking, she looked him in the eyes again. "From the worst possible first impression..."

Ah, so that's what he was thinking. "To a rather chaotic first few days of school, two weeks of not talking and then... everything that happened at the sport's festival."

"And the last two years of me being a ghost..."

She took one of his hands and made him stand up, when he had, she wrapped her arms around him. Hesitantly, he did the same in return. "You know, it was only really when I started going to UA that I'd begun to get used to carrying K around with me."

He squeezed her a little harder. "I didn't know that..."
She pressed her forehead against his shoulder. "Yeah, I took my sweet time to stop being miserable. Hell, I'm not even sure that I did, really. Considering the way I acted so early on."

Deku shrugged, petting at her hair, not really thinking about what he was doing. When had he gotten so... comfortable? "You had me fooled."

"Heh," she took a step back, their arms leaving each other. "I'll try not to make a habit of it."

He smiled, rubbing at the back of his neck. "To answer your question: I'll go with you... chasing after her might get us a lead into what happened with Eri too."

Gratefully, Jiro nodded. "I didn't think of that..." she self consciously cupped her elbows, hugging herself a little and feeling more than a bit selfish.

"So... what's the plan?" Deku said, quickly pulling her attention away such thoughts. "Are we going to meet up there? Is anyone else...?"

Jiro shrugged, tension rising again. "We could head in together, and I've only asked a few others to come with me. I told Momo, but I'm not sure she'll be able to come with us."

His turn to shrug, "what about Ashido or Kaminari?" She just handed him her phone. Scrolling through the messages he saw two very emphatic yeses, saying they'd meet her there. "Okay..." A thought occurred as he handed the phone back to her. "So, why'd you come to me? You already have them going with you."

She gave him a look, half out of annoyance and half out of... something. Her eyes shimmered slightly, lidded half-way, one corner of her lips was a light smile, a gentle inward crook of her eyebrows. What was that look called?

No one had ever looked at him like that before. "Because as much as I need my best friend with me, I need you to be there too." Somewhat less confidently she added, "and I know that if anything's likely stop you from reclusing away it's someone asking for help. Reckless, semi-martyr that you are."

Frowning a little, Deku put his hands in his pockets, shoulders bunching up again. "I'm not that careless with my well-being..."

"Yes you are." Jiro deadpanned, patting his shoulder lightly. "It's enough to make almost anyone who cares about you worry themselves sick sometimes."

"...I didn't think of that."

She shook her head, one corner of her lips smirking. "I know." Taking a moment to just breathe, she centered her thoughts and feelings. "So, do you want me to head out? We can just meet there if you want."

Deku shook his head, "you don't have to leave. We just... need to keep the volume down so Eri can sleep."

She nodded. "Cool, okay..." It was at that exact moment that she really looked at his room, and all the All Might memorabilia in it. "Heh, wow. I had no idea you were such an All Might geek." She walked over to his shelf -where his favorite figurines stood on display- and picked up, coincidentally, the rarest one.

He gulped, suddenly feeling very shy. "W-well, yeah. I've wanted to be a hero like him since I was
a kid." As she fiddled with the figurine her eyes turned to his, listening closely, it seemed. "I always thought he was coolest thing, saving people with that big smile on his face, like nothing could go wrong while he was there."

Taking a moment to consider his childhood, the chaotic upbringing he'd had, she slowly nodded. "Yeah, I can see why you'd look up to him." She turned the figurine over in her hands, taking a few moments to alter its pose into something more suitable of the man it was of, before putting it back on the shelf. "hey, can I ask you something?"

Nodding, he quietly spoke one word. "Sure."

Turning back to him, curiously, she tilted her head slightly to one side. "Why do you want to be a hero? I don't think you've ever really said."

Considering this a moment, Deku opened his mouth to talk when a knock sounded at the door to his room. Aizawa. "Are you spending the night?" A question directed at Jiro.

Taken aback, caught completely off guard, she faltered. "Um, well, I-?"

"yes or no."

She glared at him. "...If that's okay with Green." Deku, after a moment, nodded that it was.

Aizawa sighed. "so where are you sleeping? There's one bed, the couch is occupied and only one chair in that living room."

A question neither of them were prepared for. "Well," Deku scratched the back of his head, "I could just sleep on the floor or something. I have a sleeping bag-"

"What?" Jiro cut him off, "no way, this is your room. I'm not kicking you out of your bed."

"Well, I'm not just gonna make you sleep on the floor, that's rude."

"Not the point, this is your space. I'm not just barging in and intruding like that."

While the two of them argued Aizawa felt himself growing very tired. With a sigh, shaking his head he walked over to the easy chair and lay back in it, draping an arm over his face, hiding his eyes from the light.

It was only after several more minutes of back and forth that they realized they were alone again. Feeling very silly, they took a bit to compose themselves.

"Okay," said Jiro, "so you're not going to make me sleep on the floor." Deku shook his head. "And I'm definitely not going to the bitch that makes you do that." She added with crossed arms.

Deku blinked, "So... what's the solution?"

She gave him a mischievous smile, like she'd just almost assuredly guaranteed some sort of victory against him. "Neither of us do." His eyes flutter, face scrunching with confusion.

That... made no sense. "What are you talking about?"

Proudly, as if delivering the winning blow in some bout of combat, she declared, "We both sleep in the bed."

His entire body froze. "You're sure I can't just sleep on the floor?"
She shrugged. "If you do that, I'm doing that too."

"...okay, but why?"

For a moment, she just looked at him, a very neutral expression on her face. As she considered him and his words she noticed a definite level of apprehension in him. Like... he was afraid of her.

...I completely misread why he fixed the Zune, didn't I? Maybe he's really just... like that. Nodding, slightly saddened -for reasons she wasn't even completely aware of- she went to collect her purse from the living room. "Okay," her tone had not managed to obscure the emotions she was feeling. But why was she feeling them? "I'll...we'll do it your way."

His confusion rattled his brain like a rickety cage. Wait, how did-? Why-? "Wait." he reached out, taking hold of her shoulder and she -rather than jab him with her earlobes like he'd expected- just looked at him, raising an eyebrow. "...okay. We can... Okay I have no idea how to say it, but-"

She sighed, shaking her head with a closed eyed smirk. "That's... sweet but if you're not comfortable with sharing a bed, then I don't want to make you."

"I'm not uncomfortable with it." He said, almost blurtling the words out, "I just didn't want to, like, go along with that if you felt like you had to or something."

She almost laughed, shaking her head again. "Green... do I really seem like the type who'd go along with anything like that?"

Admittedly, he felt like he should have thought of that. "...no."

"Good," she continued walking to the living room, "back in a sec."

she went to the living room and fished into her purse. In a matter of moments she procured the items she sought: her medicine, or the emergency doses she kept with her, just in case she got stranded somewhere. Walking to the kitchen she put her mouth under the sink and took a long sip from the flowing water. It was only as she put the pills in her mouth and gulped them down that her thoughts started roaming again.

She'd reacted in a way that she earnestly hadn't expected to just then. It wasn't like her to get all mopey about being told that physical contact with another person had been denied her. Why it hurt as much as it had was rather perplexing. Turning off the water, wiping her lips dry, she slowly went back to Deku's room. He'd already switched into his pjs, a t-shirt and shorts made of very smooth fabric from the looks of it. At the sight of him she kicked herself inwardly.

Seeing the look on her face, he blinked. "What?"

"...I hadn't really planned on this." she said awkwardly. "Do you... have anything I could wear?"

Understanding her meaning, he nodded hurriedly. "Oh, yeah, sure." He pointed to his dresser. "Pretty much anything in the top-left drawer."

She nodded, hesitantly fishing through the drawer in question. She felt so silly, like a kid at a sleepover with a new friend or something.

...Or something.

Blushing, she hurried along trying to find- "Wait." She drew a shirt out of the drawer and beamed at it. In plain, black letters on red fabric it read if it requires pants, it's not happening and
laughed. "Oh my god, where did you get this?" She turned it around with the biggest smile, so he could read it. "I need one."

Deku took a moment to consider this. "Well... I don't know. I never wear it though." Another shrug. "If you like it you can have it."

Jiro hugged it to her chest. "Awesome! You're the best, Green." for many reasons, most of which he had shown tonight. She -ironically- grabbed a pair of shorts to go along with it and went to the bathroom to change.

In her absence Deku muttered to himself. "I'm really not..."

"I heard that."

He shook his head. "Well, I'm not." He took a seat on the bed, trying to think of exactly how this would work, sharing a bed with her.

"Lies." she declared, walking back into his room, folded clothes under her arm. "I invoke the tradition of making a liar swallow a thousand needles, unless you correct said slander." putting her clothes on his chair, she walked over to the bed and sat beside him.

She hadn't quite meant to sit so close to him...

He gulped, blushing a little, as he seemed to do quite frequently. "Um... that's a little extreme, isn't it?"

She shrugged. "Hey, if it makes you stop beating yourself up in the long, I don't know. No sense in being your own worst enemy." She scooted back, taking the side closest to the window, the wall. "Besides, you're not exactly doing me a small favor tomorrow. Who knows what it'll turn up..."

Deku eyed her with mild concern. "Um, are you sure you want that side of the bed?"

Again, she shrugged. "Why not?"

He blinked, raising an eyebrow at her for once. "...You're going to be sleeping next to a vampire and you want to be put between them and the wall?"

She looked at him as if he were the stupidest creature on the earth. "I'm going to sleep next to you."

She clarified. "Unless I start trying to kill friends of ours, I'm not the least bit concerned that you might hurt me."

Again, his eyes fluttered, his brain needing a second to just process what he was hearing. "I know you remember the night we met..."

She rolled her eyes. "For fuck's sake." She sat up, gripped his shoulders and pulled him down onto the mattress, earning a very undignified squeak from the boy. Slowly, waiting for his reaction, she snuggled up to him, staring him down defiantly. "Hmm... looks like I'm unscathed. Imagine that..."

He half suspected the sarcasm dripping from her voice was going to stain his pillowcase. "J-Jiro..."

he mumbled, squirming a little as he tried to get used to her having an arm over him.

"Idiot..." she whispered, forehead pressing against his shoulder. "Why do you act like you're a time bomb all the time?"

Gulping, noticing for the first time in two years just how warm his room was, Deku went with the
truth. Again, as he seemed to do quite frequently. "Because if I slip up I could seriously hurt or kill someone."

Sighing, Jiro sat back up. "Sit up for a sec."

She beckoned him as she gave the order, pivoting in place, going cross legged. When he'd complied, she scooted so close to him that their knees were touching. With one hand she reached up and brushed her hair as far away from her neck as she could, craning said neck inviting to one side as she held his gaze with violet eyes.

Between her proximity and her wordless invitation, his jaw fought against every fiber of self control he had. Only by forcing his eyes away from her did he manage to keep his insatiable thirst in check. "O-okay, can we not do whatever this is?"

"Only if you really don't want to."

He almost growled in frustration. "Why are you- what are you trying to prove here?"

Her reply was plain, brief and honest to a fault. "That I trust you."

A sentiment which gave him pause, pause enough to hold still for a moment. "...I know you trust me."

"Do you?"

Her challenge made him wince. Why was this... why did it feel so bad? "Yes, I do."

She hesitated for a moment, considering the young man sitting in the bed with her, so at war with himself. "Do you trust me?"

His eyes went back to hers, and she had to fight to keep her expression level. That look of hurt on him... "Of course."

"Good," she said levelly, "then we both know you won't hurt me. Because you know I wouldn't trust you if I couldn't."

He bit his lips. "but-"

She growled, "fine, you want proof? I'll tell you something next to no one knows about me."

"you- you don't have to-"

"I'm trans."

...huh?

For several seconds, Deku had no idea what to say, and let the silence in the air between them reign. Blinking he was slow to say anything. "Uh..."

Her cheeks reddened, squirming where she sat as she fought every impulse to just go hide. "I know you heard me." Resolute as she looked, all the while her brain was screaming incessantly: I'mafreakI'mafreakI'mafreakI'mafreakI'mafreakI'mafreakI'mafreakI'mafreakI'mafreak.

Unsure exactly what to say, Deku blinked a few times before he nodded, slowly. "...I know."

Her eyes went wide, spine into rigid alignment as she leaned as far away from him as she could.
"What? How!? I- I never-!"

Suddenly very aware of how scared she was, Deku held up both his hands, to illustrate he meant her no harm. "You told me." He said simply, quietly. "Two years ago, remember?" Slowly, very slowly, she seemed to relax, a question burning on her face.

Unable to think of anything else to say, he quoted her. "'What are you supposed to do when your hero loses the same fight as you, the one you can never stop fighting?' "

Several things dawned on her in that moment. One, that she had inadvertently given away her darkest secret to a person she'd only known for two weeks. Two, that one of her closest friends had known -without her being aware of it- that exact secret for years and kept it to himself. Three, that he seemed not to care at all.

"... I don't understand." At his unspoken question, she elaborated. "The only people who've ever not freaked out about that have been my parents, K, Himiko and Den." He raised an eyebrow, again, and she went on further still. "...I'm a freak."

"And I'm a monster." He shrugged. "You really think that would bother me? I drink people's blood just to stay alive." He smiled. "You're not a freak at all."

It was like he was talking about the weather. She closed her eyes tight and shook her head. "First of all, no you're not. Second, why wouldn't it?" She gestured to all of herself. "I'm..." she swallowed, and for the first time in her life, gave voice to something she'd long ago internalized.

A feeling that had begun to surface when it looked like he was scared of her, her body being close to his. "I'm not normal. I wasn't born normal. My skin, my body, it's only like this now because of modern medical science. Yeah it feels right to me but-" she winced, shifting uncomfortably where she sat. "but I'm not... I'm not. None of me is right, and It's never going to be." She looked at his eyes, his mismatched eyes, and saw a face of pure, heartfelt sympathy. "Like you said... 'it's like being on fire', your mind knows what you're supposed to be, but your skin wont let you live that. No matter what..." Why was it so hard not cry? She wasn't a crier, she didn't show weakness like that damn it.

Deku's voice was soft, quiet as he spoke. "You know that I know what that feels like... and you still think I'd consider you to be a freak?" When she looked back at him she saw him shaking his head. "Jiro... No." He reached out and squeezed her hand, a move that made her jump where she sat. "I don't care about any of that, aside from how much it hurts you. I hate that it hurts you, because you're... wonderful." her heart skipped a beat. "You're thoughtful, caring, give your friends every chance you can even if it could hurt you, one of the prettiest women I've ever seen, a fantastic hero and my best friend." Her heart thudded in her chest like a hammer, frantically against the bars of a cage. "So don't doubt for one second that-"

She put a finger to his lips, trembling as she held his gaze. "Say... that last part again?"

He blinked. "You're my best friend?"

Hurriedly, in short, swift motions, she shook her head. "A couple of parts before that."

His mind did it's best to consider everything he'd blurted out, everything he'd thought to say that would cheer her up and eventually realized what he'd said. Eyes wide, it was his turn to back away from her. "Ah, wait! I-! That was, I- I mean," he sighed, exasperatedly, "I just... think that is all." He laughed nervously. "I mean, look at you. You're-"
She reached passed him, fishing into the pockets of her clothes until she found it. Sitting back, she held the Zune between them. "Why?"

He gulped, audibly. "Y-you know why, I- I said it."

"Yeah, and I didn't believe you." He flinched, shoulders practically to his ears as he tried - and failed- not to look guilty. "Look... Green," she pushed a hand up over the skin of her face, fingers weaving into her hair. "I'll admit, I am all over the place tonight. I have been since Himiko knocked me out. I can't sit still, I'm a wreck for so many reasons right now and yes, I am actively looking for anything to keep me from thinking long enough to sleep." He seemed to relax, though it was replaced with worrisome confusion. "If... it's really what you said, okay but..." She gave him a look that almost fractured his poor, cold heart. "I gotta tell you... this was above and beyond the call for being nice to a friend."

For a long, long time, no one said a word. She just sat there and waited, while he sat there with no idea what to do.

Several thoughts warred for supremacy in his mind. It was selfish to say anything. It was wrong to say anything, especially right now. She'd reacted in a way he earnestly never would have expected to him calling her beautiful. She was fishing for him to say what she clearly already knew. She was spending the night and kicking her out at this hour by freaking her out with the truth was beyond not okay.

But that look in her eyes, searching him for something she never expected to hear, struck an all too familiar chord with him. He was born like that too, a quirkless freak. Not the same thing by any stretch, but he was born broken. Long, long ago, he'd given up on any thoughts of friendship, or other relationships. Who would want him, after all? His best friend had turned on him, turned into his bully for most of his life, literally scarring his flesh with malice. It was absurd to think anyone would ever look at him like that, the way she was now.

Maybe it was exactly that, that made him realize - even though she wouldn't feel the same way - that he had to say it. "I... I think I'm in love with you."

Surprise shook her head, shifting her features about in a rapid succession of movement; processing what she'd just heard. "What?"

Wincing, but holding his eyes to her's, he said it again. "I love you." Her eyes were a blur, blinking so many times so quickly he almost hadn't noticed. "For whatever that's worth." He sighed, unable to hold her gaze any longer as he squirmed where he sat. "Wasn't going to tell you... I really wasn't. I'm sorry if that's just confusing or stupid or makes you feel gross."

Her jaw dropped, lips parting slightly. "Izuku..." God, why did she want to cry again? Why was he thinking like that? Why couldn't he see himself the way she saw him?

He winced, blushing beet red as he did. "Look, I-" No, just end the conversation here. You've done enough damage. "Sorry..." he went to stand up, "you can stay and whatnot, I'll go-"

Her hand grabbed his shirt, holding him, stopping him from leaving. When he dared to look into her eyes again, he stopped breathing. "...Say it again?"

Another, very loud gulp. He knew what she meant. Her tone of voice had left it completely unmistakable. "I love you." *Any second now, she's going to lance me with her earlobes. Just wait...* 

Rather than anything so hostile, she put a hand on his cheek. "One more time?" she was smiling.
What the fuck, she was smiling!?

Brain, slow to register what was going on, computed the only appropriate response. He reached up and squeezed her hand, resting on his cheek. "I love you, Jiro."

She shook her head. "Kyoka," when she leaned forward, face looming very close to his, his eyes unconsciously started to close, "you idiot..." when their lips met he thought he might have been dreaming. When they kissed again, he was less convinced of that theory. The third time, he'd accepted it was real and wrapped his arms around her and kissed her back. When they finally broke apart, she nuzzled her face against his neck and whispered. "I love you too, Izuku."

His eyes went wide, freezing like a deer in headlights, body rigid.

Two years.

No one had said that to him in- ...no, someone already had, he just hadn't believed them.

Being able to believe it again, was... amazing.

Her face nuzzling him again, arms squeezing him, pulled him back to her. "I love you..." her voice trembled a little, but she refused to cry. "God dammit, I love you."

His arms squeezed her back, face pressing into the side of her head. "I'm sorry I stayed in hiding for so long..."

She sniffed. "Yeah... dummy." To show she hadn't really meant that, she nuzzled him again, kissing his cheek, before resting her forehead against the side of his face. "This is... not what I expected tonight to be."

Deku let out a single laugh. "Yeah, me neither..." he pet at her head again, his other hand at her back as he took a turn nuzzling her.

There, in each other's arms, they both slowly realized how exhausted they were. "Today was kinda stupid, huh?"

"Heh... yeah." he lay back, and she followed, lying on top of him. "Tomorrow might be just as stupid."

She smiled, "And I thought pessimism was against your nature."

He shrugged. "It's not exactly a recent development." His fingers busied themselves tangling in her hair, stroking at her scalp.

She half suspected she might have started purring, if she could. "Hey... Green?"

His turn to smile. "yes?"

"Thank you..." she squeezed him. For more than I can fit into one sentence.

He kissed the top of her head. "I think that's my line..."

Sleep, for once, was mercifully close by. Had it not been, they might not have drifted off just then.

"It might not be the right time, I might not be the right one,
But there's something about us I want to say,  
Cause there's something between us anyway...

I might not be the right one,  
It might not be the right time,  
But there's something about us I've got to do,  
Some kind of secret I will share with you...

I need you more than anything in my life,  
I want you more than anything in my life,  
I'll miss you more than anyone in my life,  
I love you more than anyone in my life..."
Metal, twisted and torn, sagging like the ribs of a desiccated corpse. Steel beams reduced to little more than ruin, even before the building they were meant to support had been completed. Bits of flesh hung in strips, tattered and bloody, dripping into the makings of the foundation below. Faint moon and starlight glistened off the red fluid, giving the dead flesh a vile sheer as it reflected from it. A craterous path lead to the bowels of the yet to be constructed building, a haunting rush of air continuously sounding from within. Almost like a beast, hiding away in its lair, awaiting the passing of those nearby.

The creature, lurking within, would not have its wish.

Cold night air made the exhalations, coming through the respirator, exit in visible, vapory mist. A crackling of electricity, shining red as it flickered in the night. A cold hand, wrapped around the face of a man dressed like a Native American unclenched its fingers. The limp, breathing body of the Hero fell to the ground and a voice cackled through a voice synthesizer.

"Society thanks you for your contributions, Native." Footsteps walked away from the unconscious hero, the feet in question were clad in worn dress shoes, fraying and with threadbare shoelaces. "As do I..." he held up a hand for his masked face to see, letting the red crackle of energy that was the sign of his quirk light up his vented, skull-like mask. "It will be useful in future endeavors." The fabric of his suit fluttered in the wind, the impossibly thin and decayed material draped over a body that was now rippling with strength, drive.

No longer a husk.

"Nomu?" He called out, as his young friend, Kurogiri, followed wordlessly, watching their surroundings carefully. After a bad step he clutched at his chest, hissing in pain, prompting his master to turn around, worriedly. "Still?"

Sheepishly, Kurogiri nodded. "I'll be fine sir."

Uncertain, the masked man nodded. "It's been three years, Kurogiri." He put a hand on his shoulder. "I'll say it again: if you seek treatment at a hospital, I will come save you once-"

"It's not worth the risk, sir." He said briskly, straightening up both his clothes and posture. "I'm fine."

Even beneath that helmet, it was plain to see the older man's worry. "Stay behind me." He gave his ward's shoulder a squeeze, stepping into the now damaged construction site. "Three years away, without anyone to tamper with its mind... I'm not sure what we'll find here."

Wordlessly, Kurogiri nodded and the two of them approached the source of that breathing sound.

"Nomu?" Master called again. "Can you hear me?" He motioned for Kurogiri to stand back, and the younger man complied. Cautiously, Master approached the crater and the breathing stopped. Kneeling by the crater, he murmured into the synthesizer. "You can..." Slowly, he extended a hand, reaching into the darkness. "It's okay, little one." There was a sharp gasp, a rustling down inside the hole. "I'm not here to hurt you." Peering from the darkness, slowly at first, was a pair of eyes, shimmering and black. "I'm here to bring you home."

Then, the 'Nomu' peeked from its hiding place, looking into the 'eyes' of the man who was trying to calm it. "Home?" Its face was nothing like what it used to be, save for the exposed brain. Master
almost balked at the sight of its lumbering body.

Slowly, Master nodded. "That's right." Taking its hand, he helped the 'Nomu' climb out of the hole. "Now come on, we have people looking for us. Bad people, we have to hurry."

The Nomu chuckled nervously. "So... we're going back to Overhaul?"

Master tilted his head to one side. "Who's that?"

Only the question was never answered. At that moment the sound of steel warping, bending from some unseen force split the night. Beams meant to uphold literal hundreds of tons of weight contorted and bent, lashing out like the tendrils of cephalopods, coiling around Master and into the Nomu's flesh. No sooner were they rendered helpless than the Nomu had started screaming.

"Master-" Kurogiri's words were cut off by sprawling tree-roots coiling around him, eliciting a scream of agony as the skin on his chest ripped open.

It was a rare occasion that anything managed to break that man's focus, much less to the degree that his quirk stopped functioning altogether. It had been literal years since Master had seen Kurogiri's true face, that hairless head perched at the end of his overly long neck.

Master hissed in rage. "Foolish." Even encased in impossibly heavy metal, he stood from where he knelt and turned around. "Attacking an enemy you know nothing about." He took stock of the Heroes gathered here before him. Kamui Woods, a hero whose body was comprised mostly of wood and bark, having the ability to 'grow' just about any part of himself out and ensnare opponents. Iron Breaker, a man who simply controlled any and all metals; why he didn't take a name relating to magnetism was beyond him, but Master was not a comic book reader.

Stepping forward were two heroes he'd taken notice of the last few years: Ingenium and Valentine. They seemed to be partners, of a sort, considering the frequency at which they were found together. "I'd say we know a good deal about you already." Valentine remarked, approaching him with folded arms. "Judging by the conversation we just overheard." Master Snarled, Valentine ignored him as she paced about in front of him. "You created this thing," she gestured to the 'Nomu' you're a known affiliate of Kurogiri," and she gestured to the nearly unconscious, hairless man in Kamui's grasp. "Which tells us you might be the one behind the attack on UA, three years ago; the attack meant to kill All Might and any number of innocent children, one that Kurogiri was a part of."

"Are you done?" Master growled, growing impatient.

"Not quite," she smiled wryly, condescension and contempt dripping from her voice, "we also now know this thing is the same monster that killed... Shigaraki was it?" Master's fingers curled into fists, gripping so tight his knuckles went white. "Which means that when this thing referred to its 'Sensei', it was talking about you, wasn't it?" Master, despite his anger, laughed. "Would you like to introduce yourself?"

"Ahhh..." Master sighed. "But it sounds like you already know who I am." He shrugged. "Would there be a point?"

Vanessa smirked. "From the stories I heard, I always took you for the boastful type... Honestly, I'm surprised you're even alive."

Again, Master shrugged. "Well, there's an old phrase about death and the rumors thereabouts," he took a step toward Valentine, "but you probably know it."

"Vanessa," Ingenium warned, "he's got over two tons of metal wrapped around him and he's not
even shaking."

Master gave an approving chuckle. "Oh, I'm sure she's aware, Iida." With a casual stretch of his back the metal encasing him groaned, earning startled looks from Kamui and Iron. "I'm going to give you all one chance: surrender and flee, before this turns violent."

"I'm afraid we can't do that." Said Valentine, putting a stern hand on the metal encasing Master. To her credit, she almost toppled him with her efforts. "You're going to be coming with us."

Master reared back his head, slowly taking in a deep breath. "Well... don't say I didn't try to be merciful." In one, fluid motion, the construction-grade steel snapped; flying off of him like shrapnel from a grenade.

Kamui was hit square in the chest, air knocked from his lungs as he was flung from the scene. Iron manage to stop the metal heading toward him, Ingenium leapt aside and Valentine swatted away what might have harmed her. For her efforts, she was grabbed by Master and thrown.

The distance she flew was, at that time, immeasurable as she soared beyond any of their sights.

Ingenium leapt into the air, the engines in his arms rocketing his fist right into the helmet over Master's head. While he did make the man stumble, he was immediately backhanded through a concrete wall with a nasty sounding crunch of metal. Speaking of the material, a veritable mountain of it soon found itself hurtling toward the villain, attempting to encase him completely. Chunks of it were punched aside, torn in half, crushed beneath the suited man's feet, but eventually he was entrapped by the mass of steel.

Iron Breaker stepped forward, grinning as he encased the man completely, compressing the metal down as much as possible; trying to seal him inside it.

His tactical error was met with a hand, bursting forth from the metal prison and grabbing his face. Fingers clawed at Master's hand, trying desperately to free himself from the villain's grasp. It was only seconds afterwords that a bright, crackling of red electricity lit up the night and the hero went lip in the other man's hand.

Then, slowly, the metal encasing Master became undone, hovering around him as if in orbit as he tossed the unconscious hero aside. "Such a powerful ability goes to waste on a man so foolish."

With a now idle hand, he brushed off one of his lapels with his fingers as the metal hurting the Nomu slipped from its flesh, leaving it writhing in pain on the ground as it slowly healed. Shaking his head with a sigh, he knelt beside the hero and patted his shoulder. "But don't worry; soon all of this will be... irrelevant." As Kamui tried to stand, groaning all the way to his feet, Master calmly approached him and then kicked him in the head.

Kamui woods wouldn't be getting up from that one anytime soon.

Turning back around, he saw Kurogiri lying on the ground and squeezing his bleeding ribs with both arms. "Kurogiri." He ran back to his side. "Talk to me, how bad is it?"

He couldn't answer. He was simply in too much pain.

"Don't worry, son." He went to scoop the man up in his arms. "It's going to be-"

At the sound of boots, crashing down onto the floor above Master's head, the ground shook. "Never fear..." Came a voice that made Master's blood boil. "because I am-" As master turned around, looking All Might in the eyes, the Hero's signature smile disappeared. "It... it can't be..."
Taking a defensive posture between Kurogiri and the Hero he hated above all others, Master cracked his knuckles. "All Might." His voice rang out like the guttural snarl of a mechanical beast.

The hero's breath trembled, his body slow to react to what could only be the truth: the ghost he'd been fearing would come back, had risen from the dead. "All For One..."

Fearing for its life, the Nomu leapt into the sky, going as far and fast away as it could. All for One's hand lurched toward All Might, metal flying toward the hero as a blood curdling roar split the night. All Might moved in a blur, his hands tearing the metal away from himself before any harm could be done, but All For One wasn't trying to hurt him; only to distract him.

Punching through the floor beneath All Might's feet, he grabbed his ankles and dragged him down through it. Hauling with all his strength, he brought the herculean man crashing down through layer after layer of concrete and rebar. Say all you like about All Might's durability and strength, put the man up against an enemy wielding anything sharp and his defenses slip away. Still, it would take more than a few gashes -no matter how deep they reached- to stop a man such as he. When he leapt back to his feet, his fist sent the other man through wall after wall, as his fist carried the villain in a semicircular arc.

All For One was eventually tossed from the man's fist, crashing to the ground in a rolling stop. When All Might went to lounge for him again, he merely extended a hand and rebar coiled from concrete around him, spearing into his arms and legs; like worms, attempting to tunnel through the earth.

"That's it..." All For One's voice shook with gleeful malice as the hero screamed, desperately trying to rip away the metal, burrowing into his skin. "Die. Die. Die!" All Might fell to the ground, his hands clutching at the coiling metal in vain as his screams split the night. "You tried to kill me all those years ago, after all those times I offered you a place by my side." All Might's screams grew weak, even as he managed to free one of his limbs from the unbelievable pain he was suffering. "We could have changed the world together," he brought a hand to man's throat squeezing tight, "made it better." As he stared into All Might's eyes, he grinned beneath his helmet. "But now... you won't be there to see it."

A slab of concrete the size of car crashed into All For One's head. For a moment, his vision went black, as he was carried through the air into a concrete wall. As he collided with it, his head was sandwiched between both masses of concrete as it shattered to dust, cracking his helmet open like an egg. Steam billowed forth from the cracks in the metal, and someone, roaring a battle cry, carried another slab of concrete through the air and brought it soaring down into that same, damaged helmet.

All For One's helmet shattered as he was flung into the ground.

Valentine landed on her feet, bringing her foot up into the now exposed face of the Villain. His body was sent through another wall, and he went crashing down to earth, his weakened body slow to move. With a groan, he forced his aching form to stand. To his relief, Valentine seemed to be having trouble standing.

As he climbed to his feet, he soon fell back over. Groaning, he clambered up again only to go face first into Valentine's fist, but he didn't fall. So Valentine hit him again. And again. And again. And again. Summoning what strength he could, he lashed out with his fist and sent her flying through several walls.

She only stopped when her body slid over several pieces of rebar with a bloody splatter through her abdomen.
Groaning, crying out weakly in pain Valentine reached down and began pulling herself free. Shaking his head in jerking motions, All For One stumbled about, trying to keep himself standing. When he regained his balance, he saw All Might was still on the ground; better still, there was a large, spear-tipped piece of metal hanging over him. With a grin, All For One reached forward with his hand.

But nothing happened.

"No, NO!" He tried and tried again, but it wasn't working. Iron Breaker's quirk, he'd been so damaged that he'd lost one of his abilities. Again! With a growl, his eyes narrowed, he turned and glared and Valentine. "Congratulations, you're officially the second person to wound me so much I've lost an ability." He went to lounge at her but a loud, glaring, piercing beeping caught his ears as his lungs seized up. Falling to his knees, hands clawing at his chest and throat, All For One started gagging.

Valentine had damaged his respirator, he couldn't breathe.

As the last piece of metal was torn from All Might's skin, Valentine peeled herself off of the metal that had impaled her. A piece of rebar was through aside, a giant of man started to stand even with his protesting limbs, Valentine was staggering toward him, Ingenium was getting up as well.

Looking up, his expression pained, Kurogiri saw the hopeless situation they were in. Three heroes, two of whom were practically unstoppable, were rising to apprehend his master. Turning to the man in question, he saw that he was struggling to even breathe.

"No," All Might breathed, staggering toward All For one, "it's you who wont be there to see that twisted future of yours."

He needed to hear nothing further.

Kurogiri reached his hand out, extending it toward All For One and summoned the last of his strength. As the purple portal appeared beneath, the weakened man's face lurched up to face him. "Goodbye, father."

With widened eyes, All For One reached for his last remaining child. "KURO-" and then he slipped into the portal, disappearing.

As Kurogiri slumped, fading into unconsciousness, All Might raced to him, shaking him. "No, NO! Wake up! WAKE AND TELL ME WHERE HE IS!"

"All Might..." Vanessa put a hand on his shoulder. Lowering his head, eyes shut tight, All Might felt reality sink in.

All For One was back. "Ingenium, all an ambulance..." He hoisted Kurogiri up, into his bleeding arms. "We need to get this man to talk, and tell us everything he knows about All For One, hopefully before it's too late..."

...

All For One fell into his dusty old room, landing with a crash, snapping several floorboards. Kurogiri had dropped him almost directly on top of his medical equipment: parts of the respirator among them. With strained, wheezing breath, All For One fumbled with his hands. Piece after piece was taken and discarded, tossed aside in his frantic efforts to repair the machine that kept him alive.
As the last part clicked into place, the beeping stopped and, his chest heaved as he gasped for breath, body too weakened to stand. He crumpled over, falling against the side of his bed as staring limply up at the ceiling as he panted through the machine. Slowly, slowly, his chest began to slow and the heaving of his lungs stopped.

There, lying against the side of his bed, staring up at the dimly lit ceiling with eyes he'd barely used since they'd grown back, he realized something: he was alone now.

A hand reached up, gripping the side of his bed and hauled him shakily to his feet. Reaching up, his other hand removed his broken helmet, what was left of it. With a bitter shake of his head, he threw it aside, reaching up to scratch at his short, swept back, black hair. Wearing little more than a vented collar, a mask over his mouth and nose, he staggered for the door. When he saw his reflection in the mirror, he stopped. Glowing red eyes, his suit was torn up so badly most of his body was laid bare. The numerous, jagged, ugly scars that covered his skin gave him a leathery appearance. But his strength was back, at least in part. Stripping the tattered cloth from his body, he stumbled to his closet and took stock of what he had. Growling, sighing, he reached for a sweatshirt and sweatpants, the only articles of clothing he really had left.

Zipping up his shirt, he staggered -limped really- from the room. "'Overhaul', hmmm?" His mechanical voice droned. "Let's just see if we can find out who that is..."

Memories are fragile things. Time will corrode them, a new experience might change the way you feel about them or you learn something that twists them all up. Worst thing about that is with happy memories, they're the most vulnerable to that kind of decay. Because it's always the bad memories that stick around. It's instinct, back before humans had really developed language. Walk through a valley, you're with a friend that day, you don't see the wolf waiting for you. One way or another, you survive but something goes wrong. Friend gets hurt, loses a limb maybe but one thing is certain: you don't forget that valley, and since you don't forget the valley you don't go back and get hurt by the wolf again.

If it keeps you safe, it stays in your head and there's no getting it out, no matter how much it hurts to keep it there.

So if something comes along that changes a happy memory, sours it into something bad, your brain holds to it. Keeps it that way to keep you safe, stop you from making the same mistake again. Even if that mistake is something so innocent and innocuous as just being happy for a few seconds.

He was in the kitchen, fingers strumming against the table. It was dark, raining outside, crayons and a drawing of All Might were on the table in front of him. In perfect detail, every scratch on the paper, mark of the wax even the crumbs left behind from when he'd put the crayons down too hard; it was all there. All of it.

His eyes went to the window, and he saw the neighborhood exactly as he'd seen it back then. Dark, save for the orange glow of the streetside lights, shining somehow brighter through the rain. Every drop on the window, trailing down and pitter-pattering against it was as clear as that night. The lights from outside cascading in, onto the floor and furniture. It was all so clear, too clear.

There was no reason to remember it all so perfectly.

...Everything except the sound. Hanging in the air was this... ringing, like a knife in his skull. Like a migraine but a thousand times worse.

As he sat there, squeezing his temples like he was trying to crack his own skull, an all too familiar
voice found him. "Why do you think you remember this so well?"

Deku looked up and saw none other but the long dead Shigaraki. "I don't-" he winced, both hands at the side of his head. "AH! I don't know!"

Shigaraki rolled his eyes, walking to open the cupboard above the sink. "It's gotta be something."

Breathing heavy, the ringing subsided and his head stopped splitting. "Why do I get the feeling that you know?"

The dead villain shrugged, giving a wry smile and pouring a glass of wine. "Because otherwise I wouldn't be here." He handed Deku the glass, watching as he went to take a sip. As the wine slid past his lips, the villain laughed. "Say whatever you want about people, they're creatures of habit. Just about nothing changes that." Licking his lips he pushed away from the sink and the table, pacing around with a lighthearted spring in his step. "Make Bakugo angry, things blow up." For effect, he balled his fingers into fists and then splayed them out with a flicking motion. Like fireworks. "All Might's catchphrase, Kyoka and that adorably awkward smile she has."


Shigaraki flashed a wild grin. "She said to call her Kyoka."

"She didn't say that to you." Folding one arm to his abdomen, Deku took another sip of the wine. Oh how familiar it tasted.

Again, the villain laughed. "My apologies." As he made it to the other side of the table, he made a mockery of a polite bow. "But then there's you, and your habit..."

Deku sighed, irritated, taking another sip with a shake of his head. "Didn't realize I had one."

Slowly, the villain raised a finger and pointed at the glass in his hand. This time, when he grinned, it made the Vampire feel ill. "You run." Deku raised an eyebrow, blinking slowly, and Shigaraki continued talking. "Ten years, you just put up with Bakugo's crap, clinging to memories clearly not coming back. Why?" Rhetorical question, as it turned out. "Because it was easier than standing up to him."

Deku struggled to wrap his mind around this concept. "That's not-"

Shigaraki cut him off. "Cling to this idea of being a hero, long after you were told it would never happen because that was easier."

"Can I just-"

It seemed they had a pattern in this dream. "Do you know how much of that you've had?" Shigaraki leaned on the back of the chair opposite of the hero, gesturing to the wine he was drinking. "Since... that night?"

Eyes narrowed, Deku was hesitant to reply. "What night?"

"You know the night." A Declaration met with a quiet, unyielding stare. "Some files and letters squirreled away with the alcohol, labeled 'remember: you are alone'?" For a moment, Deku thought he might remember but his head started splitting open, the ringing came back and it slipped away. "You don't even remember what you read, do you? Thought it was just... something you had to forget."
Impatiently, growing ever tired of this cryptic nonsense, Deku snapped. "Is there a reason we're doing this?"

Shigaraki rolled his eyes, tongue pushing at the corner of his lips as he shook his head. "You really don’t think this is relevant?" Shrugging, head still shaking, he looked at Deku as if he were a hopeless cause. "What do you think is gonna happen now that you're with her?" As the vampire blinked in confusion, the villain kept right on talking. "that it'll just... make you better? Fix everything? That's just more running away, placing the responsibility with someone else."

Deku growled, finally deciding he was fed up with this. "Responsibility for what?"

"Your pain." It took a moment for that to sink in with Deku, some of his anger fading as it did. "Two years you hid away, using other people's problems to forget about your own. Noble that you helped them, perhaps, but still; you can't deny what it was, when you were there for them."

He gulped. "So if I'm just 'running away' from myself again, using her to do it, you think it ends in her getting hurt?"

"I don't see an alternative."

"I'm just surprised you care." Deku stood up, walking to the window the glass door, that served as the sole barrier between him and the patio. He took a moment to look at the telescope, sitting there in the rain, on its tripod. Many a long night were once spent, staring up at the stars through that thing... "Or did you forget you were trying to get me to kill myself when you first started bothering me?"

Again, the dead villain rolled his eyes, sighing as he went to join the one present yet living. "Thought it was what you wanted."

Taking in a deep breath, Deku nodded as he slowly released it. "Thought I did..." he finished the wine in one gulp. "Then I got reminded why I was doing this in the first place." Uncomfortable standing next to Shigaraki, a man he felt responsible for killing, he went and reclaimed his seat.

The dead villain flashed a wicked grin. "Is that the real reason?"

Deku let out an agitated sigh. "Could you speak directly for once?"

Shigaraki splayed his arms out the side, palms upturned in a show of helplessness. "Can't. Rules of your brain are rather restricting like that." He twirled on his heel in mock merriment. "I can't say anything directly that you're not comfortable facing. Not unless you psyche... weakens." There was an unsettling thought... "But I can ask questions." He said, raising one finger to emphasis the importance of that particular point. "Why do you want to be a hero?"

Something that seemed to a recurring question now. "Why does that matter?"

"Isn't it the most important question?" Shigaraki almost snapped. "For the life of me, I can't find an optimistic answer." He flexed his fingers, knuckles cracking with every motion. "I imagine a different sort of life for you, somehow... You get All Might's quirk, right?" That sounded like blind wish fulfillment if ever he'd heard it, but he listened nonetheless. "Things go, more or less well for you. Sure, you screw up your arms a bit, get a few scars, but ultimately there's no real... consequence for you. No real repercussions for any crazy stunt you pull, it's all uphill." Sitting down, shrugging, almost as though he were irritated with the little fantasy he'd cooked up, Shigaraki had to compose himself for a second. "I think about that life and I don't see you
mentioning why you want to be a hero anywhere along the way."

Deku gave him a searching look. "I didn't know this bothered you so much."

"Because we don't talk about it." Shigaraki folded his arms, leaning back in the chair. "And it's the most important question, isn't it?" He gestured about the room. "A person throws themselves, day in and day out, into situations that could easily get them killed in order to protect strangers and for... no reason?" His hand clapped back down on his other arm. "No one alive is that much of a cardboard cutout."

"And you think this is because I 'run away'?" Deku almost laughed. "Lots of kids want to be heroes when they grow up."

Shigaraki rolled his eyes. "Yes, but even they have reasons. They think it's cool, awesome, want to win, want to have an excuse to hurt people and not get punished for it, they want the power to do whatever they want, the popularity, it's always something." Shigaraki sat forward, hands half gripping at the air not far from his face. "But you..." He bit his lower lip, smiling with lunacy as he shook his head for the umpteenth time. "You run from even that reason. As soon as you get distracted from answering the question you leap at it, not looking back to answer." Shigaraki looked him right in the eyes. "You run from the question, this night in particular, you drink yourself to sleep to avoid thinking, you run from anything that's too much for you to directly though any means at your disposal."

Rolling his eyes, Deku went for another sip of his wine. "You're jumping to a lot of conclusions..."

The villain shrugged. "I know I didn't refill your glass." His stopped midway, eyes peering at the maroon liquid. Funny, he didn't remember refilling it himself either... "and I also know you didn't have any to drink last night, before going to sleep, with so many prying eyes around." Slowly the villain stood up, his shadow appearing to loom over the entire room.

It was enough to make Deku nervous. "The timing on this is fishy... why now? Why right after Jiro and I...?"

Shigaraki gave another, unhinged smile. "Because you have a choice to make:" Palms facing the room in front of him, he slowly raised his arms until they were about midway between the height of his shoulders and hips. "Face your demons and grow up to deal with your own baggage, use her to do run from them, or..." he cackled. "End the relationship so she doesn't have to watch you wallow, or to protect her, whichever reason justifies it more."

His heart was beating quickly in his chest, hammering as though it wanted to break out of him. "I still don't know what you're getting at," Shigaraki's grin only widened, "whatever it is that you think ties this all together."

"Getting to that, thanks to your sobriety." Eyes widening, filled with malice, rage and glee, he hissed through his grinning teeth. "Think about it... it'll come to you." without so much as a word, the dead man's wrists burst open. Blood covered the walls, covered Deku and he fell onto the floor.

Suddenly he was in the bathroom, the lights were out, a dark figure stood just beside the tub, their wrists spouting crimson all over the room: the walls, the shower curtains, the mirror, sink, floor. As it sprayed, the vampire shielded his eyes. "NO!" He screamed, flailing about as he became drenched in blood, the sound of something metal clattering to the floor as he covered his face. Don't look, don't look! He felt so small, so powerless as he did nothing but sit there, arms flailing over his drenched face, screaming into the night.
Jiro was rather unpleasant roused from slumber by someone next to her thrashing in their sleep. With a growl she started to get up to tell off whoever it was, when she remembered everything that happened the previous night. With some embarrassment she only briefly recalled last night's conversation and eventual end before alarm took that emotion's place. Lying beside her, heart racing so fast she could hear it, was a still sleeping, violently twitching, Izuku Midoriya.

Her brain took a moment to really find any appropriate reaction. "Hey." She reached out, gently touching his face only for him to shake his head with enough force to push her away. "Hey!" she said, more afraid that before, putting gentle hands on his shoulders. "Green-" She murmured, as his eyes bolted open and he lurched away from her with a start. It was only because she caught him that he didn't fall off the bed. "Izuku, it's okay." His eyes were wide, partially hazed over, like he didn't realize where he was as his gaze searched about the room. His breathing was so fast and shallow as a hand gripped at her shoulder, he almost didn't even seem to see her. "Hey..." pulling him back into bed, one of her palms slowly went to his cheek, his eyes finding hers at long last. "you're okay..."

As the recognition settled into his features, breathing slowing a slight fraction a hand went and dragged down along his face, to hide behind. "I- I don't-"

"Shhh..." she cooed, wrapping her arms around him. "You're okay."

His voice shook, cracking a little. "I'm sorry..."

"No, no, it's okay." Her eyes and eyebrows scrunched as she pressed her face to the top of his head, pulling his face to her shoulder. "I'm here." Heart rate finally slowing along with his breath, the tension slowly left his body, hand that was on his face turning to squeeze her shoulder as his other arm went shakily around her. Reality was slow to return to both of them. Jiro was left wondering just how damaged this poor boy was, while Deku wondered just how much he'd frightened her. "Green," she murmured, petting at his hair, kissing the crown of his head, "what happened?"

No, no I'm not going to think about. Gulping back a wave of nausea, fighting back the images in his head, Deku squeezed her. "Just- just a nightmare."

She squeezed him back. "How often does this happen?" Her voice was quiet, soft as she tried her best to soothe away his lingering terror.

He gulped. "It's... frequent." His hand started stroking at her spine. "It's not every night but... close. Why am I telling her the truth? She doesn't need to know this, doesn't need to worry about me. He winced at his stupidity, leaping at the closest, easiest chance for comfort. It was enough to make him hate himself a little more.

And he wakes up from these alone? Every time? "No wonder you're always so exhausted..." She squeezed him harder. "Sleeping has to be terrifying."

He went to pull away from her, to end the embrace, and she complied. Even as her arms unfurled, she made sure to keep a hand on his shoulder, let him know he wasn't alone. "Look I-" he dragged another hand down his face, "I'm fine, I-"

"Yeah, bullshit..." she whispered, squeezing his shoulder and scooting just a tad closer, even as he looked further away. "How long has this been happening?"

Slowly, he began to realize she was not going to let him be alone with this. Sighing, eyes shutting tight, he exhaled and lowered his face to an awaiting palm. A long time ago, that was what she'd said. I'm here. You're not alone. I won't let you be. 'He just slowly shook his head. "I've always
had nightmares. They were never this bad until... couple years ago."

She chanced putting an arm around him, a gesture she was relieved not to see him run away from. Instead he leaned sideways into her embrace, letting her put her arms around him again. "I see..." The timing made sense, too much sense. "Are they... about her?"

He gulped, trying not to feel sick. "I- I don't know." He shook his head. "Most of them are pretty vague." Then, guilt set in from lying to her. "Actually... I spend a lot of them arguing with... Shigaraki."

Jiro blinked a few times, "The villain from the USJ incident?" He nodded into her arm. "Why him?"

That one, he really didn't know. "Guilt maybe," he shrugged, "guilt and not really knowing the guy. Makes it easy for my mind to... use him, talk through him, if that makes sense."

"It does." She squeezed him, petting at his shoulder, one of his hands rising to hold onto her elbow. "What do you argue about?"

There was really only one answer: "Me. My mistakes." He bit at his lower lip. "People I've failed, hurt. Done wrong." *Why am I even answering? This isn't making things easier on her.*

One of her hands found his face, as he kissed her palm she brought his head back to her shoulder, petting him soothingly. She could be here to comfort him as much as she wanted, but realistically there was only so much that would help. "Tell me you'll get into therapy."

He laughed through his nose, smiling. "I um... already am."

"Good..." She sighed, relieved she wouldn't have to convince him to go through with that. Grateful for the absence of that particular male stereotype in this situation. "Because I don't think cuddles are going to be much in the way of medicine."

He wrapped his arms around her. "No, but... they're nice."

Her turn to smile, giving him another squeeze. "Well, duh." He laughed, quietly against her shoulder. "Snuggles are always awesome. Didn't you know that?"

He shrugged. "I remember Kaminari telling me that when you're sleepy you're also cuddly."

She growled under her breath. "That damn traitor..."

For a while they just sat there like that, not really wanting to move, finding themselves entirely too comfortable where they were. Jiro made motions for them to lie back down when Deku was finally pulled from their trance. "Shouldn't we get up?"

"God no," Jiro looked over at the clock, confirming what she already knew, "It's barely two thirty in the morning." She said with a yawn, one that Deku couldn't help but mimic.

"Good point..." He murmured, settling back into the covers with her. When she wiggled her way up to him, face hiding against his chest, he felt almost alright. He felt... human, as they wrapped themselves up in each other once again. "Sorry for waking you up."

She squeezed him for the umpteenth time. "Just don't get mad if I do the same thing sometime, okay?" She did not sound pleased with herself as she said that.
Of course, the implication that this would not be a one-time thing took its sweet time settling into his brain. "Uhm, yeah." He said, kissing her forehead and earning a happy little hum from her. "I guess I should've figured you have nightmares too..." he murmured, eyes drifting closed.

She gave a sad, bitter little laugh. "Yeah... life is a bit of a meat grinder..." And, for the second time that night, they drifted off to sleep. "Sweet dreams, Izuku..." She mumbled as she began to drift off.

Feeling a bit warmer in his cheeks, Deku gulped, smiling a little bit. "Y-you too." He'd have to get used to her using his first name like that, wouldn't he?

The next time they'd awake, it wouldn't be quite as panic stricken, but scars like theirs were not ones to heal overnight; a fact that had Deku incredibly nervous. "Sweet dreams, Izuku."

That dream, that flash of a memory he'd had on his way home with Aizawa and Eri... He knew it meant something. Somehow, he got the feeling that figuring out what that something was would not be something that would go well for him or anyone around him.

Stirring of the woman in his arms, a light hum as she nestled closer to him in her sleep brought his mind away from such thoughts. Sighing away some of his stress, he held her close and tried to get comfortable.

Luckily, falling asleep next to someone so warm and snugly proved far easier than he would have thought.

"I was a born...
 a zombie...
 from mercury..."
Stendhal was sitting inside, sipping a cup of tea, massaging a nasty bruise on the left side of his jaw. From the feel of it, he was lucky he hadn't lost teeth. Beneath his gloves his knuckles had gone black, a couple of them had split open. As per the request of Ingenium, he hadn't used his sword in that last encounter. Petty larceny gone wrong, a lunatic with two contrary personalities convinced he was anyone but himself. It went from a fight with one man to a fight with 12 in seconds flat. If only he'd been faster on noticing that twelfth guy, he might not be tasting blood right now.

A strong hand clapped him on the back. "You did good today, Sten." Ingenium gave him a broad smile, earning an awkward looking one from the Dhampire. "If I didn't know any better I'd say strength and taking a beating were your quirk, not that paralysis thing you do." Ingenium gingerly sat down next to him, nursing some rather sore bruises himself.

In reply, Stendhal shrugged, fiddling with the spoon in his tea. "I find ways to put it to use."

Joining them at the table, Crimson Riot laughed. "You know, you don't always have to be so modest." reaching toward him, he nudged his shoulder. "You can brag once in a while, you were awesome!"

Though she was hesitant to join the conversation, Creati did offer what she could in the way of a polite smile. "It's somewhat expected, you know." She reached up, fingers nervously playing at her shoulder. "Your distant personality can be a little... unsettling sometimes." At least she'd finally said it.

His eyes slowly went to her. "I don't showboat." Taking another sip of his tea, he turned to the others in present company. "I'm here to do the real work of being a hero. Not soak in the benefits of an adoring public."

"This again?" Riot shook his head smiling. "Come on, you have to know that patrolling does good, stopping bad guys or no."

Stendhal rolled his eyes. "Name one way."

"Fear." Creati quietly put forward. "It helps with fear."

As Stendhal raised an eyebrow, looking at her like she'd lost her mind, Ingenium nodded. "That's absolutely right." Then Stendhal shifted that look to his mentor. Noticing this, Ingenium sighed. "People see us, out and about, acting like everything's okay, showing that heroes are present, and everyone stays calm."

Slow to blink as he was, the Dhampire did exactly so. "...okay."

Ingenium gave him a patient look. "What do people do when they're scared?"
Stendhal shrugged. "Riot, panic, hurt each other I guess."

"They get stupid." Riot added.

Understanding the direction the conversation was headed, Creati gave the correct answer. "They do whatever it takes to feel safe."

Pointing right at her, Ingenium nodded. "Bingo." Then he turned back to Stendhal. "See, the balance we keep is fragile." He held his hands a short distance apart, fingers outstretched, together and rigid. "We live in a world where just about anyone can be born with the potential to unleash incredible destruction at the drop of a hat." Slowly, Stendhal began to nod. "By making people feel safe, by keeping them from panicking, we stop more harm than we would if we simply fought villains all the time."

Adding to this conversation again, was Creati. "Otherwise we'd be overwhelmed trying to quell a panic that, really, we can't control or turn back once it escalates enough."

Licking the inside of his lips, Stendhal nodded. "Never thought of that."

Ingenium shrugged, holding up his glass to clink it against his student's. "That's why you're here to learn."

Stendhal laughed once, though his nose. Picking up his glass he said, "To keeping calm."

"And in doing so, may we keep others thusly." Creati added, raising her own glass.

Quietly, Ingenium concluded their little toast. "Hear, hear." And their glasses clinked together.

When their drinks were back on the table, Stendhal let out a long breath. "Still... there are some who I feel only live to serve that function of the job."

Riot blinked. "What do you mean?"

"Warriors with untested mettle." Stendhal tilted his head, quickly to one side as he licked his lips. "So called 'heroes' who would panic, falter from danger if it didn't suit them, drop all courage and turn tail." He shook his head. "With so many of us employed... well, I wonder just how many such pretenders there are. Those without true..." he had to look for the word. "A true..." he gave up. "My point is I don't-" he licked his lips again, leaning forward. "I look out there and I wonder just how many are content without actually being heroes. Sacrifice for others, do the right thing regardless of their own consequences. You know?"

He looked to them, hoping they understood, saw it his way. Riot awkwardly scratched at the side of his head at a total loss for words, Creati seemed nervous, avoiding looking him in the eye. Ingenium was the only one who held his gaze, though he did so with apparent remorse. "Not sure, kid." He shrugged. "but as you said with so many of us out there... I'd wager there's quite a few. 'Pretenders' as you put it."

Smirking darkly, though only for a moment, Stendhal gave his mentor a look. "So what do we do about them?"

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2252

A young man sat in a hovel of an apartment, an old rag polishing at one of the many knives he kept on his person. His combat vest had many sheathes upon it, and it had long been his goal to fill
them with knives. With this one, that goal was finally met.

"One day you'll have to explain the whole 'knife fixation, kiddo."

He looked up at his mentor, a man with a strong jawline and imposing build. A jagged scar ran the length of his face, starting above his right eyebrow and trailing below his left eye. Short dark hair, swept to one side went well with his thick eyebrows, hanging over eyes that seemed naturally perpetually open wide. With a shrug, the young man went with the truth. "I'm afraid of knives."

His mentor, flexing one of his wrists as he examined a pair of brass knuckles, gave a soundless laugh. "And so you collect them?"

The boy gave him a look. "I want the criminals we stop to know my fear." He held up the knife, holding it to the light. It didn't matter what shape the blade took, the make of it, the engravings -if there were any- any knife he looked at always served as a painful reminder of the day his mother died.

Slipping the brass knuckles over his fingers, his mentor pulled a simple black mask over his face. "Anyways, you about ready, kid?"

He nodded, sheathing the final knife. "Are the others already waiting for us?"

With a laugh, as the two of them got to their feet, the man clapped him on the back. "Always business with you, Kid. I admire that resolve, but you gotta learn to lighten up a little or you'll have a hell of a time making friends at some point."

Donning his own mask, metal angular with the impression of a relaxed smile laid into the metal, the young man shrugged. "Friends are not my concern."

With a tired, knowing smile, the older of the two let out a little sigh. "All you care about is being a hero. huh?"

"You know... I met a hero once. He was more like a monster, posing as a hero who killed without discretion." The young man walked to their front door, doing his best not to recall that particular night. "I want to be a real hero, whether the law sees me as such or not."

His mentor laughed again, as the two of them began making their way to the roof. "Well, you're certainly with the right group for that, Stendhal." and off they went.

It was less an apartment complex and more of a five star hotel. Many of the lights were on, though that was no indication of what number of ears may catch wind of their commotion soon to unfold. The neighborhood was lit to the point of mirroring daylight, the sheer number of screens hanging above the street, advertising all manner of thing. As the boy and his mentor arrived on the rooftop, the others gathered turned and gave them looks to varying degrees of disapproving.

"You're late." Said one man, dressed head to toe in a plastic body suit, an ancient, rubber gas-mask covering his face.

The mentor smiled. "No we're not, you know we intended to meet here a good ten minutes later than this." A hand on his hip, Stendhal looked away from the conversation, watching the streets. "Are Vigil and Sparky in place?"

The latex-clad man sighed. "Ready and awaiting word to act, unlike you when you were supposed to be."
As the others continued speaking, the teenager kept his eyes searching the roads below. No police cars in the immediate area, at least. "Seether, let Knuckleduster be." Said one woman, clad in something resembling police riot armor, sans the helmet. "Not everyone gets so paranoid about these things as you." She was easily the most laid back of the bunch, her shoulder-length black hair tied back just enough to keep her hair out of her face.

Stendhal had noted, when they'd first met, that she hadn't yet chosen her true name.

With a shake of his head, Seether reached into his pocket and procured a rather impressive lock-pick. "At any rate," he sighed, "the target is home. Shall we?"

Wordlessly, the quartet walked to the small hatch that served as roof access. After Seether had opened it, he gestured for the others to enter. "After you," said the lady, and Stendhal jumped right through, Knuckleduster not far behind.

He landed with the grace of an acrobat, his steps soundless against the floor. Peering up, he saw the hallway deserted. "Clear." he hissed under his breath, as Seether passed a large dufflebag from the roof and into Knuckleduster's hands.

"Word is, they use electronic locks with keycards here..." Said Knuckleduster, watching the frailest in their company make a smooth descent.

Seether scoffed. "And you think I am unaware?" From his pocket he procured the 'master key' to the building. "You should know by now you're working with a professional."

The lady shook her head, smiling bemusedly. "No, you clearly need to remind us of your time in that special forces outfit you worked with in the military."

Knuckleduster -suppressing a laugh- put a finger to his lips. "the job, people. Stick to the job."

With a roll of his eyes, Seether tossed the key to Stendhal. "As I recall, you're in the lead tonight."

The younger one caught the key, and wordlessly turned to the door, a knife at the ready. As he slid the key into the receptacle, he heard the lady mutter something. "Man of few words, this one..."

"Indeed," said Seether, "can we follow his example now? We risk detection with every-"

Again, Knuckleduster put a finger to his lips. "shhhhhhh." The lady half suspected Seether was going to burst a vein in rage at being so ironically hushed.

With a sigh, Stendhal entered the apartment. Glancing around, he saw not their target but an elaborate array of decorations. Antiques dating back the Japanese revolution and before; it was no surprise that many a katana hung from the walls. A Suit of ō-yoroi armor stood proud at the center of the living room, ancient war banners lined the walls, paintings depicting the war and culture of the Edo Period -including one Samurai with a cross-shaped scar, though Stendhal doubted it was historically accurate- hung near a bonsai plant, sitting by the windows.

Stendhal sneered. Clearly this man fancies himself a warrior, a man of honor. Only the young man knew better than that. He was about to turn toward the bedroom where he thought he heard snoring, when a display-case caught his eye. Blinking, he stepped toward it. It was... beautiful.

A sword was housed within, its blade shimmering where the light caught it, a hilt of ivory white but bearing not a hilt guard. Beneath the blade, rested a plaque:

"Sword of Heaven; my blade forged from metal fallen from the sky."
He acknowledged the weapon with an approving nod, but resumed his path to the man's room. Approaching the bed, where the man soundly slept he brought his knife to the man's cheek. With a flick of his wrist, blood was drawn and the man was springing to his feet. Rather than retaliate or defend himself, Stendhal's long tongue slid to his blade and lapped up the blood. With an undignified squawk, the man went falling to the floor. When his head hit the ground, he was out like a light once again.

"Done." Stendhal said aloud, and his companions entered the home, closing the door behind them.

The lady nodded with some respect. "He's giving you a run for your money now too, Knuckles." She elbowed the imposing man in the ribs, as Seether set to work opening the dufflebag.

"Cut the chatter." His voice hissed through the gas-mask. "We have a stage to set."

Meanwhile, Knuckleduster patted his ward on the shoulder, grabbing their target by the throat. "It's good work, kid."

Stendhal nodded. "Time for him to feel some fear." Grabbing the man's legs, the pair of them hoisted the incapacitated one off the floor.

They carried the man to his dining room, the table now draped in plastic. As they set him down, using duct tape to strap him to it, the other two set about covering the rest of the apartment in plastic tarps.

"Exactly how bloody are we planning for this to be?" The lady murmured, making sure the area was air-tight sealed, so as not to leave evidence behind.

Seether sighed, giving up on them doing this with any modicum of professionalism. "That's up to Stendhal."

Beneath his mask, Stendhal grinned. "Do we have the evidence?" Reaching into the bag, Knuckleduster handed Stendhal a CD, some photographs, and reports from a mortuary. "Excellent. The player, please." Once the DVD-player was handed to him, Stendhal made quick work setting it up. Then, once that was attended to, he taped the various reports and photographs around the room. Slipping the DVD into the slot, he set it to repeat the disk's contents.

The recording was a video expunged from police records, both by bribe and theft. It was of a man clad in samurai armor, savagely beating a small child until he stopped moving. Then, seeing he'd been caught on film, he rushed down the camera man.

It ended abruptly there.

With a snarl, Stendhal grabbed the table and put it upright, so the man strapped to it was forced to look him levelly in the eye. "Wake up." His voice growled. When the man refused to rouse, he thrust his knife through the man's hand. "I said wake up, filth!" The tape over the man's mouth was all that kept him from screaming. "Good." Rather than remove the blade, he left it where it was, taking a step back from the man. Putting a finger to his temple, he concentrated. Vigil, are you seeing us?

A vague presence seemed to fill the room, a faint outline of a ghostly woman drifting toward them. Present! Chirped her echoey voice.

Stendhal smiled. "Tell me what he's thinking, when he thinks something worth saying." The 'ghost' gave a thumbs up and a giggle, and Stendhal turned his more fiery attentions back to their captive. "Shogun," he hissed, "sword hero, a man whose blades could slice the earth in two." He held up a
newspaper article, showing the 'Samurai' in a heated battle with an enormous robot, his sword coursing with energy provided by his quirk. "A man who fights with tinfoil swords, making them as lethal as any child's imagination ever could." He almost smiled. "It'd almost be nostalgic if you didn't moonlight as a child killer."

Vigil turned to Shogun, after a look of disgust washed over her face, she turned to Stendhal. Well... his first thought was a rather vivid and fond memory of- she gagged. of feeding a child to a shark. Knuckleduster, with a furious tilt of his head and jaw-muscles bulging and teeth bared-pulled his brassknuckled hand back and gave the 'hero' a few broken ribs. His next thought was 'how dare you speak such lies! The world will never vindicate you or what you do to me!' Stendhal actually laughed, holding the DVD player to the man's face. "Oh really?" Then he placed it gently aside, grabbing the knife in the man's hand and wiggling it, twisting it. As the man screamed he cooed in a mock attempt to soothe him. "Shh sh sh sh..." he trailed a hand down the side of the man's face, before ripping the blade out of his hand with a savage twist. "One can never be too sure of anything, can they?"

Vigil tilted her head back to Shogun, then she burst out laughing. He- he's actually trying to bribe us! As her 'ghost-body' floated in the air, she doubled over laughing uncontrollably as she spun in the air.

Knuckleduster sighed. "Vigil, please quiet down or leave if you're going to keep making that noise, we'll radio you when we're done here." And the girl did her best to quiet herself.

Shaking his head, jabbing fingers painfully at Shogun's eyes, rolling them around the fragile orbs, Stendhal hissed. "There isn't enough money in the world to stop me from what I'm about to do." Blood trickled out of the man's eyesockets, though his eyes were far from destroyed. "This is justice, retribution for those children, and you will have many many a long year left broken and alive to feel their pain." Stepping aside, he turned his head to the lady. "Twist?" She blinked, pointing to herself and Stendhal nodded. "Break every bone he ever broke on those kids. Seether?" The man in the gas-mask nodded. "Keep the smelling salts ready if he passes out. When Twist is done, ugly up his face. Make his mask a necessity rather than a symbol of justice."

Now Vigil almost looked mortified. Almost. He's... he's begging for you to just kill him. At this, Stendhal felt his rage well up inside him. Tearing off his mask, he wheeled about, bringing his eyes millimeters from Shogun's, he pried open the man's bleeding eyes. "I. Will not. Kill you." His teeth bared, lips quivering into a snarl. "You don't get to get way from pain, from vengeance so easily! You. Will. Suffer." Forcing Shogun's eyes closed again, he slid his mask back over his face.

Then, as 'Twist' raised her hand, a barely visible 'wave' of air radiated toward the 'hero'. When it touched him, his bones began to snap, taking shapes that were far from natural, jutting from their proper place, piecing his skin. When his screaming died down, she'd do it again. And again. And again. Again. Again. Again. Again.

When Stendhal motioned for Seether to step forward, a most unsettling thing happened: Shogun, through his broken nose, began to laugh. Blinking, confused, Vigil slowly began voice the source of his reaction. He says you're the same as him. Gritting his teeth, Stendhal put a hand on Seether's shoulder, effectively halting his advance. 'That look in your eyes, you have the same demons as me; a need to hurt those you see as deserving.' Stendhal half suspected one of his teeth might be cracking under the pressures of his jaw. 'You have a dark passenger, just like me.'
Then, his rage reaching a breaking point, Stendhal grinned. "Use both hands, Seether." With a shrug, the man stepped forward and removed his gloves. Once discarded to the floor away from the blood pooling upon the plastic covering said floor- he put both hands on the man's face.

Seething: essentially, boiling. In this case, any skin or flesh that Seether touches boils, bubbling and bursting as though exposed to extreme heat. It was something of a miracle that Shogun had a face to speak of, once Seether withdrew his hands.

Re-brandishing his knife, Stendhal knelt before the incapacitated hero and set to carving in man's skin, on his chest. "Radio Sparky, tell him we're done."

A hand to his pocket, Knuckleduster procured a radio. "You there, Sparks? How we lookin?"

Some miles away, sitting in front of several computers, was a twenty year old man with a very, very pale complexion. "Everything looks good from here." he said sagely, with a matching nod. "Yes... this is a fertile land and we will thrive," in his hands were two, little, plastic dinosaurs. One was an herbivore -stegosaurus, for those who care- and the other a carnivore - Ceratosaurus. "We will rule over all this land," said the stegosaurus, "and we will call it..." Sparky stopped, having lost his train of thought. "...this land."

Then came time for the sinister, gravely sounding Carnivore to speak. "I think we should call it."

"Sparky," said a voice on the radio, "please stop reciting dialogue form centuries old tv and do what we pay you to."

Befuddled, Sparky blinked. "Um... you guys don't pay me." After a thoughtful pause. "Am I supposed to be getting paid?"

"Isn't this work reward enough?" Knuckleduster's voice quipped.

Sparky shrugged. "I 'spose it will be once I hack his bank accounts and gift it off the charity," most of it, he thought with a smirk, "provided you guys remember to bring me his computer, or phone, or wallet at least." Setting aside his toys he set to work, flipping switches and pressing the various keys of his elaborate desktop setup. "Surprised you caught that reference."

"Can this wait?" Stendhal cut in, "we have a naked man to hang out of a thirty story window and I'd like not to be distracted."

Joining this request, unsurprisingly, was Seether. "I'll second that."

"Would you two shut up about shutting up?" Twist chimed in. "A few minutes ago Sten was doing his whole 'voice of justice unfulfilled thing' and he ran his mouth enough to fill a book."

Sparky's face noted that he agreed. "She's got a point."

"Yes," Stendhal hissed, straining as he tied a length of rope around the table their target was tied to, "but that was not done with an open window or while doing delicate work."

Again, Sparky's face made much the same expression. "He's got a point."

Knuckleduster laughed, "what did I just say about quoting old tv?"

Indignant with surprise, and at the conversation continuing to carry on, Twist remarked, "the hell was he quoting that time?"
"Actually..." Stendhal mused, after a moment, "I think that was Detective Bullock from Gotha-"

It was at that exact moment that an alarm started going off in the building.


Clearing his throat, Knuckleduster flexed his wrists, readying for whatever combat was impending. "Sparky..." His tone was worried.

Biting his upper lip, Sparky acknowledged there wasn't much he could do. "Silencing that alarm might get more than attention from our local boys-in-blue, folks." He switched on another monitor and a nearby police-scanner. "Way it looks right now, you have maybe six minutes to anscray before running afoul of the law."

With a sigh, the four inside the building hoisted their unconscious target out the window and began lowering him down. "Vigil, are the cameras in place?"

*Ready and waitin!* She chirped.

"Sparky?"

With the stoke of a few keys, the feeds clicked on. "And cue one city-wide spectacle of public humiliation." Across all of Tokyo, every screen overlooking the streets -and some that didn't- showed either the video of Shogun's brutal, child violence, the pictures and documents detailing his victims and their suffering, or the man hanging out of his own apartment window. Carved in bloody kanji was one symbol: 偽者: Nisemono, meaning 'pretender'. With a look of revulsion, he added. "And me loosing my appetite..."

"Don't worry, husband." Twist smiled into her radio. "I'm sure you'll be back to ravenous as soon as the job is done."

Only he wasn't so sure. "There's reason aplenty I stay away from the hands-on of what we do, sweetie." Gagging, turning that particular monitor away from himself, he shuddered. "This'd be one of em."

With a roll of his eyes, Stendhal stalked over to the display-case and broke it open. The police were already on their way, making more noise was hardly a problem. Picking up the Sword of Heaven, he pocketed the plaque. Slinging the scabbard over his shoulder he sheathed it, grabbing another sword from the wall and mounting that scabbard on his belt. "Best route out of here, Sparky?"

"Workin on it," his fingers worked furiously at the keys, "helicopter's been dispatched to the roof, can't go back that way." As if on cue, the sounds of the blades rotating caught their collective ears. "And... from the looks of it, there's a near platoon of em amassing at the ground level, but that looks to be just a perimeter." It was as he said, none of the gathered police made any motions to go inside the building. "Looks like... sewer access is your best bet."

Twist had to gulp back nausea. "No chance we can just... fight our way though the cops?"

Sparky had to suppress a laugh. "Remember that feeling when you guys start 'talking shop' over dinner."

Throwing up his arms in defeat, Seether stomped from the room. "Hopeless, unprofessional, reckless stupidity! That's what I work with now!"

Knuckleduster patter the man's shoulder. "Don't worry," he handed him his gloves, "when we make
it out of here free and clear, at least you won't be griping like that from a jail cell."

Then, picking up the pace, the four of them ran as quickly as they could toward the stairwell. When the door closed behind them, Stendhal smashed the terminal, leaving it permanently closed.

**SLAM.**

At the sound of the door wrenching open, Stendhal bolted upright, police reports, loose papers and folders falling to the ground. In his lurching to an upright position, he'd kicked enough wind to send the missing person's reports all over the floor.

"Good job kid," the police sergeant growled, "hope you're picking that up."

**Tuesday, July 24th, 2255**

Nodding, Stendhal stood up through a fit of coughing, trying to keep the contents of his lungs from ejecting all over said papers. "It's like you said," he managed, "Nothing in here about Eri."

Face flush with impatience, the officer half shrugged-half nodded. "Maybe next time you'll listen, huh kid?"

It was Stendhal could do not to growl. "Which leads me to conclude it might have been misfiled."

The sergeant tilted his back with a groan. "Are there more records? Archives, perhaps?"

"No," the sergeant groaned, "go home, you've been here all friggin night and I'm tired of baby sitting the junior hero."

This time, Stendhal glared openly. "I am trying to determine what level of harm or negligence has been inflicted upon a five-year-old child, officer." Rolling his eyes, the sergeant leaned against the door, letting the kid's little rant run its course. "If there is even a chance that you people made a mistake to allow this to happen, I need to know so I can corre-" his lungs snuck up on him, and he nearly fell the floor from the violent fit they fell into.

Blinking in surprise, eyeing the kid up and down though not even twitching at any possible movement to go help him, the officer almost looked concerned. "You alright, Kid?"

Once the coughing subsided, the dhampire slowly nodded, wiping at his lips. "Have a good night, sergeant."

Standing in his way, the sergeant gave him a look. "Not so fast, kid. Where're you going?"

Stendhal's lips narrowed, eyes piercing into those of the sergeant. "To continue my investigation elsewhere."

The sergeant sighed. "Hot damn you're persistent..." He shook his head, "fine. Give me a few minutes to grab some coffee, I'll be outside in a bit."

The dhampire was now very confused. "You're... accompanying me?"

"Can't have you runnin off alone, not at this hour." As the two of them left the room, Stendhal had to suppress another growl. *Any excuse to avoid paperwork, officer?* "I'll grab my gear, meet ya outside."

Nodding, Stendhal covered his mouth as he coughed, staggering his way to the front steps of the precinct. Looking to horizon -or what passed for it, considering he couldn't see the horizon past all
the buildings- he observed that the sun was barely present. He would have laughed, had he the lung
capacity to do so. It was a new day, and he'd yet to take even a single dose of his medicine. Not
that he had it, having left the hospital before it could be placed in his possession. Holding a hand to
his chest with closed eyes, he forced his labored breathing to equalize, to adjust to presence of the
fluids now weighing them down.

Had he noticed the approach of a pair of classmates, he might have postponed such activity. "What
happened to you?" Said a familiar girl's voice.

Eyes darting open, he turned and saw Uravity and... 'Shoto', as he wished to be called, although
Stendhal didn't feel comfortable using his first name. "Asthma flare up, should be temporary." Standing
up, he did everything he could to hide the weakness of his limbs. "What brings you here at this hour."

Looking him up and down with notable concern, Shoto was the first to reply. "We heard you were
looking into Eri's situation." With a small frown, he put his hands in his pockets.

Uravity, meanwhile balled up her hands and held them up, level with her shoulders in a display of
resolve; despite the obvious worry on her face. "We want to help you find out what happened!"
Her smile, though bright as ever, was no more effective at masking her emotions than previous
efforts.

Stendhal gave them a halfhearted smile. "As much as I appreciate that, it may be best that you don't
come along."

Shoto gave him a curious look. "Are you expecting trouble?"

The dhampire shook his head. "Not exactly, but..." he frowned, rubbing the back of his neck. "Let's
just say I'd rather not give you a second secret to have to keep."

Now Uravity was worried for two reasons, as her footing shifting uncomfortably showed. "What
are you planning to do?"

Again, Stendhal smiled. "Visiting an old friend." flexing his wrists, snapping away some of the
stiffness brought by exhaustion, he started walking down the steps. Hands in his pockets, willing
his mind and body to remain functioning, he wasn't aware of the nervous look his classmates
exchanged, shortly before they exchanged a nod. It was only when they started following him, that
he became aware of their continued presence.

Tch... well, they're not so easily frightened off, are they? He shook his head, as the police Sergeant
tried to follow them without spilling his coffee.

Just like old times, with that old group of his...

Rapid gunfire hailed down at them from the top floor; leaping through the nearby doorway was all
they could do to avoid it. Even so, a bullet managed to pierce straight through Seether's calf. "GOD
DAMMIT!" He screamed, lurching against a wall and clutching at his leg.

Cursing under his breath, Knuckleduster slammed the door to the stairwell. Taking a crowbar from
the dufflebag, he wedged it though the handle, striking one end of it with his palm, anchoring it
into the wall. "Sparky," he hissed into his radio, "we need a way down that's not the stairwell!"
"Working on it," in seconds he'd brought up an emergency evacuation plan, "okay... Vigil, I need you to tell me where they are."

Her incorporeal form flew through every wall in her path, until she was outside the building. Looking up to the top floor and counting, she closed her eyes up tight and concentrated. They're on the 25th floor, the 25th!

With a smile, Sparky started typing at his keyboard. "Thank you kindly. Anything you can do to slow down the cops would be appreciated."

Wanna bet they're afraid of ghosts?

Sparky couldn't help but grin. "You're on." looking back to the floor plan, he searched for where his friends were currently stranded. "Okay... head down the longer part of the corridor and hang a left, should be an elevator door about ten feet on."

"You two are our guardian angels." Knuckleduster pocketed his radio, pulling a can of ammonia from his pocket along with a few bandages. He quickly, tightly wrapped up his ward's bleeding leg then sprayed down every drop with the contents of the can; no DNA evidence would be found there.

"What the hell are you doing?!" Seether tried to push the man away. "RUN!"

Knuckleduster batted his hands aside, pulling the other man's arm over his shoulder. "Ain't in the business of leavin allies behind." and he began to haul the man down the halls. "Twist, watch our tail."

Turning round, both her palms raised she began to backpedal. "Is that just my name now, boss?"

"For now!" He strained, hauling their wounded ally toward the elevator. "Can always change it later!"

Ahead of them all, Stendhal snarled. "We don't hurt police!"

"We also don't get killed by them!" Knuckleduster barked. "They'll survive a few broken legs!"

The teenager scowled, shaking his head as he clenched his hands into fists. Already at the elevator, listening intently, Stendhal drew the sword on his hip. "Elevator should be clear, once arrived."

A few seconds later, the doors slid open and the police blasted their way through the stairwell door. As Twist rounded the bend, sprinting for the elevator, Knuckleduster hauled both he and Seether through the doors. Twist barely made it inside in time, narrowly avoiding the spray of bullets that chased after her. "A little trigger happy for cops..."

Over the radio, Sparky answered. "Have orders to shoot on sight. No surprise our target had friends with some pull."

Seether laughed. "And now they have us trapped in a metal box..." he shook his head. "I want out of this elevator please. If they have orders to kill us, they might just sever the cable and let gravity do the work."

At his desk, Sparky blinked. "Wait..."

Twist knew that tone. "Hon? Please first run by us whatever lunatic idea you have."
Starting at her words, his hands set to work. "Ah, well.." he murmured, "yall want down to the
ground floor before that happens, right?" with a few more strokes of the keys, he was ready to
enact his plan. "Want me to disable the safeties? Should speed you up rightly."

"By how much?" Knuckleduster said into his radio.

Actually, he wasn't sure about that. "...enough." he said, lacking any and all confidence.

Seether groaned out a sigh. "Fuck me..."

A ghostly face peered down at them from the elevator's roof. They stopped being scared of me.
What should I do?

Stendhal pointed up. "If they start, trying to cut down the elevator, tell us." With a smile, Vigil
vanished back the way she came. "One hell of a quirk..."

Twist wasn't so quick to agree. "She's been in a coma since she was a child, when it first activated."
Stendhal turned his face right toward her, his shoulders a little limp. "She cant figure out how to
shut it off, has no idea where her body or family is now."

His heart felt a little heavy. "I... I- didn't-"

Twist reached out and squeezed his shoulder. "No harm no foul 'less she says so." Hesitantly, he
conceded with a nod and she withdrew her hand.

Guys? Came Vigil's voice, they're doing it.

"Damn it, not now!" Sparky hissed, "just four more floors to-" with a sickening lurch, the elevator
began to drop.

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**Tuesday, July 24th, 2255**

Their travels brought them a dingy, decrepit section of town. To a nightclub, as life would have it,
the exact nature of it somewhat unknown to their leader.

"This... is where your friend is?" Uravity fiddled with her fingers. "It.. erm, it looks like a... like a-

"Strip club." Shoto said for her, a hand pushing at his face. "Are you playing a joke on us?"

Sighing the dhampire shook his head. "I wish I were, but realx: it's not a strip club." First to venture
forward, he somewhat nervously added, "Still... don't be surprised if folks aren't wearing much
once inside."

The Sergeant raised an eyebrow. "...you kids even old enough to go in there?"

"Yes." Said both Shoto and Stendhal. Uravity was not so vocal, opting instead to keep fussing at
her own fingers.

It's worth noting that both boys were lying, and that when they exchanged a quiet glance, they
silently agreed not to rat the other out.

Shaking his head and rolling his eyes, the officer sighed. "Right..." he said in total disbelief, "I'll
just have to insist that we turn ba-"

Ignoring him, Stendhal offered the back of his hand to the bouncer. "Under twenty one, here to
see... her."

Nodding, the bouncer stamped the back of his hand with black ink. "Cause no trouble."

"Hey," the sergeant barked, his state of perpetual annoyance wearing thin on Stendhal. "I'm talking to you! We're turning. back!"

Leaning forward, Stendhal whispered to the bouncer. "Discounting the officer, the others are with me,"

Again, the bouncer nodded. "Hands please." and Stendhal went inside.

As the other two nervously followed after him, the Sergeant's lip quivered in anger. "Stop! Right now!" only the bouncer stood between him and the entrance. "Get out of my way!"

"No." His deep, rumbling voice barely even rose, his eyes half drooped closed from boredom.

The police officer glared at him. "You're disrupting police business."

The bouncer smiled. "Gotta warrant?"

Now very much past the point where they could hear the conversation outside, the three teenagers were attempting to navigate the chaos inside. Neon dance lights flickered about, people were dancing on stages over loud, loud music. Drinks were being spilled, most of them alcohol, patrons clad in very, very little; a few were wearing little more than strategically place cloth and mesh, to varying degrees of easy-to-see through. Some had simply forgone wearing shirts altogether.

Blushing and averting his eyes from a rather scantily clad woman, Shoto muttered to their -at the moment- leader. "just... who are we here to see?" The poor boy felt entirely out of his element.

Hiding behind his arm, as he made a show of scratching at his shoulder, bunching up said shoulders to better obscure said face.

Stendhal merely repeated his earlier statement. "An old friend."

Uravity, meanwhile, was attracting all manner of attention thanks to her hero costume. A small group of younger men -and women- had slowly been noticing her and, by the time their group reached the bar, several of them had approached her. "Hey there," said the bravest among them, earning a raised eyebrow from Stendhal, "What brings you here?"

Very aware of how form fitting the rather well-built man's shirt was, Uravity immediately lost her proverbial footing. "Ah um," she couldn't look him in the eyes, cheeks going pink, "n-nothing."

"Nothing?" he smiled, tilting his head to one side, hoping to recapture her attention. She was not compliant. "Well... then I'm glad 'nothing' brought you here." His tone of voice left little wondering as to whether or not he was flirting with her. "What's your name?"

Growling and sighing, Stendhal turned to Shoto. "Go act like her boyfriend." Turning his eyes to the crowd, he searched for faces that might not prove to be as friendly as the boy presently speaking to her. "Before someone less amiable approaches her." Then he went back to walking toward the bar.

Shoto's gaze shot back and forth between his two classmates. "But- how am I supposed to-"

"Just put your arm around her or something! We're on the clock here." And Stendhal disappeared from his sight, into the crowd, leaving an uncertain, stammering, Heterochromic boy at a complete
loss.

Great... Stendhal sighed, pushing a palm at his eye. Two very attractive, nervous young adults with no real world experience in an NC-17 nightclub. Why, why had he not insisted on them staying behind? Simple, he hadn't thought of this until just now. Like lambs to a... Actually, he didn't have a metaphor for this. What he did know, was that the two of them would likely not be leaving this place without being propositioned for some rather face reddening things and that they might not be equipped to handle that.

Sitting down at the bar, he decided the pair of them were grown up enough to handle it. Plus, if things did turn violent, the three of them could likely take on this entire club without breaking a sweat. When the bartender walked up to him, her shoulder length black hair tucked behind one of her ears, she almost stopped cold at the sight of him.

"...Sten?" With the barest hint of a smile, he nodded. Her smile was not so small. "What the hell are you doing here?" She leaned over the bar, wrapping her arms around him, a gesture he was hesitant to reciprocate.

As their hug was ended, he cleared his throat- because of the blood sticking in it, not another reason. "Work," with a smirk, Twist rolled her eyes. "Is your boyfriend about?"

"Husband." she corrected.

Glancing at her fingers, he gave her a look. "You were both only two years older than me when we met up, and I still don't see any rings."

Pouting, she crossed her arms. "...Still my husband." she poured him some water. "Right..." and he gratefully started sipping at it.

Looking over his face, she couldn't help but feel concerned. "You look terrible."

He shrugged. "Nothing new, according to some." and he polished off the water, which she almost immediately refilled.

She looked him in the eyes, tired worry plain as day on her features. "Really still all business with you, isn't it?"

He rolled his eyes. "Serves me well enough."

"At getting you near killed." She whispered, eyeing the other patrons watchfully. "I don't need to remind you how things went when we all parted ways."

He smiled, somewhat sardonically. "Should I remind you I'm the only one that made it out clean? Even got myself near enough to being a hero, honest and paid."

Her eyes narrowed. "Gotta point?"

"I do," he set the glass aside, "my way of doing things has served me well and I aim not to change it now." He had to pause for a moment, suppressing some rather violent coughs. "...can I please speak to your husband?"

She shrugged. "Got a compelling reason for me to?" and he'd clearly struck a nerve with her, brilliant.
See, this is why he needed to learn 'tact', unfortunately all his efforts in that department had produced negligible results. Not seeing another way to convince her, he sighed. "Little girl caught up in a bad situation." Her expression softened, and surprise was worn plainly on her face. "...I need to figure out what happened so I can protect her."

She stared him down for a long while, sympathy and sadness on her face. "You really are the genuine article, aren't you?"

For a moment, he dared to look as empty and tired as he felt. "We both know that's not true..."

She nodded. "You're still trying to be," not knowing what else to do, he brought his glass to his face for a long drink, hiding behind it. She'd seen the wear on his face, the splotches already forming in his complexion, his ghostly pallor even more paper-white than years ago. She knew, "how long do you have, Chizome?"

Setting the glass down, he looked her in the eyes, expression level and soft. He wanted to lie, say he was fine, but he couldn't. "Long enough."

Swallowing, her face bending with concern, she nodded. "I'll let him know you're here." Before she walked away from the bar, she refilled his again, leaving the man to his thoughts.

After she'd walked away, his eyes lingered on the dripping faucet...

Drip... drip... drip...

Groaning, pained and dazed, the four people in the elevator forced themselves to stand. Blood, lots of blood was dripping. "Who-" smoke filled Stendhal's lungs and he fell back to floor, coughing violently. "Who's hurt?"

Growling in pain, gripping at a dislocated shoulder, Knuckleduster forced himself to sit up. "Grrrrrrarrrrgh! Who isn't!?"

Twist and Stendhal exchanged a look, then nodded. "Us." said she.

Motioning for the door, Knuckleduster set about forcing his shoulder back into place. "Get us out of here."

Drawing in as deep a breath as he could, Stendhal got to his feet and forced his fingers into the cracks of the door. Straining of his muscles put spots in his eyes, what little oxygen he had was not enough for what he was trying to do. Still, resolve managed to win out, even with the burning of his body's every fiber he pulled the doors to. A rush of air, smoke leaving the elevator and breathable air flooding in. He gasped, staggering from the metal box, and forced his senses to come back to him.

Outside, a crowd of officers were distant enough that he couldn't see their faces. But not so distant that he couldn't see their weapons aimed at the building. "We'd be best get running." He started staggering, searching about. "Sparks?"

"Door to the left of the entrance, marked as 'maintenance'." His voice was worried, urgent. "Get moving, Sten, I'm not seeing you guys in handcuffs." Or, as they suspected, mostly just his girlfriend.

The dhampire rolled his eyes. Sword unsheathed, he shakily walked to the door and kicked it open. "Come on, people." he motioned for them to follow.
If only things had gone the way they'd hoped.

Twist had gotten to her feet, carrying Seether to the doorway, when the stairwell door burst open. Stendhal barely had time to lounge at his allies, dragging them from the path of gunfire, as the riot police swarmed into the lobby. From his vantage point in the elevator, Knuckleduster surveyed the scene, watching the slightest opening. To their unbelievable luck, no one was watching the elevator. When they'd taken up positions near the maintenance door, he eyed one of them in particular. There, on his belt, was a smoke grenade. With a wicked grin, he lounged forward and grabbed the man from behind, pulling the pin on the small explosive. As the other officers turned and trained their weapons on him, the room flooded with smoke.

Laughing with savage glee, Knuckledister set to work. His fists flew, cracking ribs, disarming and incapacitating men with years and years of training to their names. Skulls were fractured, arms broken, knees dislocated, teeth knocked free, weapons went off and hit nothing but the walls.

"What the hell is he doing?" Stendhal snarled, peeking from the doorway, hoping not to get his face shot off. What he saw almost made him wish that he had; Knuckleduster, the look on his face, it was like... like he was more alive in that moment than ever before. Life, there was no other word for it, just shone in his eyes, as he beat down the police officers that threatened to kill him and the others.

Even after they all gone down, their bodies flung to every corner of the room, he kept hitting them. "Come on... get up!" he roared, "That can't be all the fight you boys have in you! You're god damned riot cops!"

Suddenly, the lobby erupted in light. Spotlights shining into the apartment building, flooding the room with illumination, casting somehow angelic shadows on the lone vigilante's face, standing defiantly in the room. Sneering, challenging the men outside, he slammed his fists together, the brass knuckles clanging loudly.

His show of foolish bravado was cut short by Stendhal throwing a pebble against his head. "Tch!" Stendhal hissed, motioning for him follow them into the sewers.

"Tch!" Knuckleduster scoffed, letting out a tired sigh. He stooped to one of the unconscious bodies in the room, pulling the pin on another smoke grenade. Striking a heroic pose, he shouted into the night. "Consider justice served!" and smoke, colored by the lights outside flooded the lobby. A few police officers rushed toward the building, but none would arrive in time to stop them.

They'd fled into a labyrinth beneath the city, there was no point chasing them now.

"You were a call,
That I couldn't put down...
You stayed in my mind late into the night,
My dark passenger...

It's a war in my mind,
As you sharpen the blades,
I try to be good, but it's not as good as being insane..."
The Beginning of the End - Part One

AN: the album "Fear Inoculum" is out and I am so fucking happy! (fangirl squee goes here)

Sorry this took so long, this chapter and the rest of the arc went through so many re-writes I'm actually kind of embarrassed.

Thanks for waiting, everyone.

It all begins here... - Black

"We think we've climbed so high,
up all the backs we've condemned..."

Tuesday, July 24th, 2255

It almost felt nostalgic, standing behind Sparky's chair as he typed away at his keyboard. Seeing the man's slender shoulders shake with how vigorously he struck the keys brought back memories, but he didn't want to think about them. If such musings could be avoided, it was best to do so.

"Not really sure what you expect me to find here..." Sparky mumbled, working as tirelessly as he ever did back then. "Without a last name or any know-who of the folks who're after her it's a shot in the dark wearing a blindfold."

Stendhal sighed. "So it's impossible?"

"No," Sparky groaned, "just very, very tedious, slow going and unlikely. Not many out there named Eri, but there's even less out there about any of them." He shook his head, pausing for a moment to rub at one eye, under his glasses.

The dhampire crossed his arms, leaning back against whatever surface was readily available. The wall, as it turned out. "Look, I don't care what you find. I just need something so I can track anyone who might know her down. After that, I may get back to you."

A thought that was far from appealing for the hacker. "Yeah... sounds like fun..."

Stendhal smiled, putting a hand on his shoulder. "Relax, I'm not pulling you back into anything like the old days."

The older of the two scoffed. "You do realize the 'old days' were only three years ago, right? Ain't exactly old news for any of us."

That depends on how long you expect to live, Sparky... Stendhal patted his shoulder. "Just... gimme something here, okay?"

Sparky gave a look that was halfway between helpless and stressing over what he knew was going to happen. "Oh if there's anything to find I will..." Nodding, Stendhal went to pace about the room, running a hand down his tired face. How long had it been since he'd slept? How much had he slept the night before? He couldn't even remember.
Pulling his phone out of his pocket, he pulled up Guren in his contacts list. 'On the hunt for whoever Eri was involved in. Let you know what I find.' After a moment's deliberation he added, 'Wish you were here. I could use that observant brain of yours.'

Putting his phone away, he noted it was almost six am, around the time he usually started waking up. Odd that he hadn't... Shrugng, he chose not to continue that train of thought. With any luck the poor man was catching up on some much needed sleep.

"Wait... hold on..." Turning around at Sparky's dire tone, Stendhal was prepared for something truly grisly. "I... found an article."

"What's it say?" In no time flat, he was behind his old friend's chair again.

Sparky clicked his tongue against the roof of his mouth as he skimmed it over. "Well... it's mostly blacked out but that face is her's, right?"

When he prodded the screen, Stendhal nodded. "It is." And he grinned.

"No mention of any names but..." his eyes narrowed. "Her parents worked for..." and then his eyes widened. "'Philanthropy'."

At a loss, Stendhal looked back and forth between the article and Sparky. "Why, What...? What does that mean?"

Astonished, Sparky looked at him as though he'd spend his life living in caves. "You don't know what Philanthropy is?"

The dhampire rolled his eyes. "Enlighten me."

With a few clicks of his mouse, a website was brought up. "They're the largest hero organization the world over. Basically a giant conglomerate of the largest hero associations all under one name: 'Philanthropy'."

Looking at the website, Stendhal thought he gleamed something about a massive air purification project. A tower being built at the center of Musutafu, meant to filter pollutants out of the air or something. Before he could ask about it, Sparky was back to talking. "CEO's a bit of a mystery, but can't say that's surprising. If I was in charge of that much money I wouldn't want to be very famou-"

"Okay, what about Eri or her parents?"

Turning back to the article, Sparky kept skimming his way through. "Something about... god it's practically covered in black ink- about some kind of huge computer project. I have no idea what though, they might as well have dipped this in-"

"I get it," Stendhal batted the words away, "it's something at least..." He sighed, raising a hand only to drop it and clap the palm against his leg. "Can you check Philanthropy's records, see if there's anything there?"

"Records? Considering the article, I wouldn't bet on it." Despite his apparent denial, Sparky had already started typing. "But maybe there's an old email kicking around the company's servers that mentions her."

Stendhal laughed, clapping his hands together. "Now we're talking." and he rubbed his gloved hands together.
Walking into the room, a cup of coffee in her hand, was the hacker's 'wife'. "Any luck, boys?"

"Might be, baby." Sparky grinned, finally clicking on one email in particular. And as he scanned it over, a breath of satisfaction escaped him. "It's not much... but we have an address." grabbing a pen and paper he set to scribbling down what he'd found. "No one's gonna be home though, word in the article was her parents are long dead." tearing the paper from his pad, he handed it to Stendhal. "But, if there's new owners, they might be able to point you in a direction."

Grinning wildly, Stendhal took the paper from him. "Remind me to buy you two dinner in the near future."

Laughing, Twist kissed her man's forehead. "And he'll hold you to that." As Stendhal went to leave, she grabbed some of her effects. Old bits of body armor.

"...What are you doing?" both Stendhal and Sparky said together.

Gesturing to their half human friend, she spoke plainly. "Goin with him, husband."

Sparky's jaw dropped. "Are ya now?"

"Mhmm." She nodded, Smiling at him. "Good work's to be done."

Slowly, the hacker deflated, face scrunching up into a wince that screamed 'oh no...' as Stendhal laughed. "Just like old times, Twist?"

"No." She declared, losing her smile. "Hopefully nothing like."

All Stendhal could do was nod. "Where are the ones who followed me?"

Twist shrugged. "Kids are asleep, in one of the booths downstairs. The officer's still wasting my bouncer's time."

Groaning, Stendhal rolled his eyes. "Persistent bastard... Fine. Lets go get the sleeping ones."

"And the cop?" she raised an eyebrow as she went to follow him.

Stendhal shrugged. "Just... shoot him."

Sparky's jaw dropped again, Twist nearly did the same. "Shoot him?"

Another shrug. "Politely."

With rapidly blinking eyes, Sparky called after the two that were leaving. "So... does that little back and forth mean it's okay for me to quote stuff on this op? Cuz, that was a quote."

"No."

"No."

"No."

They both answered together, and the door shut behind them.

Sighing, Sparky swiveled his chair back around, shaking his head. "So it is just like old times... Four violent lunatics run off while I dig up dirt on whoever the hell..." Realizing it would probably be needed, he reached over and switched on his old radio.

It likely wouldn't be too long before someone had to call him on it.

When he could sleep no more, he rolled to get out of bed but almost fell out of an easy chair. Cursing under his breath Aizawa grumbled as he stumbled about in Midoriya's home. Walking to
the bathroom he splashed some water on his face, then dragged a towel over his features. He never liked looking in mirrors, always felt so vain to fuss over his appearance. Although, he’d be lying if he said that was all it was. Years spent killing people and regretting it will sour a reflection like nothing else in this world.

Funny the harm a functioning conscience will inflict upon its owner.

Turning away from the mirror, he shook his head. He was about to leave the bathroom when his phone rang. Surprised, he fished it from his pocket and brought it to his ear. "Hello?"

"It's been too long, my old friend." Even over the phone, after all this time, the voice of The Nameless One made his spine crumble with fear. "How's my favorite Hero holding up?"

A hand gripped into a fist, knuckles going white as his stomach did backflips. "I've been well."

"Good, because he's got some explaining to do." Aizawa's jaw clenched, eyes wincing shut. "This... Guren Fang," sighed the old man, "I want to know about him. Why you decided to make an exception with him."

His lips twitched, bordering on a scowl, though it was only to mask fear, disgust; both with himself and the man he answered to. "I assume you want to meet him."

"I do." He could tell Nameless was smiling. "Must be quite the rising young star, to have swayed your judgement so, enough to permit him to attend your class."

Gulping, Aizawa dared to confirm that thought. "He is."

Nameless laughed. "Good. Come by when you can, we need to talk before too long. Seems things have... shifted, in my city since I've been away. I keep hearing about 'Nomus' and attacks on UA."

Nodding, the former hunter did his best to keep his nerves level. "I'll tell you what I can, sir." From the other end, the line closed and Aizawa's phone shut itself off, leaving the man breathing heavily and shaking.

*However this goes... I'm not letting him hurt my-... my student.* Pushing a hand up, over his face and into his hair as his fingernails clawed at his features he returned to the living room. As his hand drew away from his face, venturing toward the couch he saw something that stopped him moving entirely.

Eri was gone.

Eyes darted to the kitchen, finding no one there, the door to Miss Midoriya's room was still undisturbed. Racing to the glass door that lead to the patio he tore the curtains aside and saw she wasn't there either. His mind was racing, the adrenaline from his conversation with Nameless already had his adrenaline pumping. Had they locked the door last night? Had someone slipped into the home and nabbed while they were all sleeping? Unable to take the wondering, holding still and thinking in place of action, he went to his student's room and opened the door.

Aizawa was just about to wake up the two young heroes when he suddenly blinked in confusion. There she was, nestled into the bed and snuggled up between both Midoriya and Jiro, with the hearing hero's arm splayed over them both. Slumping against the door frame, his head bumping into it, Aizawa felt an absolute fool. He'd been worrying himself sick while the little one was safe as could possibly be without All Might standing guard.

Rolling his eyes he turned around and gently closed the door. "Damned kids... gonna give me a..."
heart attack one of these days."

"mrmrm... Whu?" Roused from her sleep by the noise of others for the second time, Jiro glared at the door. Only then her eyes saw Eri, snuggled up with Izuku. "Oh my god..." She'd seen Izuku fall asleep on the train once or twice, and she'd always thought the peaceful unguarded look on his face was cute. A small child smiling in her sleep as her hand clung to his shirt was that and then some. A hand went to her face, hiding her star-bright smile. That's too cute, I'm gonna die.

She didn't know it at the time, but the little one simply felt safer near them. Them and the others that had been present for her rescue.

Turning to the clock, she saw it was past eight am now. Sighing a little she reached over and shook Izuku's shoulder. "Hey," she murmured, still smiling a slight fraction, "Izuku~" As she gently tried to rouse him, his eyes twitched and slowly opened.

"Hm?" He went to sit up, but was immediately halted by the weight of Eri's body on his chest. For a moment, he just blinked then he had to surpress a laugh. "Eri..." and he reached for her little head to pet her.

Jiro just sat back against the wall and smiled. "She's really imprinted on you, hasn't she?"

He gave a somber little laugh. "You're not the first person to point that out..." As he spoke, the slight rumble of his voice just barely created enough sound to wake the sleeping child under his arm.

When her eyes fluttered open, after taking quick stock of her surroundings -remembering where she was- she lowered her head and looked away, squirming where she sat. "Sorry for bothering you, I... had a bad dream." Apologetically, she looked up at Deku and the man's heart melted like ice on pavement in the summer.

Stammering, he wasn't entirely sure how to reply to that. "Uh, it's fine? you didn't wake me up or anything." When Eri seemed satisfied with this answer, she turned to Jiro.

The violet eyed girl gave her a thumbs up. "All good on my end, Eri girl." Inwardly, she rolled her eyes. 'Eri girl'... real original, Kyoka...

Stretching, one arm above his head, Deku felt his shoulder and back work themselves into place shortly before following suit with his other side. "Anyways... think it's about time we got up." turning to the window, he winced at the light, even though it was obscured by the curtain. Not noticing this, Eri hopped off the bed, trotting out of the room. "...she doesn't seem right, does she?"

Seeing the concern on his face, Jiro drew a knee up to her chin, lazily draping her arms in a criss-cross over her leg. "I don't know... a little shy, timid maybe. Hard to say." Her lips and chin pressed up against her knee, her eyes narrowed as she thought. I used to be like that too... but, that was only after years of being picked on, hurt by other kids for being... well, me. Her eyes drifted to one side, a wince she tried to hide. If those really were Yakuza and she was in their custody... what kind of life has she had?

"There's that, but... it seems a little quick, doesn't it? She's weirdly comfortable around me considering how little time we've known each other." A ponderous hand rubbed at his chin, obscuring his lips from view. "It doesn't really make sense..."

Turning her eyes back to him, she thought immediately of what answer to give. "Were'n't you the same way?" Confused, he looked her in the eyes, turning to face her fully. "When you met
Akaguro, right on day one, you trusted him with your secret, your story." He half frowned, sinking into where he sat a little as she kept talking. "I understand why you trusted me, you felt like you owed me, but... that always bothered me, that you were so quick to trust him." He sighed, turning away a little while his expression soured.

"Well..." he offered, eyes back to hers, "he already knew for one." She raised an eyebrow. "Said he knew what I was, that he could tell, the day we met. Offered to help me figure it all out." He smiled on one side, laughing one, quiet, little laugh. "He was just so friendly, confident... I don't know." he shrugged, pulling himself off his haunches, freeing his hands which he'd previously been leaning on. "I guess, in a way, he reminded me of the good parts of Bakugo, before he..." his smile faded away, eyes venturing to the floor.

Jiro knew the rest of that better than anyone. "Turned rotten as a villain?" He really didn't want to, but he nodded anyways. Hard to argue with the truth, after all. "Well... what's done is done. Guess it wasn't really my business asking about that anyways." With a shrug she stood up, stretching her arms above her head, popping her back into place.

As she stretched the fabric of her newly acquired shirt cascaded into place, highlighting the frame of her body in the light of the room. His eyes wandered to her shapes, tracing over the length of her legs, up to the rest of her. Slender, almost to the point of being delicate were it not for the muscles she had, afforded to her by her hero work and training. Admittedly, you wouldn't have noticed to look at her while she was wearing more in the way of clothing, but without much covering her limbs -and his exceptional eyesight- he did. Slight curves of her body had accentuated, hips along with her-

No, no, bad Deku. Tearing his eyes away from her, clearing his throat, blushing and scratching at the hair behind his ear he mumbled a reply. "Uh, it's okay. You can... ask about whatever, really." Given my current state of mind, I'd probably... okay, refocusing now. Stupid hormones...

Turning around, finding the sight of him to be an amusing one, she quirked an eyebrow as she smiled, taking a look at herself as she was presently poised. Even she had to admit that maybe she wasn't bad to look at, at that moment. "You okay over there?" The thought that he actually liked what he saw... it was new and she kind of liked the idea, in some new and vaguely thrilling way. Whatever that was...

Nodding hurriedly, he did his best to look relaxed. "Mhmm." he smiled, not quite succeeding in his efforts. "yeah, just... yeah."

To his surprise, she didn't seem to get mad, even if she did roll her eyes. Turning to face him, she leaned over, her face looming close to his. "Were you staring at me, Midoriya?" her tone was only playfully scolding, and if her face was anything to go by, she was far from displeased.

All the same, he was presently focusing on not being so... base, eyes resolutely not peering down her rather roomy shirt. "I- well, uh..." He cleared his throat again, "th-that is, ah-

She put a finger over his lips and, obediently, he quieted. "Deep breath." Again, as she instructed. "Okay. Try that again?"

He gulped. ".a little." Furthering his surprise, she smiled a little wider, even though she'd started blushing. ".wasn't on purpose."

Shrugging, she leaned forward, her proximity making his heart jump. "Good boy." He blushed as red as a fire engine and she kissed him, short circuiting his brain completely with a mischievous
giggle. So... he **likes** being called that?

Bashful as a priest, he smiled, appearing every bit the rabbit at the mercy of a wolf as he felt. "Uh, good in regards to what?"

Another shrug. "Honesty?" Spinning on her heels, she scooped up her clothes. "I'm not mad or anything, Green. You *are* allowed to look at me." Venturing to the door, she turned the handle, bracing herself for the day that was surely about to follow. "See you in a few."

Nodding, he watched as she left, keeping his eyes to himself this time. Mostly... Drawing in another breath, he slumped back, head bumping against the wall as he exhaled through one corner of his mouth, breath brushing through his hair. *Note to self: figure out exactly what the hell I'm doing in a relationship.* His eyes went wide, face reddening again. *Oh god, I'm in a relationship. What genius thought *that* was a good idea!? I barely know what I'm doing around friends!* In the back of his mind, loud as an alarm, Shigaraki was laughing uproariously.

Shoulders bunching up, Deku growled quietly. "Shut. Up." The dead villain only laughed louder and he sighed. "...I hate you."

"Awww, I *love* you too buddy."

Another growl, suddenly feeling very uncomfortable, Deku climbed to his feet and fished through his drawers. After finding a suitable outfit -jeans and a T-shirt- he slipped into his favorite hoodie, the green one, and exited his room.

Some moments prior, Jiro had ventured into the bathroom, the electric excitement slowly starting to simmer down. Ordinarily, she'd have felt incredibly flustered, modesty was important after all and not lightly forsaken. But, in that instance, the idea of him roaming his eyes over her body... she shook her head at herself, rolling her eyes bemusedly.

*Who am I and what have I done with the real Kyoka Jiro?*

Truly, she was far from used to feeling desirable, and it clearly was going to take some getting used to. All the same, she laughed, quietly to herself.

*Still, teasing him like that was pretty fun.*

As she slid back into her leather Jacket, she saw the bruise on her forehead in the mirror. Gently, she ran her fingers over the still sore skin and frowned, deflating a little. *Himiko... whatever she's doing, at least she's not willing to go masquerading as me for anything.*

Soured by those thoughts, she roughly adjusted her jacket on herself. "Yeah... but that's not saying much." Even still, it meant that their relationship, in the past as it surely was, still meant something to the shape-shifter. "Damn it, Himiko..." And she walked out of the bathroom.

---

All For One, a man capable of stealing the quirks of others, Nemesis to All Might. A man, surprisingly, relatively unknown to most. At the present point in time, he was making use of one quirk in particular, namely a tracking quirk he'd acquired just last night. It was difficult to move about the city without attracting attention to himself, wearing such a bulky thing as his respirator and having glowing red eyes had not exactly made him inconspicuous.

But he had found it.

A run down neighborhood, an old abandoned shop, a secret stairway and a grin hidden beneath his
respirator. Descending was simple enough, nothing about this place felt unfamiliar. The darkness, the moisture clinging to the stairs, the moldy, putrid smell. For far too long had he lurked in such domains, to have grown accustomed to such things. As he reached the bottom, stepping through a doorway, a hand wreathed in blue flame rose up to meet him.

"I don't know who you are," All For One turned his head ever so slightly and looked at his would be aggressor, "but you made one hell of a mistake finding this place." A kid, barely into his twenties, one hand pressed to his side where his clothes were burned. Beneath his hand, All For One could make out the bloodied bandages.

All For One laughed. "No, I think this is right where I want to be."

The bandaged lad's eyes narrowed. "Got business here other than death? I would know about it."

Hands held up, All For One turned to face this rather deformed youngster. "I'm here to see Overhaul."

The lad's eyebrows jumped, flame wreathing his hand flickering, then he jerked his head to one side. "That way."

Nodding, hands still held up, All For One walked along with the young man's hand trained on him, blue light flickering throughout the murky halls. Filth seemed to permeate this place. Which made sense, considering it was in or adjacent to the sewers. Winding halls, corridors barely held any illumination, the occupants of this 'facility' When the reached their destination, a dimly lit and wide open room, walls occasionally adorned with doorways. Something about the place seemed as if it were carved out of the concrete itself long after the sewers had been constructed. Textures of the walls were too smooth, doors so featureless it seemed the materials that comprised them had always been in that shape.

However, the room they currently occupied was... different. The jagged, rough surfaces of the concrete were present as they should have been. Furniture in the room was bolted to the floor, rather than just sprouting out of it. The bolts were excessively large too, in fact most of the metal fastenings and various bits of lab equipment bore an almost antiquated composition.

Standing at the largest, oaken table was a man. Overhaul, so All For One presumed. "Dabi..." sighed Overhaul. "Is there a reason you haven't outright killed this intruder?"

The younger man swallowed. "He asked for you by name."

"Oh?" When Overhaul turned around, he eyed All For One carefully. "I don't recognize him."

Again, All For One smiled. "That's because we haven't met. Not yet."

The man wearing the plague mask narrowed his eyes. "I see." Flexing his wrists, he walked carefully toward the newcomer. "And what brings you here? Why do you want to meet me?"

The answer was simple. "I find myself in need of allies, and you have my Nomu somewhere around here."

Overhaul raised an eyebrow, crossing his arms. "Nomu?"

"Yes," said All For One, "a rather large purple being, you've made some changes to him."

Overhaul chuckled. "Oh... you mean Mooney."
Now the villain was uncertain what to think, not that he had really been to begin with. "You... you mean Moonfish?"

The other man shrugged, Dabi walked around All For One to stand by his superior's side. "He did go by that name once. What is he to you?"

It didn't take long for All For One to take stock of his options. This was literally his last choice available to him. "He has information I require to topple this 'world of heroes', I'd like to speak with him."

Overhaul considered the man standing in front of him for a long time. This, this absurdly dressed individual, was... compelling. His skin told a weathered, violent story. Clothes that hung over his muscles like loose threads, sweatpants and a hoodie, gave little in the way of anything personal. Glowing red eyes, breathing only with aid of a machine but driven; oh so driven, if his brow, posture and eyes were telling the truth. This wasn't some thug bent on making noise for the sake of it, he was...

Overhaul actually smiled. "Tell me." Something approving flickered in All For One's eyes, and the two men seemed to see each other at long last. "What exactly do you think he knows something about?"

All For One chuckled. "Have you heard of the 'Prophet System'?"

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Retinal scans, bio-scans, required ID-Key cards, armed guards and even some automated turrets and quirk suppression collars and cuffs. This was to say nothing of the individual cells, specially crafted to house each and every prisoner specifically. Security at Tartarus could best be described as 'overzealous' to an extreme degree. Though, according to the people running the facility, it was the bare minimum to keep people safe from those held within its walls.

As Aizawa wandered his way inside, Eri in tow, his eyes searched about. She said she would be... Sure enough, there she was. Clad in that ridiculous outfit: a red tutu with a faux cat's tail, the fake -and technological- matching ears on her head as she glared with venom into one particular cell. When she noticed him approach her countenance immediately softened, then brightened.

"Shota." She said, walking over to him, her distance slightly within his personal space. "It's been too long, sourpuss."

She obviously wanted to hug him, but didn't, knowing he was always one to shy away from such displays of affection. Sighing, he proved her wrong, spreading his arms with a wry smile. "It's been less than two months, Shino." And she happily embraced him, though his elation was muted compared to hers.

With a laugh, she stepped back, a hand trailing from his shoulder to his elbow. "What, you can't call unless it's related to work?" Then, she let him go, crossing her arms. "You don't have to be such a stranger."

He sighed, giving a one shouldered shrug. "I've been busy."

"Training that ward of yours, no doubt." She teased, "I'm gonna get to meet him someday, right?"

He chuckled, in spite of himself, "I hope so. It's honestly a shame he never went to summer camp."

she couldn't help but agree. "Isn't it? Well, last time you mentioned him you seemed proud, if not a little worried." Her eyes had a way of carving into his soul, seeing right through him. If he didn't
trust her, it would have been far more alarming than it was. "You're not often proud of your students."

Finding himself somewhat shy now, he adjusted his collar. "Um, well..." A small hand gripping at his pant-leg pulled his attention away momentarily. "Ah, right." He motioned to Eri. "This is her." Eyes lighting up, Shino knelt down to Eri's level and waved, the little one smiling shyly at her. "...You really don't mind looking after her for a little while?"

Shino shrugged. "Can't say that I do. Plenty of practice with Kota, after all." Her smile saddened as she turned her gaze back to her friend. "But does she? That's the real question." and she looked back to Eri, who stepped out from behind Aizawa's leg.

She looked up at with wide, uncertain eyes. "Is she... okay?"

He nodded, patting her head. "She's more than okay, Eri. You can trust her."

Smiling with a happy hum, Eri turned to Shino and stepped closer, bowing as she did. "It's nice to meet you, cat lady."

Shino laughed. "My, so well behaved." And she bowed in turn. "Don't worry about thing, Shota."

Nodding, he looked deeper into the facility and steeled himself. "Thank you..." With a sigh, he started walking away. "Hopefully I wont be long..."

Her expression went from jovial to severe in seconds flat. Even without reading his mind, she knew. "You're going to see him, aren't you?" He gave no reply, just kept walking and she let out a very tense breath. "I hate it when you see him..."

"Believe me," said Aizawa, "I am far from enthused at this moment myself." Leaving it at that, he walked through the next set of doors and began the long march down the long corridor.

Deep breaths, Shota... deep breaths... Far from the usual place that the two of them met, Tartarus was hardly The Nameless One's fortress. Meeting him here felt so... alien. As the final door opened, in to the head warden's office, he came face to face with none other than Endeavor, staring him down with a vicious glare. "Nice to see you too..." Aizawa shot back with a glare of his own.

What had he done to him to make him so angry?

Behind the hulk of a man, came a familiar laugh. "Now now," at his voice, once again, Aizawa's spine crumbled. "I'll not have infighting with two of my best and brightest." As Endeavor stepped aside, the sight of the old man put Aizawa's heart in his throat. Then, with that wrinkled old face of his, he smiled. "Hmm... I'm sorry to see you've certainly aged." he stepped closer, hands behind his back as his smile remained plastered on his face. "More stress than the old days?"

Gulping, Aizawa shook his head. "No more than usual."

Nameless laughed. "Is that so?" a hand roughly clapped onto Aizawa's shoulder, a grip so tight the hero couldn't help but wince. "And here I thought keeping secrets left one feeling particularly ill at ease." His eyes glared like the sun, yet his warm smile remained. "So you were planning to tell me about the boy. That's good to hear." He laughed again, the seriousness and severity gone in the blink of an eye, patting Aizawa more gently. Sighing away the last of his mirth, Nameless went back to the window, staring out into the heart of the city. "You didn't bring him here though..."

"No, sir."
His smile vanished. "Why not?"

Gulping again, sweating under his collar, he went with the truth. "He had a previous engagement. A friend is dealing with a serious personal matter, I didn't want to intrude on that."

The smile returned. "Oh. Well, that's different." Nameless chuckled. "You should know it's not like the old days." he motioned for him to join him by the window, an order Aizawa tentatively followed. "I'm not going to have you kill the child." A palpable amount of tension eased out of his lungs. "Not yet, at least." Like his world had just been fractured, Aizawa turned his eyes to Nameless, a sense of hopeless dread turning his veins ice-cold. Again, the smile was gone. "If it turns out he's a threat to anything I've been working to achieve, you will kill him and that upstart Valentine." Turning to him, his expression leaving nothing to the imagination he scowled. "Have I made myself clear, Eraser Head?"

It was a long time before Aizawa could answer. "...Yes, sir."

"Good." he motioned for him to leave. "Now, go and fetch him." At his behest, the old hunter walked away with clenched fists.

*If you insist... I think I might just inform 'that upstart' about this meeting while I'm at it.* The Hunter's eyes narrowed, fear replaced with anger, determination. *I see why you chose this place now. You want the arena to be one where you hold the advantage, should things turn violent. No where more secure, with more people ready to put us down than Tartarus.*

Leaving the room behind, he noticed Endeavor smiling out of the corner of his eye. It shouldn't have been surprising, that man always was a tad sadistic.

As the four of them exited the cab, Shoto choosing to pay the fare, Stendhal had to choke back another round of coughing. An effort that did not go unnoticed by Twist. Catching sight of her face, her obvious concern, he narrowed his eyes. "I'm-" God dammit it was hard to keep his lungs in check. "fine." He swallowed, the motions massaging at his aching esophagus.

She obviously didn't believe him, and didn't dignify that with a response. Instead she looked down the drive way they'd found themselves on, eyeing the long abandoned and ill maintained house that was their destination. "Doesn't look like anyone's been here in years."

Raising an eyebrow at the yellow tape, 'police - do not cross' Shoto remained silent. Uravity, however, did not. "Or has been allowed to be... Akaguro, what is this place?"

Breathing in as much as he could, the dhampire sighed. "Eri's former home..." Walking over the decrepit police line, he offered nothing further, Twist at his side. Uravity and Shoto exchanged a look, nodding to each other before they followed.

"What do you expect to find here?" Twist whispered to him.

In reply, he... well, he had to think about it. "Hopefully just something, anything really."

Twist offered a bitter laugh. "Really flying blind on this one, huh?"

"Heh... yeah." He rubbed at his eyes, his sagging, exhausted, purple-all-around eyes. "Hence the intelligence gathering. I'd love nothing more than to track the bastards that hurt her down and-" he took a deep breath, calming himself. "You know the rest, but I can't if I don't know who I'm looking for, where to go."
As they entered the house, shoving through the not even locked door, Twist searched him over, her expression serious. "You don't just want to bring them in, do you?" He returned the look, eyes fixed on hers as they waited for the others for a few moments longer. "You're doing this like we did..."

He didn't answer.

As the other two arrived, he turned from her, gesturing about. "Search."

Somewhat taken aback by the sudden shift in tone, Shoto's eyes narrowed. Uravity, looking to intervene before anything unpleasant could be said, piped up. "For what?"

"Pictures, documents, diaries, anything like that. We need to know who these people are." As he tromped away up the stairs, Uravity followed him, leaving Shoto downstairs with Twist.

"So..." said the Heterochrome, "you two go back a ways."

She laughed, quirking an eyebrow at him. "Got a funny way of asking questions, kid."

"I wasn't asking. It's obvious you two know each other." Her smile vanished, eyebrow stayed quirked though. "But I am wondering... what's your take on him?"

She crossed her arms, turning toward him and leaning back against the wall. "And here I thought you two were friends. Why don't you tell me?"

He sighed, looking a little awkward. "Because... I don't really know him. He only really talks to two people, and I'm neither of them." His eyes went to hers, a look of helplessness in them, quiet as it was. "He knew my older brother once... I'm admittedly curious about him, but he doesn't talk to me."

A smile crossed her lips. "This about him, or your brother?"

It took him a moment to find the truth. "...Both."

Another laugh. "Now that is a fair answer." Her arms uncrossed, hands to her pockets. "You really want the truth?" Hesitantly, afraid of her answer, he nodded. "he is a being of unwavering belief."

His eyebrows inclined, she was almost amused. "When I knew him, well... we were up to some less than savory things." His imagination didn't seem to know where to take that thought, just as she hoped. "His beliefs, his code, his morals were the guiding principal for a year after we lost two of our group." Shoto seemed to grow worried at that statement, but she ignored his wariness. "He was our leader after old- ha, I can't say. But for a while, he was the one deciding how we did things. His views about this world of heroes we find ourselves in were the guiding star to our little crusade." Her harsh choice of words only served to further unnerve him, again she did not care. "It's actually thanks to him that my husband and I managed to get away, live our lives the way we do now."

Gulping, he nodded. "So... what did he do?"

She chuckled, tapping one of her temples. "More than I can repay." and she turned about to search the home. "Does that answer your question?"

Shrugging, he just replied with his feelings. "I'm not sure. Thanks anyways." He turned about the room, noticing a distinct lack of family pictures, awards, certificates... nothing personal marked the walls. Just empty, dusty furniture. Even the cupboards and filing cabinets had been stripped bare.

Upstairs was a similar story, though the conversation was far from the same. Uravity had followed
Stendhal to each room, helping him search through every nook and cranny only to turn up dust. "You don't look right..."

He sighed. "Can we not have this discussion, please?"

She gave him a saddened look, taking in all the details of his face. The ghostly pallor, the splotches of discoloration that were too sickly to be freckles. His skin gone worn and thin, giving the impression of a more advanced age than he possessed. She'd always thought he'd looked a little bit older than he was, but now... he was starting to look like he was almost twice his age. Turning toward the window, she saw the sun was high in the sky, barely noon now. It had only been a day and a half since that villain attack. What had happened to him?

Breathing in just a little too much dust, his body started shaking violently. A coughing fit had him covering his mouth, though he seemed to be stifling it, trying to hold it down. She wasn't really worried until one cough knocked him over, buckling his knees and he clattered to the floor, his body shaking like an earthquake were running through it. Too stunned to move at first, she was a good distance away from him when the blood ejected from his lungs.

"Wh-what!?" She squeaked, hand over her mouth as she knelt beside him, one hand nervously reaching for him.

He shoved her hand away, snarling. "Stay your pity! I don't need-!" more coughing, turning his glare into an expression of blinding pain. Wheezing, he lurched for the nearby bathroom and, from the sound of it, wretched into the sink. She was tempted to follow suit, seeing just what came up. "Argh... fuck...!" he coughed, growling as he did, running the water to wash out his mouth, spitting it out with pent up anger. Hands clutching the sides of the sink, his chest heaved, trying to force his lungs to equalize, to function as they once had to no avail.

Once again, Uravity ventured into the room with him, face alight with concern, worry. "What happened to you?" She almost sounded like she was going to cry, and he couldn't do anything but sigh. Even he was not so heartless as to snap at an Ochako about to cry. "You were- you were fine yesterday!" She was completely lost, confused, wounded by the harshness of reality blindsiding her.

And he couldn't take it. "You really are the most innocent among us..." Noting the obvious openness of her heart, the way her emotions were on display for anyone to see... he rather admired that, the bravery required. "You're like a damned puppy." he rasped, coughing a few more times as he dropped his hindquarters to the floor, chest still heaving for breath. "Why Midoriya wasn't interested in you, I will never understand." He shook his head, wiping the back of his armored hand at his mouth.

Not surprisingly, she didn't know how to respond to that. "Um... okay?" Sitting down, looking at his drained eyes, she felt herself calming down a little. "...are you gonna be okay?"

He laughed, but it soon devolved into weak coughing. "Why do you care?" he said, shaking his head at her. "You barely know me... Hell, the only reason you do is our mutual friend." More coughing, and she looked wounded at the implication, averting her eyes from his. "I get that we're classmates, comrades, but still..." he shrugged, looking at her and awaiting an answer.

She was honestly surprised to find a similar level of sincerity from him that she herself couldn't help but give to those around her. Not a trait she would have attributed to one so... mysterious as he. "...You're my classmate, someone who's worked with me for years. If that's not enough you've taken care of, even protected my friends. Protected me." She hugged her knees to her face, hoping her answer was enough. "Does it have to be more than that?"
Tiredly, he shrugged. "I don't know..." Swallowing, his eyes slow to blink, turned to the ceiling. "If you can keep a secret, the closest feeling I have to affection, kinship or... love is loyalty." Another sentiment she was woefully unprepared to process, as he fought to stand up. "I haven't known what love feels like, not really, since I was... very small."

Blushing, standing up with him, a hand fussed at the shoulder its accompanying arm was attached to. "Um... I- I didn't say anything about love..."

He laughed again. "You didn't have to." She only turned redder when he smiled at her. "You strike me as the all or nothing type. So when it comes to friends, why should that be any different?"

Heavy as his legs were, he moved past her from the room, making his way back down the stairs.

Well... I guess I do love my friends... She silently conceded the point, following him back down the stairs. "You didn't answer my question." She persisted, quietly as she could.

Ahead of her, he merely sighed. "...Don't worry about it."

That's not an answer either, Akaguro...

When the returned, Twist gave her old partner a searching look. "Well?"

He shook his head. "Nothing. Like this place was strip mined, nothing personal or identifying left. Not even a damn credit card bill."

"That doesn't add up..." Shoto scratched at the side of his head. "the only evidence of anyone being here is the police line."

Uravity nodded. "No sign of a struggle or anything. The door was just unlocked. Almost like they're just..."

"Gone." Stendhal finished for her, growling at the empty house. "Nobody just disappears. Someone came and took everything... Almost like..." his mind fished for something, a memory, something he'd heard earlier that day.

A thought process rudely interrupted by his phone going off.

Snarling, he pulled the device from his pocket. "What now?!" and he drew it forth, putting it to his ear as he answered.
Tuesday, July 24th, 2255

The hot afternoon sun shone brightly overhead, perhaps a little too brightly. Two soon-to-be heroes walked with something akin to purpose, though their footsteps were hesitant, bearing an air of almost weary caution. She had to wonder if the sunlight was hurting his eyes, even with his sunglasses in their usual place. When she looked at him to see if he was alright, she noted that he had his hands in his hoodie's pouch pocket, thumbs fidgeting. While she was used to seeing him so squirrely, she hadn't expected him to be in such a state now of all times.

"What's wrong?"

Her voice startled him, almost as though he were in deep thought. No doubt rambling incessantly inside his head. "Ah, it's nothing." He seemed to become more fidgety, his gaze averting from her as he did.

Not believing this in the slightest, she quirked an eyebrow while narrowing her eyes as they walked along. "You're nervous about something." She reached out and elbowed him. "Come on, out with it. I'm not gonna get mad." Blinking, eyes shining with uncertainty searched over her. Rather than talk, he withdrew a hand from his pocket and reached for hers, twining his fingers over her hand. With a quiet laugh, holding his hand in turn, she shook her head. "Idiot... you could have said you wanted that."

Blushing, shrugging, he smiled, "Wasn't sure if it would be okay..." as he scratched at the other side of his face. "And I wasn't sure how to ask."

Humming in mock contemplation, she said, "Hmm... maybe, by asking: 'Hey, can we hold hands?' Just a thought." She teased, tugging on his hand so he stumbled a little closer to her, a playful gesture as she gave him a look. "We spent the night cuddling, you goof." She had to fight back a blush when she remembered kissing him before that. "You really think this would be too much?" she asked, squeezing his hand to emphasize that it wasn't.

Feeling every bit as silly as he ought to have, Deku laughed at himself. "Yeah, okay." As he looked on ahead, noticing their destination was in sight, he noticed Kaminari and Ashido waiting for them. "Um, they're gonna see..."

Casting her eyes to them, her expression neutral, she then turned them back to him. "That a problem?"

That she wasn't making herself easy to read worried him. She wanted his answer without outside influence altering its course, not that he knew that. With a gulp, he did eventually answer her. "...No?" She quirked an eyebrow, noticing the obvious uncertainty, and this just made him more of a stammering mess. "Ah, well- it's just..." he sighed, "Never mind. Silly thought." Cheeks reddened, giving that ghostly pallor of his some much needed color, he turned and watched the
direction they were heading.

Pleased at the outcome, she smirked, turning back the same way as she squeezed his hand again. "You afraid of what they'll think?"

Another shrug. "More just how they'd react. You know, teasing and stuff?"

Amused, she looked at him again. "You really do embarrass easily don't you?" Nodding, this fact being pointed out only made him blush harder, and he drew his hood over his head, only for her to casually reach over and pull it back down. "Don't be silly," she brushed her shoulder and much of her upper arm up against his own, "they're our friends. There's nothing to be all bashful about."

He was about to come back with some form of meek protest when he noticed how happy she looked. As much as this was his first - and he emphatically hoped only - foray into romance, it was hers too. The only difference was she was swallowing whatever reservations she had and was just trying to enjoy it. Now that he was really looking at her, he saw the same nerves there in her too. Jittery, blushing, a little too much energy brimming about her as she tried to maintain that air of quiet, controlled confidence she'd had in those early days.

A smile stretched his lips and he squeezed her hand. "You're right." This admission seemed to put them both at ease.

Just in time for the other two to notice them. At first they were fairly relaxed, standing up from where they'd been sitting on the sidewalk but then, almost immediately, Ashido noticed them holding hands. Replacing her friendly smile was a beaming, so bright one would almost her to start sparkling. "Oh my gosh oh my gosh oh my gosh oh my gosh!" At her reaction, Deku could feel the heat climbing in his face.

"Hmm?" By her side, Den just blinked, that was until he noticed what she'd noticed and then smiled. "Took you two long enough." not that there weren't things getting in the way.

Of course, Ashido was first to run right up to them and threw her arms around them, catching them both completely off guard. "I knew it I knew it I knew it!" Laughing, she jumped away, practically bouncing in place with glee. "that stupid text you sent had me so worried, you big jerk!" She was still smiling, beaming, more accurately, as she crossed her arms. "What were you tryin to pull there? Throwing us off guard so we wouldn't see this coming?"

By her side, Kaminari gave an expectant look to his old friend, awaiting her answer. In the end, Jiro couldn't quite hid her flustered nerves. "Well... uh... I wasn't really planning on uh..." she cleared her throat, finding the words and losing some of her levity. "I was serious when I sent it, today we're hopefully going after Toga if everything works out that way."

Nodding, the blond flexed his wrists and fingers, working the stiffness from them. "What are we looking for here?" He said, turning his gaze to the shop. "This Himiko's old hideout or something?"

Jiro blinked. "Uh, what? No, this is where she left something that hopefully might tell us where she's hiding though."

Glancing at the run-down antique shop, Kaminari frowned. "Here? I dunno, Kyoka. This place doesn't look like anyone's been here in years." At his word, all eyes turned to the building in question.

While it wasn't the most run down or ill maintained building in the neighborhood, it certainly wouldn't be winning any beauty contests. While the exterior wasn't so terrible an eyesore, the
splintering wood of the walls hardly made the place look inviting. Inside the shop dark, heavy curtains blocked all sunlight from entry, and these were no less frayed than the walls themselves. Even the glass seemed to be on its last legs, coated with what little dust could cling to sheer surface.

"Um, guys?" Reaching forward, twisting the door open, Ashido reached inside and pulled out the closed sign. The colors, the ink had faded so much it took them all a few seconds to see what it even was. "I think you're right, Kami."

Now gazing at the building with more uncertainty than ever, Jiro felt the air go still and cold in her lungs. "Okay, this just got a little creepy..."

Venturing forth, Deku was the first one to go inside. "Come on," he beckoned softly, "We're not gonna find it staying here." And he stepped into the darkness of the shop.

The others were hesitant, but not unwilling to follow. If he thought it was safe, hadn't noticed anything lurking within, how bad could it really be? "Nothing ventured..." Jiro sighed, stepping after him.

With a shrug, Ashido followed, though her eyes were sure to thoroughly scan her surroundings. "Aw come on, it's just nerves working us up that's all." She smiled, even though she was still nervous.

Sighing, dreadfully aware of the moment's appropriate cliches, Kaminari suddenly felt very small. "Then the expendable comic relief enters the scene..." At that moment, he really missed having his support items on hand.

"You're not expendable." All three of the others said at once.

Jiro smiled, hands in her pockets as she turned around, "you're my best friend. No one can replace you."

Giving a similar smile, though perhaps a bit warmer due to being less restrained, was Deku. "This might be a little personal, but I can't think of anyone else who was as relaxed around me as you were from the beginning." Well, almost no one.

Leaning closer to his face, though not too close, was Ashido. "I don't think I need to say anything, do I?"

Blushing for multiple reasons, Kaminari swatted at the air. "Ah! Guys... I wasn't saying that because I believed it. Just breaking the tension with some bad jokes, you know me."

With a shrug, Jiro replied. "Yeah, well, I'm in a good mood. Rather not let go of it just yet, considering what this could all lead to." She turned her eyes back to Deku, who was searching about the shop's interior.

To his surprise, he found the lightswitch. "Wanna bet this place has no power?"

"Nah," said Kaminari, "I get the feeling I'd lose," and as Deku pressed the switch, the lights flickered on and Kaminari groaned at the sudden brightness. "See? I woulda lost."

Ashido stuck her tongue out at him. "Easy to claim when you didn't say what you'd bet on." To which Kaminari replied with a shrug, and they set about searching the place. "Wow. Not much aside from dust, is there?" Picking up a rather odd looking sculpture, she tried and failed -not that many wouldn't have- to guess what it was supposed to be. Someone with sixteen arms a the head of
a goat, if that was a goat's head on her shoulders, the jagged fangs made it hard to tell.

Pulling an old book of a shelf, one of the few that hadn't collapsed, Kaminari frowned. "Not much of an antique shop..."

Casting her own eyes about, Jiro was hard pressed to disagree. Aside from that one sculpture in Ashido's hands, there really wasn't much here. A bunch of older books but, nothing too extraordinary. "Great... like searching for a needle in a needlestack." Some quick thinking let her narrow down the search by a fair margin at least, nothing with text printed on the spine could be a journal or diary. Even then, there were many volumes that fit that bill.

Deku looked as though he were about to say something in turn when his eyes caught sight of a single, thin book. There was a thin ribbon of paper, barely brand new, with a few kanji scrawled on it. 'Choose me'. Cautiously, his motions made to pluck a book from the shelves was met with a loud 'click'. To his right, the wall started moving. "what the-?" He had to step aside to avoid falling, as the floor had started moving too.

Right before his eyes, a secret stairway into the underground was revealed as lights within it flickered on. Stepping over to him, the others bore looks of astonishment, though Jiro's was the least prominent. "...Okay this is getting weird." She set her earlobe against the wall, focusing her hearing and closing her eyes. "there's... nothing," her eyes opened, a closed hand drawn up in front of her chest. "Nothing is making noise down there. It's just empty."

Leaning forward, Deku sniffed at the air before wrinkling his nose. "Ugh!" He recoiled, "what is that smell?"

Following suit, Ashido had a similar reaction. "Groady..." she grimaced, "smells like rotting meat."

Eyeing Deku skeptically, Kaminari raised an eyebrow. "H-how do you not know what that smells like, man?"

Pinching his nose, the vampire looked just a little offended. "Well, I... haven't really had to deal with food in a long time now." Steeling himself for whatever was down below, he started walking. "Hey Ashido? you might want to text a teacher about this, tell them where we are."

Blinking, pointing at herself to confirm this and prompting a nod, she reached for her phone and sent a text. "Okay, one homeroom teacher informed." And she gave a thumbs up, falling into step behind the others.

Ahead of her, Kaminari was muttering quietly to himself. "Do not make morbid jokes, do not make morbid jokes..."

"Valiant effort," Jiro quipped, "but I think that counts as a failure on your part."

Snapping his fingers, Kaminari pretended to be angry. "Curses! Foiled again!" and Ashido giggled, Deku smiling and shaking head head.

At least everyone was still calm, not that it lasted very long. At the bottom of the stairs they came face to face with a corpse. Barely anything was left that gave any clue who it was, or what they looked like. Distinctly human, though a good deal of bones were missing, namely the entirety of their left arm and the ribs on that side.

Chancing taking his hand away from his face, Deku found the scent nearly gone. "Weird..." he murmured, kneeling down to the poor soul.
Looking up at the ceiling, Ashido saw that the ventilation must have carried the lingering scent all the way up the stairs. "Who were they?" she breathed, turning toward her surroundings. A pristine, white, tile floored facility resembling a hospital. The only signs of decay or decrepitude was the corpse, and the mold that had since grown and died around and on it.

Deku was slow to answer, saying a few silent words for whoever they were. "No nametag..." he murmured, frowning at the barely clothed bones. "Guess we'll never know who it was."

"I mean," Kaminari shrugged, "dental records are a thing. We could-" A hand tugged at his sleeve, Jiro's. "Huh? What?" when he turned he saw her staring at the wall. A hand drawn note that read 'This way' pointing further inside with an arrow, written in Toga's handwriting. "That's... also creepy." Said he, reaching up and squeezing Jiro's hand as he gently removed it from his sleeve.

Standing up, breathing now a little tense, Deku whispered aloud."...I don't think we're here for K's diary." As he started cautiously treading down the one hallway.

Jiro's fingers curled inward, digging at the fabric of her gloves. "Then she lied... she used K's memory to get us to come here?" Her brow furrowed, partly in pain and partly in anger. "Why? Why would she do that?" she bit her lip, eyes to the floor as she followed after Deku.

Giving her a sympathetic look, he could only speculate. "Like you said... there's a chance we might not find the same girl at the end of this." If she were willing to use cheap and manipulative tactics like this just to bring them all to this place... who really knew anymore?

Exhaling sharply in angry defeat, she picked up the pace ahead of him. "Damn it!" The rest of them exchanged worried looks, before chasing after her. Deku, alongside her now, put a hand on her shoulder. She gave him a look, shortly before she deflated, reaching up and squeezing his hand. "I'm fine..." she lied, shaking her head with another sigh. "Just... think next time, before you say something like that." Wincing, the vampire nodded before stuffing his hands into his pockets, overcome with self consciousness.

Since when am I that insensitive?

Eyeing the pristine walls, Kaminari noticed the doorways along the passage led to padded cells. Some were furnished, made to be lived in comfortably, others were... more barbarically provisioned. Surgical tables, dentist's chairs all with restraints, fastenings meant to tie people down. Wherever such fixings lay, his eyes also found dried, old blood and occasionally the butchered and eerily preserved remains of this facility's former inhabitants. One without skin on his face, eyes dried to husks long before his death. Another with his scalp and skull looking as though it had been carved open hundreds of times, trays of food lay rotted at his feet and his body had died of undernourishment, expression utterly devoid of intelligence. To make that spectacle all the more grim, there were at least five others like him. Two men had died in the same cell, one having eaten the other. Some looked as though they'd only died yesterday, their straitjackets as clean as they were in their original packaging.

Shuddering, taking a step back from one individual who'd had his entire face removed, Kaminari turned green. "What the fuck is this place?"

"Nothing good, that's for sure..." Ashido's voice waivered liked a paper chime in a hurricane. She'd done her best not to look, not to see what Kaminari had already, but her peripheral vision was working against her.

As they reached the furthest end of the hall, it split into a T, rows of supply closets on one end, and a solitary cell at the other. There was a desk, with an intact desktop computer setup as pristine as
most of the walls. "This feels like disturbing a tomb..." Kaminari grumbled, a little more at ease now that they knew no one was here with them. No one except the bodies, anyways.

Deku, however, was not at that central section of the T with them. He was staring into the final cell, just before that intersection. His jaw was trembling, eyes widening with horror. There, in the center of the room, was a corpse sitting in a chair. A ringing sound overwhelmed his ears, his vision going fuzzy like static as the only thing keeping clarity in his eyes was that corpse. Throat slit open, wrists slit open, a look of horrified agony on her face, the straight-razor still in her hand as her eyes bore into the ceiling.

The ringing became splitting headache, reality fading to black as he stood there motionless.

He... he vaguely remembered an empty bottle of wine... behind him in the sink... he was drawing with crayons...

Then...

then... oh god, he was so little then...

_She gripped the razor in her hand,_

_and in the next moment, did something his tiny mind could never have fathomed._

_No, no please no, not again! DON'T MAKE ME SEE THIS AGAIN!_

A solitary voice cut through the illusion, though considering it was a dead villain speaking, as may well have been a part of it. _"Will turning away make it any less true?"_

_I... I hear... is that singing? Is someone singing?_

_Make it stop... Make it stop make it stop MAKE IT STOP!_

_Deku screamed, and with her shaking hand..._

_She took the razor and opened the other._

_Through the horrors of this long buried memory, he could still hear Shigaraki. "You already know_
Ashido was the one to answer that, pointing down the other end of the T section toward the solitary
in his ears like the dissociative state hadn't ended yet.

There were so many things wrong with those statements, but Deku, given his current state of mind,
chanced another step toward him, her hand on his shoulder elicited a jump, and she almost flinched
As bad as he was at reading people, he knew she'd not only seen through that lie but not
Kyoka. I'm supposed to call her- right, we're-
Dimly, he felt his understanding of who this girl fall back into focus.
Her voice was trembling one, as she took a tentative step closer to him, staring into those
heart rate, even from that distance.

Another scream split the night...

STOP IT!

A bloody razor clattered to the floor...

A hand brushed his shoulder, his senses rocketed back into his possession and he lurched away
from its owner. Pale and cold as fresh fallen snow, his chest was heaving with his breath as cold
sweat drenched his skin. Hyperventilating, his eyes didn't recognize anything around him, nor the
worried, heartbroken face that was staring him down. But he knew... he knew she could hear his
heart rate, even from that distance.

Her voice was trembling one, as she took a tentative step closer to him, staring into those
mismatched eyes. "Green?" He gasped, thinking he remembered being called that. "Are you okay?"

Dimly, he felt his understanding of who this girl fall back into focus. Jiro... that's Jiro. No...
Kyoka. I'm supposed to call her- right, we're- He gulped, nodding in reply. "Yep."

As bad as he was at reading people, he knew she'd not only seen through that lie but not
appreciated it. All the same, she was too worried to push her own issue. "What happened?" She
chanced another step toward him, her hand on his shoulder elicited a jump, and she almost flinched
her hand away. As it softly went back to his shoulder the other two were staring in frozen,
wondering worry.

They'd never seen him like this... none but her. A fact that left him drowning in shame.

He swallowed again. "Don't look in that room, okay?" For a moment her eyes darted toward it, but
she nodded. "It's not... you don't wanna know."

Over at the desktop, Kaminari nodded, turning his eyes to the screen. "It um... everyone in the cells
died of oxygen deprivation. The last command entered at this thing was to cut the airflow into the
cells, before they tried to seal this place up."

There were so many things wrong with those statements, but Deku, given his current state of mind,
could only really focus on one. "What do you mean 'tried'?" His head was still ringing, like buzzing
in his ears like the dissociative state hadn't ended yet.

Ashido was the one to answer that, pointing down the other end of the T section toward the solitary
cell. "Someone, whoever was in there, broke out." Rounding the corner with shaky steps, Deku peered down the hall and saw a solitary, broken door.

It had been carved through, scraped through if the metal shavings scattered about the vicinity were any indication. Deku knew better than to assume otherwise. Intrepidly, he stepped forward, venturing toward the cell and he was graced with the sight of another hand written note. 'In there.'

Of course while he walked down the hall, he heard the other's talking, namely Ashido and Kaminari. "How'd you log into that thing?" Said she.

"How do you think?" He peeled a post-it note off the monitor, showing her the credentials he used to log in. "They must have figured no one else would ever find this place, to leave this lying around. I have full admin access."

Ashido laughed, "And here I thought you'd learned a thing or two from me."

"Oh I have... but you know I'm terrible with technology."

Rolling her eyes by his side, Jiro couldn't help but feel their attitudes were just a little inappropriate. "Time and place guys..." Not that they heard her.

Deku didn't say anything. Instead he knelt by the door, his fingers reaching into the thick pile of metal shavings and pulling a metal placard from therefrom. Carved into the polished surface, was a name. 'R.J. Mooney'. His fingers tightened on the object, warping the metal audibly. "Moonfish..."

Placing a hand on his shoulder, Jiro gave him a squeeze. "It might not be him."

Giving her a look as he got to his feet, he tossed the placard aside, stepping into the breached cell. No sooner had he than his eyes went as wide as they could. "Holy-..."

"Shit." Jiro completed for him in a hushed tone, her own widened eyes scanning the wall.

Writing, in some places carved and in others it was scrawled and scratched into it with pen. Whoever this prisoner was, they didn't have the benefit of a padded cell, and if the desperated scrawlings were any indication, nor did they have the luxury of humane treatment.

'I can hear them... outside my cell. They think I'm not listening, that I can't hear... I wish that were true, but I also can't wish that. Not knowing would be so much worse the fear, I think the fear would kill me."

_Day 11: skull, aching. Throat parched, stitches bleeding. Reflection... hideous._

_Cover my face_

_COVER MY FACE COVER MY FACE COVER MY FACE COVER MY FACE COVER MY FACE COVER MY FACE COVER MY FACE COVER MY FACE COVER MY FACE_

_Day 17: Scenario 13B... that's what they're banking on? Are they insane, or is my mind no longer in a state to delineate such things?_

_They were my scenarios, my code and algorithms that mapped them! YOU CANNOT SHUT ME AWAY AND STEAL MY WORK!_
QFZCD: Again... into my skull... again... why?

WHY

Brain... why do they cut...

WHY MUST I WATCH WHILE THEY CUT

Monkey soup: What are squids? Those things used for counting? Is that right? Am I walrusing that correctly?

Walruses...? those... things you... parts of time of your life that look back on?

WHAT HAVE THEY APPLIED TO ME

**Lorenz:** In chaos theory, the **butterfly effect** is the sensitive dependence on initial conditions in which a small change in one state of a **deterministic non-linear system** can result in large differences in a later state.

The term, closely associated with the work of Edward **Fish**, (is that right?) is derived from the metaphorical example of the details of a tornado (the exact time of formation, the exact path taken) being influenced by minor perturbations such as the flapping of the wings of a distant butterfly several weeks earlier. Lorenz discovered the effect when he observed that runs of his weather model with initial condition data that was rounded in a seemingly inconsequential manner would fail to reproduce the results of runs with the unrounded initial condition data. **A very small change in initial conditions had created a significantly different outcome.**

The idea that small causes may have large effects in general and in weather specifically was earlier recognized by French mathematician and engineer Henri Poincaré and American mathematician and philosopher Norbert Wiener. Edward Lorenz's work placed the concept of instability of the Earth's atmosphere onto a quantitative base and linked the concept of instability to the properties of large classes of dynamic systems which are undergoing nonlinear dynamics and **deterministic chaos**.

Prophet...

They wanted a prophet... a prophet of the end...

Prophet of the darkest day...

Spoon Squirrels: talk of anesthesia... they might actually give me anesthesia again...

it's been so long... it hurts...

the drills... in my head...

hungry...

want $M_\mathcal{A}_{\mathcal{E}}^{n,P}$

anesthesia...

please

anesthesia...
The anesthetic state produced does not fit into the conventional classification of stages of anesthesia, but instead produces a state of unconsciousness which has been termed "dissociative" anesthesia in that it appears to selectively interrupt association pathways to the brain before producing somesthetic sensory blockage. In contrast to other anesthetics, protective reflexes such as coughing and swallowing are are maintained under anesthesia. Variations in body temperature may occur. Although some salivation is occasionally noted, the persistence of the swallowing reflex aids in minimizing the hazards associated with ptalism. A single intramuscular injection usually has a wide margin of safety select patience. Fasting prior to induction is not essential; however, when preparing for elective surgery, it is advisable to withhold food for at least six hours prior to administration. Restraint in subhuman primate neonates is difficult to achieve. The recommended restraint dosages for the following are: papio cynocephalus, Pongo Pygmaeus, eagle to whale mg/kg; Aotus Trivirgatus, Svirfneblin to tardigrade mg/kg, Macaca fascicularis radroach to müsslord mg/kg. A single intramuscular injection produces restraint suitable for TB testing; radiography, physical examination or blood collection. To reduce the incidence of emergence reaction, subjects should not be stimulated by sound or handling during the recovery period. Apnea, respiratory arrest, cardiac arrest and death have occasionally been reported when used in conjunction with sedatives or other anesthetics. Close monitoring of patients is strongly advised during induction, maintenance and recovery. Timothy Leary identified a genetic type whose future circuits have begun to be activated and coined them FUTANTS. Futants are naturally selected to facilitate survival by being better adapted to explore the future and take risks through their genetic characteristics. Unless we provide a proper environment of freedom in which this positive genetic type can be recognized, operate in, and the dross be separated from the valuable information, we will be depriving the race of a vital resource. Every time a scientist, Philosopher, artist, or athlete pushes our thresholds to new ground the entire race evolves. Ritual Magik is a system of disciplines and exercises aimed at activating parts of the mind we might normally never use (about 85%). Through this system a better understanding of ourselves is attained. No true ritual magician has ever sacrificed life, drank goats' blood, or taken part in any other stupid urban legend ritual. This sort of behavior is left to the psychotic, dogmatic, fundamentalist believers you see on your T.V. everyday letting off bombs and killing people in the name of God. Beliefs are dangerous. Beliefs allow the mind to stop functioning. A non-functioning mind is clinically dead. Believe in nothing."

Murder burger: head hurt

no painmoosers

head hurt

hungry

Kill them...

hungry...

hungry + kill

be free..."
The last thing that was carved into the wall, was a fish trying to eat the moon.

In stunned, stupefied horror, Deku and Jiro tuned to each other. "Green..." she gulped, "what- what the fuck is this place?"

Unable to do much more than breathe heavily for a few seconds, he just shook his head. "This place was built into the shop. Someone... bought this place, likely hired people to work here. Contracted people to construct it all..." As he went on, she scanned about the room, looking down the hall to make sure their friends were okay while she was at it. To her palpable relief, they were fine. "Either rich criminals or..." he gulped, trying not to be sick. "or-"

"Heroes." They finally looked each other in the eye again. "Heroes could have funded this. Who else could even be rich enough?" the question hung in the air like mustard gas around their heads, noxious and clouding their every thought. "Green... what the fuck did Toga bait us into?"

"I don't know..." He started walking for the door, hoping that he could at least keep his stomach calm until they left the building.

He'd nearly reached the door, when he saw one last desperate scribbling in the walls, though he ignored it.

As the duo reached their awaiting friends, Deku swallowed again. "Can we take the computer with us?"

Ashido blinked. "Um... not all of it, but I can remove the hard drive if you want. Why?"

"Evidence." Deku said simply. "It's evidence of what these people did here." as she set to work, and he went to help her, he turned to Kaminari. "You pocket that sticky note?"

Blinking, eyeing the cell his two best friends has recently emerged from, he nodded. "Uh, yeah, actually."

Deku's turn to nod. "Good. Make sure you don't lose it." We might want that later...

Kaminari and Jiro exchanged a very worried look. "Uh, Green," Kaminari shifted uncomfortably in his seat, "what's this 'evidence' gonna lead to?"

Jrio was the one to answer that. "Whoever it was that made all this happen." Ashido's face went to about the palest shade of pink it could possibly go to, and she gulped audibly. "If they're still out there... we have to stop them." It would be at that exact moment that Ashido's phone rang, everyone present considered themselves lucky that little jolt wasn't enough to give them a heart attack after all this.

---

"Powerful representations of life that many associate with our souls.

A symbol of resurrection to some, one of endurance and change to others.

To whom it may concern... the symbolism of the Butterfly."

---

Outside Tartarus, the quartet led by Stendhal arrived in a cab, just then pulling up to the front gate. As the four of them exited the cab they were greeted by a very angry, very tied police sergeant tapping his foot with crossed arms. "Well? What have you got to say for yourselves?"
Stendhal shrugged. "It was a quiet, naggless afternoon." Then he gave a dark little smile. "I'd do it again too."

With a quivering lip, the furious man stepped forward, eyeing Twist. "Who are you?"

The vigilante managed to keep her cool, to such a degree that even Shoto was impressed. "A friend of Sten's."

Smiling like a man off his medicine, the sergeant looked at her as if she were prey. "You have your hero license with you?"

It was only for a moment, but she was visibly pushed off base by that. "I-

Stendhal stepped between them. "Course she does." At the dhampire's eyes boring into his soul, the policeman lost some of his color. "It's outright stupid to ask that question, you should know better."

Even so, there was something to be said for his bravery. "I really must insist that see-

Growling, Stendhal grabbed his collar and spun him around, propping him up against the cab with his feet kicking to find purchase on the ground. "Come on now," his glaring eyes were joined by a wicked grin, "we're all friends here, aren't we?" Uravity's eyes darted between her classmate and the guards outside Tartarus, hands on their stun-weapons.

Gone almost colorless, the sergeant nodded. "Yeah. Yeah, I uh... don't know what I was thinking there." Turning to the guards he laughed nervously. "All good fellas! Just- just horsin around!"

Laughing a little louder, he clapped a hand on Stendhal's shoulder. "Love this guy! Fun at parties..." and the hero in training let him down.

As Stendhal patted the officer, Todoroki glowered with crossed arms, turning his gaze far away. "There he is." Then, gesturing to the front gates of Tartarus, he said, "Shall we?" making sure the sergeant went first.

All but Twist ventured through, at the allowance of the guards. Taking a seat at a nearby bench, she plucked her phone from her pocket, dialing the number of her favorite person. Stendhal couldn't help but smile.

*I should really stop teasing those two...

"Was that really necessary?"

As the entered the main lobby, Stendhal was surprised to hear Shoto speak with disapproval. "He threatened my friend."

"And that justifies it?" Shoto shook his head. "There were other ways to handle that..." He frowned.

Stendhal growled. "I didn't hear you complaining yesterday..."

Shoto's face flinched, and for a moment, he actually looked hurt by that sentiment. "...It's- I-" He sighed, composure slipping enough that he almost looked as sad as he felt. "...I'll catch up with you." and he walked away.

"Sten..." Uravity murmured in a scolding tone. "Why?" When he didn't have an answer, shyness and guilt eating him, she frowned and chased after her friend.

 Ahead of him, the sergeant almost laughed. "So only you can treat your friends unkindly, is that
His fist clenched. "...Shut up."

Then, the policeman scoffed, mocking a salute. "Sure, yes sir. Want some coffee."

Snarling, he gave a rather flippant reply. "Love some. I take it black."

According to an article written almost two hundred years ago, researchers found people partial to bitter tastes, such as black coffee and tonic water, were more likely to display signs of machiavellianism, sadism and narcissism, meaning they were more prone to being duplicitous, vain, selfish and deriving pleasure from other's pain.

Unfortunately for this policeman, he had read this article and was already considering such likelihoods. "Uh, right." he said, gulping. "I'll uh... I'll just do that.

As he walked hurriedly away, Stendhal rolled his eyes.

"Domestic troubles, Sten?"

The dhampire stopped dead in his tracks. *That voice...* Turning toward the latest cell he'd passed, he saw a man he would never would have expected to see in Tartarus. "...Seether?"

Inside the cell, stood a man with bleeding feet, his skin so paper-thin you could see the muscles, veins and nerve endings beneath. His lips, when they stretched into a smile, couldn't even hide his teeth. "You look almost as bad as I."

Eyeing the blood pooling around his feet, the younger of the two wasn't so convinced of that. "What are you doing here?"

"Bleeding."

Stendhal sighed, growled really, and rolled his eyes. "I can see that. What the hell happened to you?"

Seether pointed to himself. "You mean the skin?" the other opened his mouth to speak, but was cut off before he could. "Happened not long after I was born, believe it or not. See... my parents, they... their quirks, a combination of them, made mine." The dhampire crossed his arms, waiting somewhat worriedly for the story to conclude. "My mom had this way with skin, she could... mold it, shape it if she pleased. My father? Well, anything containing water, 'thing' is the keyword, if he touched it, it would boil in seconds."

"So you boil skin. I know."

Seether laughed. "Most kids... their quirks don't awake till their five, six, something like that. But me?" Another blood chilling laugh. "I was born with mine." He waited just long enough for the implication to settle in, for it to crawl across Stendhal's mind, and fill his heart with horror. "Needless to say... mom died." The younger man's arms uncrossed, his jaw dropped. "Father hated me. Wanted me dead. But the staff were none the wiser to it, saw a man with a broken heart looking at them when he asked if he could just hold his son. Give his son a bath." Another few seconds, and the implication has Stendhal's eyes wincing shut. "Were it not for a stranger passing by? I would have boiled alive. And now..." He drew up a hand, two fingers extended, then tapped his forearm. From the point of impact, a thin stream of blood trickled down his skin. "I need my suits to avoid this."
Nodding, his understanding grave, Stendhal looked at the man with pity. "Always wondered why you never took it off. Why don't you have it now?"

Seether shrugged. "Accidentally hurt one of the guards. He took exception to that, now all my suits have been in the wash for... about three days." He gestured to his bed, his bloody, surely stained bed. "I haven't gotten much sleep."

Another, slow nod. "I'll get them back to you."

The older of the two nodded. "Thank you, Sten. You're a good kid." When he went to walk away, the fragile man spoke up. "How are the others?" He stopped in his tracks. "Since the ambush, at our hideout, the police... I haven't heard from anyone in here." The younger of the two felt his body go heavy. "The lovebirds, did they...?"

"Clean getaway." Stendhal said quietly. "Saw them recently, in town. They're doing fine."

Seether seemed to smile. "Good, good." and sounded happy too. "...and the others?"

Stendhal shrugged. "Vigil's been in the wind, haven't heard from her since that night. And Knuckleduster, well... you saw what he did."

Slow to nod, the older of the two sighed. "You ever check up on the dead cop's family?"

"Once or twice... for whatever good it did."

Another sigh from the fragile man. "So... is he still at large? Alive at least?"

Stendhal laughed. "With that many bullet holes in him?" He shrugged, "maybe, but I'm not betting on it."

He went to leave again, but his old partner had one last question. "And... How long do you have left to live?" He allowed himself to stop, just one last time, though he said nothing. Stendhal just turned around and smiled over his shoulder, the meaning it held unmistakable. Slowly, Seether realized only all too well. "You deserved better than that kid. Always have." And Stendhal walked away. "Were the world a better place, one where people with ugly quirks like ours more allowed to live freely, I would have like to see who you'd become."

*People being oppressed for having unsavory quirks... where have I heard that before?*

Finally, he rounded that last corner and found the man who'd summoned him hanging up his phone again. "Assembling the class for something?"

Pocketing the accursed flip-phone, as they both hated owning them, Aizawa nodded. "Just a few of you. Wanted to be sure this was the right one." He gestured into the cell, toward a man with only one eye.

A muscular man with the eye of heartless predator. "Hockey-mask..." Stendhal scowled. "is there any way I can interview him? Alone."

The teacher was about to turn, saying that was confirmation enough when he finally noticed the ghastly state of the seventeen year old. "...Are you okay?"

Slow to shut his eyes, he made a conceited effort to control his temper. "Please... It's important."

Hesitant as Aizawa was, at this point in time, he seemed to be... moved by the request. Exhaling, he
Overhaul had taken a seat on the old, oaken table, a hand rubbing at his chin as he considered the tale he'd just been told. In the ears of any other, such things were world shaking, such revelations changed the perspective of even the most devout believers of a cause. Of course, such preaching had been conducted in the presence of those already converted. As his men loaded weapons, preparing for the impending assault around him, Dabi walked over, sitting down gingerly as he clutched his still wounded side.

"We're really doing this?" Said the lackey, observing what few men they had left.

Overhaul nodded. "We are."

Dabi sighed, massaging his wound. "I understand wanting to go find Eri, to get Katsukame-Muscular, whatever you want to call him." Overhaul smiled. 'Muscular'... well, he supposed 'Overhaul' wasn't so imaginative a name either. "But... risking what little we still have to go and get this Kurogiri out of Tartarus as well? We don't even know this All For One character. How can we really trust him?"

The Yakuza Boss chuckled. "You're really questioning my orders now? All For One's info, all of it mind you, matches up with everything Mooney told us."

Realizing what he'd just done in front of the men, the now exiled Todoroki gulped. "I- I didn't-"

"Relax," Overhaul patted the slightly younger man's shoulder, "I'm not angry, my friend."

Blinking, Dabi raised an eyebrow. "I... I'm not sure that we could be described as friends, sir."

Overhaul gave him a searching look. "Really?" he crossed his arms. "How long has it been since you found us, Toya?" Dabi's eyes shifted again, searching the men with weary discomfort. "As I recall, you've been a part of this organization for almost decade now. Meaning we more or less found you right after you ran away from dear old dad."

Lip quivering, the lackey seemed to grow smaller. "You promised never to speak of that."

"And I'm not." Said the Boss, hands upheld in an amicable gesture. "My point is, you've been here since I was 14." another pat on Dabi's shoulder. "We grew up here together. Why should we not be friends?"

Dabi, once again, swallowed. "Erm, well, I'd think a friend would be more of an equal."

Over in the corner, All For One Raised an eyebrow, listening intently to the conversation as he pet the Nomu's head. Overhaul shrugged. "Well, then why you don't you act like one?"

The younger of the two seemed to consider this. "There wont be any repercussions?"

"Not unless you get violent with me."

Nodding, the former Todoroki relaxed. "This isn't a good plan."

Overhaul grinned beneath his mask. "You have a better one?"

As the two younger men started talking logistics, All For One suddenly felt very foolish. Had...
it really been that simple all along? Were he and Kurogiri really just one conversation away from that this entire time?

...No. It didn't matter, and it wasn't in the past yet. When they got to Tartarus, they'd get him out and then they could have this conversation themselves.

"Alright," Overhaul and Dabi stood up together, "Listen up, because we're not going over this again!" The Boss's voice resonated in the chamber earning the attention of all who were present. "We have solid intel that Muscular and Eri are both, as we speak, locked up in that horrid jail the heroes keep!" All For One Stood up, cracking his knuckles. "We have a third person we're trying to rescue," Overhaul pointed to the man with glowing eyes, "so some of you will be following him. If there's any problems with that, I don't want to hear them." He made a strong gesture to the man by his side. "Dabi's with me, and we're going after out lost lambs." He pointed to two more of his goons, and then fell into step with them. "The rest of you? Follow All For One." The villain in question gave an appreciative nod. "You know the risks... lets go screw with the world." Pulling a pistol from his pocket, Overhaul primed it before striding out of the room, the others not far behind.

To his surprise, he almost felt something, when the Nomu followed after Overhaul instead of him.

_Screwing with the world, Overhaul? Heh... no. It's time to completely re-write it. It's time for the real conflict to begin..._

While it wasn't his first time visiting the place, whenever Deku found himself in Tartarus he always felt a certain sense of insignificance. The overwhelming security, the guards didn't even have visible faces and he was always being watched like a criminal waiting to strike. Kaminari and Ashido had gone off to Kaminari's house, stashing the evidence away -and only that, so they said- leaving Deku and Jiro to answer Aizawa's summons.

This being her first time in the place, Jiro was understandably nervous. "Make this place imposing enough?" she muttered, keeping watch over her shoulder. "Any idea what Aizawa wants with us?"

The vampire answered in earnest. "Nope. I have no idea." When he felt her hand fishing for his, he didn't put up a fuss.

A fact she was immediately thankful for, easing down slightly. "Well, he sure picked a weird place to meet." Turning back to where they were walking, her eyes narrowed. "Hey I... I think I hear someone familiar up ahead."

Deku smiled. "Vanessa." Picking up the pace a little. "Wonder what she's doing here..."

Quickly matching his sudden change in gait, Jiro almost smiled. "Oh, yeah. She's you're um..." No, wait she couldn't say that... "well, she's like you, right?"

Slowly, he nodded. "Uh yeah. She's the one who-... yeah."

They both laughed. "Is it... weird talking about that?"

"Not really," he shrugged, pushing the button to open the door separating them, "but she might've heard this conversation..."

In fact, she had not. She'd been far too busy with a conversation of her own. "-I nearly killed him trying to save All Might." Both of the student heroes were not surprised to see the elder vampire speaking to Ingenium. "All I'm saying is, maybe this isn't as bad as he thinks. We have this guy on
the ropes, don't we?"

The engine hero sighed. "Maybe... but considering-" his eyes fluttered, surprised by the students who'd just entered the room. "Jiro, Midoriya." And he was smiling.

As she turned toward them, so was Vanessa. "Little one." She said warmly, reaching out to hug him, a gesture he was only all too happy to reciprocate. Though as her arms wrapped around him, her nose did detect something odd. Lavender? But why would he- Then her sharp nose detected the real source. Ohhh. I see. She smiled, stepping back and giving Jiro a knowing look. "I trust you're well?" she said to Deku.

As the violet eyed girl blushed, he simply nodded, just happy to see her. "Uh, mostly." he rubbed the back of his head. "Just not thrilled about being here again..."

Jiro blinked, overcoming her nerves. "Wait, again?"

Ingenium nodded. "Yeah, that's right. Mister Midoriya has been volunteering here. Nothing dangerous, he's far too young for anything aside from helping in the kitchen, or with the waste disposal."

Jiro nodded. "Uh... okay." She wasn't really sure why he'd bothered to explain that...

"Um, ah heh..." Deku was suddenly feeling a bit out of place, with all this attention. "Does anyone know where Aizawa is?"

Vanessa's eyes flickered of something dark, but then she pointed to the other door in the room. "That way, last I saw."

Deku nodded. "Thank you... Vanessa."

She smiled. "Promise to wait for me before he takes you anywhere."

This time, he smiled as he agreed. "Okay."

When Jiro went to follow him, Vanessa put a hand on her shoulder. "Actually... can we talk?"

Her turn to feel out of place. "Uh... sure? Yeah that's okay." She turned to Deku, "catch up in a few." and they went their separate ways.

Okay then... Shrugging off whatever that was about, he ventured forth. Surprisingly, this stretch of the facility seemed almost empty. Almost like it had been cleared out recently. Weird... must be something going on. They wouldn't do this unless-

"He's not the kinda guy you cross, kid." Deku stopped. That was the voice of that villain with the muscle fibers sprouting from his back. "I tell you his name, even his assumed name, I'm dead. Never-mind telling you where he lives." He could hear him talking, even through the walls of his cell. Vampire hearing hard at work, he guessed. "So, when they come for me -and make no mistake, they will- I'll get to walk out of here instead of being carted out to a morgue."

He heard a laugh, a laugh that could only have belonged to Akaguro. "Forgive me, Muscular, but I don't care. I'd actually love to kill you myself, but I don't think I'll be doing that." At that statement, so coldly delivered, the vampire felt his blood run cold.

He actually means it... how can he say tha-!?
Muscular laughed. "Oh hohohoho HO! You've got some spine. Unlike most of these pathetic heroes..." another round of laughing, this one no less unsettling than the one before.

"Spine..." He couldn't see, but he could tell Akaguro was smiling. "That's your favorite weakspot, right?"...What the hell was he talking about? "I've heard of you, the things you've done," Deku's footsteps brought him ever closer to the cell, so he could peer into it at long last, "you're something of a serial killer." Deku stopped again, just shy of the window, leaning his ear closer instead. "Only instead of targeting regular people, civilians, you kill heroes." Deku's eyes widened a fraction, and Muscular could only laugh. "The Hero killer.'" Akaguro scoffed. "Chilling name for a coward."

As the vampire's jaw dropped, his friend put his feet up on the table in the room. "You ever pick a fight you could lose, or are they all just folks you knew you could beat? Cuz if you won't even give me a name, or a hint-

"Tread carefully boy." this time, his tone was sharp. "There's a fine line between bravery and stupidity."

"and in relation to that border you live where in stupidtown?"

**Did- did he really just-**

Muscular laughed again. "Stendhal, right? Yeah... I've heard of you too." The thug stretched, and the popping noises of his spine managed to make Deku cringe. "Some kind of street-justice nut job, taken to crippling heroes you don't approve of."

...**What?**

Akaguro gritted his teeth, but Muscular kept right on talking. "Tell me... did you ever kill one of them?" Hand clenched so tight his knuckles snapped, one managed to dislocate. "Lord knows you wanted too, hell, I'm amazed Shogun was even able to recover from his injuries enough to-" a lurch forward, chair falling to the floor, knuckles striking across Muscular's face, glass eye knock free of his skull along with a few teeth. Yet his laugh just came back, like nothing happened. "You may think me low, boy, but at least I know what matters most: who. I. am." As Deku peered into the cell, Muscular turned back to the would-be-hero in the room with him, and saw into the mangled, empty eye-socket. It was almost like peering into a hollowed out watermelon, if it had been left in the sun just a little too long one day. Dry, flaking having gone brown in spots where you could tell the rot had truly set in, and the only moisture was this thick, almost yellow viscus fluid around the deepest part of it.

With a wicked grin that gave Akaguro a run for his money, the villain whispered. "And so do you... don't you?" Lip quivering, Stendhal took a step away, toward the window. "You're just afraid to let the world see..."

At that exact moment, the building shook, so hard in fact that Deku was knocked off his feet.

"What the hell!??" Akaguro demanded. "What was-"

His voice was cut off by the sound of Muscular's laughing. "Speak of the devil, and he shall appear..."

---

Three guards turned to paste inside of four seconds. Their innards splattered all over the wall, and more funneled up from a nearby stairwell, Dabi filled the small entry-way with flame. It wasn't the first time his flames had incinerated people, but he never could get used to the screams. The way their vocal chords would tear themselves apart as the moisture of their bodies was all siphoned
away, leaving them sounding like the last attempts of dehydrated turkeys to sound some sort of alarm.

Of course, this was to say nothing of what melting human skin looked like up close, as it dripped like sludged up ice cream to the floor.

"Clear." Said Dabi, grabbing a surprisingly intact key-card off a dead guard, then advancing to lock the doorway he'd just cleansed of life.

Overhaul groaned, musing over their present options. "I doubt we have more than a few minutes here, before the cavalry comes in."

Dabi gulped, "Calvarly meaning 'All Might', right?"

Not having a way to break that news more gently, Overhaul nodded. "In so many words."

A steeling breath, and brisk nod. "What should I do?"

Overhaul pointed down a different corridor. "Find the girl. Take Mooney with you."

Confounded by this decision, Dabi shook his head. "No."

Overhaul spun around. "We don't have time to argue! I can handle myself, just find the girl!"

The two men stood there for a moment longer before Dabi gave up. "Mooney? with me. The rest of you with the Boss!"

While neither of them were fond of this decision, they also knew it was for the best, somewhere in their heads.

Mooney seemed reluctant to go with Dabi, but followed him nonetheless. "You're... not going to burn me, right?"

The former Todoroki wasn't quite sure how to take that... "Wasn't planning on it. Just don't go charging into my flames and you'll be fine." Provided we don't run into my father...

Cutting off that train of thought was a sudden hail of automatic gunfire. Dabi had barely the time to dodge, but Mooney took the full brunt of it. If it had been simple bullets firing at them, that would have been one thing. But no: these were stun weapons, dealing out a sever electric shock with every hit. Ideally these would be used to subdue the inmates, if they had to be used, but Mooney had just been hit with enough of them to cook a rhino. When his body hit the floor, it started flopping about like a beached fish, convulsing with the electric current.

The corridors of Tartarus were narrow, not exactly ideal for any sort of combat. Without ranged weapons, they would be at a significant disadvantage unless All For One pulled through. Hand scrambling for his radio, Dabi started yelling into it. "One, now would be a good time!"

Grumbling to himself on the building's roof not far from the entrance Overhaul had made in it, All For One concentrated on just completing his task. "This is not a quirk you want to rush, child..." Clouds overhead swirled about, turning black and crackling with thunder. With two of his fingertips, he took aim, and lightning struck the telephone pole that served as the main delivery source for above-ground electricity.

One...
Taking aim again, this time at a nearby and conveniently placed oil tank. With just two cracks of Thor's hammer, if one was feeling poetic, the tank exploded and the underground power supply was no more.

Two...

One last time, he took aim toward one corner of the building itself, and the Yakuza behind him started cowering toward the edge of the roof. "I wouldn't run, if I were you."

"Yeah? Why not?" Said he, making for the fire escape.

"Very well," All For One sighed, "climb down the metal object if you wish." No sooner had he said that then the lightning struck true, shaking the entire building again. "And just one more..." One more strike, and the building's internal generator was overloaded. Rushing forward, reaching into his pocket, he procured a small device.

It was, in fact, a radio-jammer. For those who do not know, all wireless technology -even cell phones- operate on and communicate using radio frequencies. With this one device, thanks to severing the building's landlines, he had cut off all avenues of communications inside the prison. It wouldn't keep outside help away forever though, not with the amount of commotion they were about to make.

"Move." Said All For One, jumping into the building, as all the cellblocks opened at once.

Finding himself on the floor, Stendhal felt his heart slow when the power went out. Scrambling forward, he lapped up Muscular's blood, and the hulking man fell to the floor with a thud, shouting angrily.

"This won't stop me, kid! I'll get out of-"

Whatever he had to say was never heard. Stendhal had grabbed his fallen chair while the villain was on the floor and proceeded to hit him so hard with it that it shattered. Hearing the villain once or twice more, he belted him with the remains until even that subsided. "Boring conversation anyway..." and he threw the shards of the chair clattering to the floor.

Stepping out of the cell, he saw his best friend standing up, pulling himself off the floor.

Stendhal grinned. "Guren!" throwing his arms wide, as if offering the man a hug. "What brings you here?" He went to give a hand in standing up, but Deku seemed to shy away from him. Feeling... hurt? Yes, that's what it was... he hadn't felt this in a very long time... in any case, it gave the half-human pause. "What's wrong?" his voice failed to mask anything that he felt.

Feeling guilty about this, Guren went to give him an honest answer when he heard every cell on the block open. "...Oh fuck." Turning around, Stendhal saw no less than twenty inmates exiting their cages, with him and his friend as the only ones between them and their way out.

They'd only just started backpedaling, the inmates charging, when a familiar face entered the room through an adjoining door, carrying Stendhal's sword. Eyes glowing, hair standing on end, Aizawa threw himself into the corridor with a snarl. "No you don't!" Scarf around the man's neck, he halved him to, battering the side of his head against the wall; an instant knock out.

Tossing the sword to its owner, he charged forward, throwing himself into the air in a whirling spiral, his knee striking one man in the side of his neck, out like a light. Stendhal grinned, unsheathing his sword. "Guren," the vampire turned to him, "like we did at the USJ?"
Extending his claws, Guren nodded. "Right!" and they charged after Aizawa, as he forced one man into doing the splits before elbowing his larynx.

As they entered the battle along their teacher, Stendhal felt more alive than ever before.

Alarms blaring, so loud Kyoka could barely stand it, she plugged her earphone jacks into the devices mounted on her gloves. Aiming down yet another hallway, she unleashed the sound of her quirk at full blast, throwing them all into ear-ringing dazes, stumbling about and yelping in pain. "Valentine!"

At her word, the vampire charged forward, her immense strength and speed allowing her to make short work of the entirety of the inmates. "Clear!" she shouted, and the guards set about binding them, moving them into whatever cells they could.

Vanessa was panting, hands on her knees as she hunched over, catching her breath. As she tried to catch yet another second wind, Kyoka ran over to her. "How many more?"

Giving a tired breath, Vanessa was slow to reply. "Another... six cell blocks, at least." Kyoka felt her expression and shoulders sink. Then, her ears perked up along with the vampire's.

"Gunfire." Vanessa agreed with that assessment.

"More guards containing the situation?" she hoped

Kyoka focused just a little harder. "The guns sound really different-" she didn't have time to finish her train of thought. A man with glowing red eyes rounded the corner, followed by three thugs armed with assault rifles. As they rounded the corner, they opened fire. Vanessa's body flew, hurling herself between the student and bullets tearing through everyone in the hallway.

"ARGH!" the vampire's blood spattered on the walls and floor, one more leap and she was around the bend, having brought Kyoka to safety. Searching Vanessa over, seeing where she'd been shot, her eyes caught sight of the bullets pushing themselves back out of her body, clattering to the floor. "Nng... god do I hate being shot." Around the corner there was more gunfire, the sounds of people being electrocuted -fried- and then of a very brief brawl. Chancing a look around the corner, Vanessa bit her lips and winced her eyes closed as she took cover once again. "Run."

Kyoka faltered at that statement. "Wh-wha-..." a vigorous shake of her head. "but what about the guards we have to help them!"

Lumbering around the corner was a large, muscled man with glowing red eyes, his breathing assisted by a respirator over the lower half of his face. Growling, Vanessa threw a punch only for the man to grab her hand and stop it cold. Hurling her body about, she twisted in the air and slammed her foot into the villain's head, sending him threw a wall. As she landed, she looked right into Kyoka's eyes and yelled. "RUN!"

The villain exploded through the wall, grappling with the vampire as they threw each other about, demolishing the building around them as they fought. Following Vanessa's advice, she started running and didn't look back.

Corner after corner, hall after hall, staircase filled with bodies after staircase filled with bodies. Tartarus had turned into a warzone. She was about to round another bend when a rush of heat and blue light made her come screeching to a halt. Something smelled vaguely of... bacon as several voices shrieked in agony shortly before another rush of searing flame stopped them short.
"Come on, Mooney."

Kyoka's eyes widened. *As in that Nomu thing? With Toya Todoroki!?* Not one to fight a suicidal battle, she ducked into a nearby closet, taking refuge under a table. No sooner had she stopped moving that she noticed Uraraka and Eri, huddled beneath another directly across from her. Placing a finger to her lips, her warning clear, the other two girls nodded.

Then, stopping her heart, the door opened. She saw Dabi's boots as they entered the room, stepping soundly against the floor. When he reached the center of the room, Eri squeaked. Kyoka's entire body went tense as Dabi halted all movement. Hands wreathed in flame, he knelt to the ground, ready to burn whoever was in the room, when he suddenly stopped, the flame flickering out. Uraraka was attempting to shield the child with her body, staring down the Yakuza, knowing what was about to happen, but refusing to show fear.

Kyoka was about to attack, when Dabi put a finger to his lips. "Shhh..." motioning with his other hand, to keep their voices low, he whispered, "get her out of here. I didn't help that murdering witch break her out just for her to end right back she was." While the three of struggled for anything say, Dabi stood up, exiting the closet. "She's not in there, let's go." and he and Mooney wandered away.

Sighing in relief, Kyoka took a deep breath. "You guys okay?"

Uraraka nodded. "You?"

Her turn to nod. "Let's wait a few minutes... then run for the nearest exit." A plan no one present planned to argue with.

With a roar, Vanessa sent All For One threw another series of walls, charging right after him. The villain tossed himself aside, barely evading her her fist, as it punctured through the steel plated surface. *If I wasn't such a shell of my former self... once upon a time I would have no trouble with a weakling like her.* Back on his feet, she raked her claws across his chest, spilling his blood in a rush of red onto the floor. Footing now unsure on the slippery surface, All For One fall onto his back, feeling very dizzy.

Vanessa's boot-heel shoved him to the floor. "Now stay dow-" A hand, its arm wreathed in latex, snared the skin of her face, and she started screaming. While she was so blinded with pain from her boiling skin, All For One lurched upward, his fist connecting with her jaw and sending her up, through every floor above, through the roof, and into the sky.

"If you could do that from the start," said the newcomer, adjusting a gas mask on his face, "why were you losing?"

All For One sighed, "couldn't be sure I'd hit." his legs were shaking, knees threatening to buckle as he started walking. "That punch took just about all the strength I had left..." His hand groped at the wall, propping himself up every step of the way.

Behind him, the newcomer was following at a leisurely pace. "So... where are we going?"

The villain scoffed. "We?"

This was met with a shrug. "At this point, anything to get out of this place and keep eating.

All For One grinned. "Even if it means working with villains?"
The newcomer scoffed. "Staying on the path of the righteous is what landed me here. No, if you need a professional, need my skills, I'll work... All For One."

And he laughed. "Welcome aboard then, mister..."

"I am called Sether."

For the remainder of their trip, they walked in silence, stepping over body after body along the way. Eventually they arrived at All For One's target cell, and found it empty.

"What?!" He demanded, "He's supposed to be here! Where is he!?!"

Looking to the clipboard, hung just outside the door, Seether clicked his tongue. "Your man is still in the hospital. This cell is being reserved until he's released." All For One sank, slumping against the wall in defeat. "You have my sympathies, I know how this must feel."

The villain snarled. "No. You don't."

Seether shrugged. "Either way, we need to leave."

Taking a deep breath, All For One nodded, pushing off from the wall and the two men resumed their journey in silence. This was not turning out the way he had hoped...

With a savage blow to the head, Deku incapacitated the last inmate in the cellblock. Sheathing his sword, Akaguro went to Aizawa. "What now?"

Breathing heavily, Aizawa shook his head. "The emergency generator. If we get that back online, we might be able to lock this place down before anyone can escape." Staggering a little, he stared running ahead. "Midoriya, stay here and secure the inmates, meet up with us when you can."

Nodding, the vampire grabbed a collection of handcuffs. "I'm on it!"

Akaguro placed a hand on his shoulder giving him a squeeze. "It was fun, fighting like that again, wasn't it?"

Deku gave him a little smile. "It's not over yet." Exchanging a nod, the two boys went their separate ways. Deku set about snapping the handcuffs in place, securing them to whatever was readily available. It took him some time, but eventually he had them all secured.

"Okay..." he said as he stood up, "that just leaves Muscular." Grabbing a quirk restraining collar and accompanying manacles he started walking over to the cell.

Walking in front of the window, he was sent flying into the opposite wall by the table that went crashing through it. His wounded head popped his skull outward, back into its proper shape as blood trickled down that side of his head, throwing the table off of himself. He looked up just in time to see Muscular's fist colliding with his face.

Crashing through yet another wall, his world spun as his healing factor fought to function. When Muscular approached again, he gave a roaring uppercut, knocking the man back. A charge to knee the man in the sternum sent him back into his cell as muscle fibers wrapped around his limbs.

No, NO!

He leapt forward again, and this time Muscular backhanded his side so hard that Deku's left arm, ribs and hip shattered. As he was sent screaming to the ground, Muscular walked over to him,
grabbed his face, and started slamming him viciously into the floor, again and again, and again, and again...

His senses were going black, only faintly aware of the man's laughing as he continued to pummel him. "So much for that knack, eh kid!?"

He pulled Deku back, higher than any point previously, and crushed him into the floor, splitting his back clean open as the bones of his spine cut through. He lay there, helpless and unmoving, closing his eyes and bracing for the killing blow when a voice roared. "STOP!"

Confused, Muscular turned around. "Boss? Who's that guy?" Weakly picking his head up off the floor, Deku saw a tall, muscled man with glowing, red eyes, standing beside a man with a bird mask. Behind them were Dabi and the thing he recognized as Mooney.

"That will have to wait," said the boss, turning the man with glowing eyes, "is that him?"

Even under that weird mask, Deku could tell he was grinning like a lion at a fresh kill. "It is." He turned to the boss. "As I said, his blood may just be the key to perfect that serum you mentioned." ...Serum? ... what serum? "But when you're done, I get to kill him."

As Deku's heart chilled over with fear, his body still refusing to move, the boss nodded. "That's the deal. Muscular?"

Another blood chilling laugh. "It's my pleasure sir."

The last thing Deku saw, was Muscular's boot coming toward his head, before the world went black.

"This is the beginning of the end."
AN: this will be something of a horrible experiment, I only ask that you trust me enough to see it through.

-Black

---

An ode to Evangelion

and Tokyo Ghoul

---

Ears ringing awoke to the slow, steady beeping of a heart monitor. Light static from a TV someone had turned on was buzzing in the air, making the dull ache in his skull throb a little. "In the days following, Endeavor has continued to refuse to comment on either his health or that of his son's since the attack on Tartarus. While we have it on good authority that the loss of his quirk was only temporary the fact that it was taken from him is not one that has us here at Rebellion newsroom sitting comfortably."

...What? Shoto struggled to sit up, but found a hand soon pressed to his shoulder, gently urging him back down onto the bed.

"Easy now," a familiar voice said softly. When his eyes flitted to her, he realized it was Uraraka, smiling at him. "you took quite the bump to the head." Even so, he took a quick look about their current location.

"When asked about the nature of the attack on the prison, he and the hero Valentine refused to comment."

Clean white walls, linoleum floors, a curtain keeping him from view of a noisy hall where people were speaking. Judging from the topics on their breaths, the strange clinical sterility of his surroundings, he was almost assuredly in a hospital. With wondering eyes, he turned back to her. "What happened?"

"Eraser Head, in a rare moment of chattiness, had this to say: 'the cretins responsible will be brought to justice. Now go away.' Aha... clearly breaking out the charm for that one..."

She gave him a sympathetic look. "You... were right next to the emergency generator when it exploded in Tartarus."

That... yeah, that sounded about right. The building was shaking, the power flickering and panic set in. If that generator had gone out then the cellblocks would have-

His bones went cold. "Is everyone okay?"

"Here's Toji with the weather..."

She seemed to deflate a little, shifting uncertainly in her seat as she gulped. "Uh, well... most of the guards were seriously hurt or worse... the only reason you're not dead was that one police guy, the sergeant? He found you and um, pretty much shot anyone who tried to get near you."

Shoto nodded. "Is he okay?"
"He's fine."

The heterochrome jumped, head jolting to the other side of the room. "Wha!?!"

Suddenly feeling very silly, Uraraka grabbed the curtain and started pulling on it. "Oh, ah, you have a roommate. Sorry, forgot to mention." as the curtain was pulled to, he saw Akaguro lying in the next bed, angrily watching the news with an oxygen mask on his face. Was- was he tied to the bed?

Listlessly, he lifted a bound arm and waved, not bothering to look at them. "Heyyyy..." he groaned, dropping his arm back to the bed with a plop.

Shoto couldn't help but puzzle at this sight. "What happened to you?"

Sighing, the half-human shrugged. "Pushed myself too hard, didn't sleep for too long."

If her reaction was anything to be trusted, the gravity girl didn't entirely believe that. "Yeah... there's more you should know..."

Her tone... that did not sound good. "...Who died?"

She winced, looking him over carefully. "There's... a chance that Green might be dead."

---

*He'd been pouring himself some tea, pleased as punch and smiling with sickening sweetness,*

"*Seems to me, this is a bit of much needed good luck.*"

*The other man gritted his teeth, holding his tongue.*

"*The Yakuza have done us a favor, removing the boy from this world for us. Now you don't have to get your hands dirty again.*"

"*Like the last time we had them running around unchecked.*"

...

Inside the shop, shaking the very walls, one man moved in a blur. His limbs battered his foes into submission, savagely removing them from their awareness of their surroundings. Breaking tables, chairs and other pieces of furniture with their bodies as he flung some of them about. Bones snapped like twigs as he held back none of his savagery, one man's arm was bent backwards at the elbow, bone jutting through his skin. Hands on another's head, smashing his face into a wall, then raking, dragging it down to the floor to crack his skull against it.

The final opponent, his heel jutted into his larynx so hard he was sent through the shop's front window. As the ne'er-do-well gagged, tried to crawl his way to safety, the man assailing the criminals stepped over the broken frame of the window, moving toward him. As the thug groped about for a weapon the hero grabbed his collar and heaved him to his feet, slamming his back up against a nearby wall.

"Talk."

Coughing, spurting blood, the thug surrendered any chance of winning or of escape. "t-talk about what?"

Eyes flickered red, hair standing on end, his arm brought itself up beneath his jaw, pinning him up against the wall and choking him. "The Yakuza. Where are they?"
More coughing, wheezing now, he racked his brain for any information he might have. "Uh... I dunno man, they usually find us when they-"

A sentence cut short by the hero's fist impacting into his already broken ribs. "Where. Are they?"

A hand found the hero's shoulder, he turned to see one of his students giving him a frightened look. "He doesn't know, Sensei." Jiro managed to speak without broadcasting exactly how unsettled she was by her teacher's behavior.

Drawing in a deep breath, slowly, Aizawa nodded. In a swift, sudden motion, he brought his forehead against the face of the miscreant, slamming the back of his skull into the brick wall and his 'opponent' crumbled to the ground. "Where's the next group?"

Her jaw dropped, brain taking a moment to formulate a reply. "Depends, are you gonna leave them alive when we get there?"

He took a patient breath. "Jiro..."

"Look," she waved her hands from side to side in a halting gesture, "I want to find Green too, hell maybe more than anyone right now," The way her voice cracked, faltered as she said that, put a twinge in his chest. "But... we can't just go around brutalizing people until someone has an answer." He managed not to hang his head in shame, the full extent of his actions these last few days sinking in. "What's got you so... why?!" She demanded, her emotional state impressively strong, despite the obvious wavering.

If only he were faring similarly. "We should rendezvous with Valentine and Ingenium... they're likely just about done."

"Aizawa..."

Ignoring her worry, feet hitting the pavement with purpose, he started striding away. "Let's go."

She wonders why I'm acting so irrationally. Were she the one who gave the order that led to his capture- ...no, such thinking is unfair. He brushed some of his hair back with the palm of one hand, fingers clawing at his scalp as he did. We just have to find him.

If it's not too late to save him, after so long...

---

Unknown

One room.

That was the entire world, so far as he knew now. Just one room, with him bound to a chair, his blood saturating his tattered clothing, little more than ratty rags. His arms were behind him, metal - rebar, specifically- wound through his flesh and bones. However long it had been, however much time had passed, he couldn't tell. There was no natural light, no sign of the day-night cycle overhead. Just one, concrete room with a barred, iron door separating him from all the rest of the world. With pain and hunger as his only companions, sleep and comfort now long unfamiliar, he was starting to feel a little tense.

"If it makes you feel any better," Deku rolled his eyes, ignoring the now very visible Shigaraki as he lounged about in another corner of the room. So he wasn't entirely alone... "The floor is worse than that metal chair."
Deku scoffed. "The chair has duds, pointy duds, in the seat."

Shigaraki frowned. "Okay, maybe I lied..." then he laughed. "Still, could be worse. They could be torturing you again."

Yeah... thanks for the encouragement.

Outside the cell he could hear them talking, the angry squabbling of men who'd failed to bring home sufficient prize for the sacrifices they'd made. "It won't work." Said the man in the bird-beaked mask.

Growling of the man with glowing eyes preempted a more verbal reply. "What do you mean it won't work!?" he demanded.

"Exactly as I said." Squeaking of a chair, swiveling around as the Yakuza scrubbed fingers at his scalp. "The infectious nature of his blood isn't what we thought: it's not like a virus or bacteria, it's because of his healing factor." Leaning forward the Yakuza began to delve into full on exposition. "See, his cells keep replicating outside the body at an insane rate, so much so it's surprising there's not two of him running around this place right now. That's how his... kind spreads, I think. Their blood enters another's body and the healing factor keeps going, overriding, changing their DNA and physical make-up."

That's kind of terrifying...

The glowing eyed man scoffed. "So why don't you just inject me with his blood and be done with it? He doesn't need to still be alive!"

As Deku gulped, the Yakuza sighed. "Because he hasn't ingested your blood."

This time, Dabi spoke up. "What's that got to do with it?"

Another sigh. "Because if you ingest his blood and he hasn't ingested yours? You die. His digestive tract doesn't work like ours, if my findings are anything to go by. It... assimilates any and all blood into more of itself, even when outside the body. However... if you drink his blood while he's busy assimilating yours, you catch it at something of a mid-way point. Essentially, the replication becomes confused, and starts replicating itself into the structure or DNA of whoever drank his blood."

The man with glowing eyes seemed appeased by this. "and if I drank his blood without him biting me?"

The Yakuza was quick to answer. "His healing factor would try to erase you, rebuild you as him or something like him. You would die."

Shigaraki laughed out loud. "Well, that explains that one then. I had been wondering..."

The vampire shook his head. "Congratulations..." he muttered bitterly, just as the door opened.

In walked the man with glowing eyes. "Still awake?"

He didn't answer.

The villain slammed the door behind him, Deku didn't even flinch. "Your continued existence is irritating."
He almost laughed. "You're not the first one to tell me something like that..." his witticism was met with a brutal cuff to the side of his jaw, spilling blood and teeth across the floor. Slowly, his teeth sprouting anew with a groan.

"Your fortitude is impressive, boy. I'll give you that." Spat the villain, as he paced about, eyes glaring daggers into him.

"So I've heard..." his voice sagged like a wilting flower, fatigue weighing him down along with the pain of his teeth as they finished re-sprouting.

This time, the villain's fist hit his ribs, he'd lost track of the number they'd been broken while he'd been here. As he sat down in front of the groaning teenager, the glowing eyed man sighed. "I'd ask where you find the spirit to be so flippant, candid, but I see it in you." Weakly, Deku shot him a questioning glance, one the villain indulged. "You weren't always a vampire... were you, boy?"

Just as weakly as any other motion had been for... hours? days? did it matter? No, he nodded. "I thought not." The villain nodded. "Quirkless then."

Deku coughed. "All my life..."

A chuckle rumbled in his throat. "So you do know something of this world's injustice."

The vampire almost laughed. "You... preaching to me about injustice?"

With a snarl, the villain cracked his knuckles. "You think you know everything you need to about me? Because I'm a 'villain'?"

With a loud 'snap' Deku's ribs popped back into place. "Argh! ...enlighten me then..."

That time, he laughed. "That desperate for conversation? No..." he stood, pacing about the room slowly. "No I wont tell you anything. Just know that this world is a charade, a puppet theater put on for an all too willing captive audience."

Groaning as his ribs finished healing, finally, he gave him an odd look. "So... heroes out there are up to no good after all?"

"And this surprises you, does it!?" another blow to his still sore bones and the boy was groaning in agony, jaw spasming from a surging, welling hunger. "Ugh... your ignorance is disgusting."

Groaning, hissing though his teeth in stilted outcries of pain, he almost started crying from the pain, lack of sleep more torturous than anything else. "You could... educate me..." then he laughed, "we seem to have no end of ti-" interrupted by the man's fist breaking his nose, forcing his head to rear back as he silently screamed.

The door opened again, this time the man with the beaked mask through, followed by Dabi. "If you keep this up much longer his healing factor might stop altogether." The masked one warned, as Deku's flesh crawled back to where it was supposed to be. "See? a while ago that was a near instant fix, but now... now it's taking almost a minute."

A growl pushed through the synthesizer of the man's respirator. "I don't care. From what you say? there's no point in bothering any longer!" his fist reared back, racing toward Deku's face again and-
"Well... this is getting to be a bit much."

"I'm starting to wonder if we'll make it out of here, Deku..."

Fewer and fewer leads seemed to be cropping up these days. No one, no one was willing to talk. Or maybe it was simply that no one knew anything, the few remaining Yakuza hidden too well; guarded their secrets too closely. Whatever the reason, Kyoka was leaving yet another potential lead behind with nothing. The rain... ordinarily she didn't mind it, liked taking long walks in it sometimes, but now... now it just added to that feeling of defeat gnawing at her innards. Hands stuffed to the shelter of her jacket's pockets, head hung low, she trudged along the streets alone.

What the hell am I supposed to do...?

If I don't find out where you are...

Oh god... A hand went to her face, pushing at her eye as she fought this building feeling of helplessness. Izuku... No. No! Get it together Kyoka! She slapped both her cheeks so hard they'd reddened. You are not some crying damsel, you're a hero! You save people, you're strong. Wherever those bastards are hiding you will find them and beat the living shit out of whatever dared to lay a finger on him. Right? She nodded, determinedly to herself. Right. And resumed her pace at a faster beat, wending her way to where the others were meeting up.

That was, until she heard someone's footstep splash, ever so slightly, in the alley behind her. Focusing her hearing, she was able to determine her stalker was... she spun around, earlobes at the ready, diving forwards with fingers latching onto the unknown figure's clothing. As her earlobes jabbed into their body, she hauled them against the nearby wall and-

Her jaw fell open. "Himiko?"

Panting from the pain, the yellow eyed girl smiled. "Heya, it's yer gi-"

"Don't fucking say it!" She pushed away from her, spinning around and walking several paces away. "I don't want to hear it..."

Frowning, Himiko almost looked... hurt. "Yer, ah, mad about that lil' stunt I pulled?"

With a growl, Kyoka spun around. "I'm mad about everything!" Himiko flinched. "You knocked me out, lied to me and have been- what? On some murderous rampage since last I saw you? What have you been doing? Do you know how worried I've been about you? Do you even care!??"

Panting from her anger, the catharsis of having finally vented it all out at someone, she lowered her head as she awaited the reply of her 'friend'.

Slow as she was to truly calm down, Himiko was slow to answer. "I've been busy, mostly just digging things up on folks. No uh, bloodshed since last I saw you." That put Jiro at ease a bit, but not by much. As her expression softened, Himiko kept talking. "I uh... don't have everything all gathered up yet, but... it's big, Kyoka gurl. I... I'm sorry I tried to pull you into it. I'm sorry I lied to do it."

Opening her mouth, Kyoka was about to say it was okay when she suddenly remembered something. "...You can make it up to me." Somewhat intrigued by this, Himiko tilted her head as she waited for Kyoka to elaborate.
When she said what she had to say, Himiko gulped.

This... was not going to be simple.

Ice water rained onto him, splattering on the floor and leaving him a shivering mess, chest heaving as he gasped for air.

"See?" said the man in the mask. "That's the first time for that one. He can't take much more unless he feeds."

"Which he adamantly refuses to do!" The glowing eyed man roared, pummeling Deku's fragile chest in a flurry of jabs.

As the bones slowly set to replacing themselves, the masked one sighed. "From you, at least..."

Panting at a rapid rate, his lungs on fire, chest screaming, Deku fought to keep control over himself. Sweat poured from his skin, jaw trembled to the point of clattering teeth, muscles in his neck convulsing, throbbing with his effort not to move, not to lurch out and attack. Moments at a time faded in and out, to black and then back to present point of reality.

"We need a new tactic, someone more... unhinged than you." At the Yakuza's word, Muscular stepped forward.

That wicked grin would haunt his dreams till the day he died. "Just don't kill him, right?"

The Boss nodded. "That's right."

His fist crushed Deku's knee, almost prompting a cream.

A hand reached out, twisting his foot all the way around, slowly: so slowly Deku could count the individual cracks of his bones as the cut into the air, into his ears.

Teeth gritting face grimacing, the vampire struggled with his every fiber to hold his control, to hold himself.

_I wont let you make me, I won't let you make me..._

His hand grabbed the broken knee, then bent it so completely the wrong way that Deku's foot dug into his hip.

_I WON'T LET YOU MAKE ME!_

Then, right where it was, Muscular twisted it around in a complete circle, and the world...

... 

... 

"..."

"They're gonna kill you."

"They're going to kill you, Deku."

It wasn't ice water this time, it was all the fingers of a hand stabbing into his belly, winding
themselves into his intestines. As he regained consciousness, Deku reared his head back and screamed loud enough to burst eardrums.

The man with glowing eyes approached, life brimming in his eyes as he shakily made his way over to him. "That's it, boy!" Deku turned his face away from him, and Muscular made a fist, squeezing mercilessly at his innards and his scream went impossibly louder. A hand brought his face up to the glowing eyed man's throat. "Bite me..." despite the exhaustion, despite the pain, despite his hunger reaching a point it had never previously reached, he did not. "BITE ME!" It was too much. It was too much, he had to bite! HE HAD TO FEED!

But it wasn't going to be him! Not what he wanted!

With guttural scream, in an instant Deku reared his head back and threw his forehead against the face of the glowing eyed man, sending him reeling back, crashing into Muscular, sending the men sprawling to the floor.

Only Deku had lost too much control. With that same momentum, with that same motion, he brought his head back and flung the chair forward. He fell forward, onto Muscular's back and sunk his fangs into the man's throat and guzzled as he man screamed. "NO! NO NO NO!" His hands clawed at the vampire's face, trying to hurt him, trying to stop him, trying to rip him free, but the angel -even when he'd stood- was too awkward. "GET HIM OFF ME! GET HIM OFF ME!"

"HOLD STILL!" he complied, and Deku saw and felt Dabi's hand on his face.

His eyes went wide.

Blue light, searing heat and pain, bursting in his eyesockets, the entirety of his scalp and head set momentarily ablaze.

Then... no pain... the sensation was simply gone in his head as his hair burned off and away, skin sizzling and popping.

He couldn't see...

He couldn't see!

"Argh!" Muscular groaned. "Damn it... tell me I wont turn into one of those... things!"

"You-" the Boss swallowed. "You wont."

"Okay," the man with glowing eyes grunted, stumbling about from the sounds of things, "we're done."

"Then can I kill him?" Muscular snarled. "I really want to kill him now..."

"What?" Said the boss. "But we still-"

"Later." And the glowing eyed one started stomping away. "I need to set my broken nose." he staggered, falling against the doorway before stumbling the rest of the way through it. "And... sleep, I think... I'm... tired..."

Sounds of the others leaving the room, the door closing.

No sound.

No sight.
No sense of touch.

Nothing.

Was he alive anymore?

Was he dead, or simply too tired to know anymore?

An alarm sounding... intruders in the hideout?

No... too quiet... just his mind playing tricks...

More hallucinations... he couldn't hear them talking anymore.

There was nothing, totally sensory deprivation.

And... since there was nothing in his world any longer... maybe...

Maybe he might as well be dead...

Maybe by that fact alone...

he already was dead...

...

Yeah...

Maybe...

Maybe that's not so bad after all...

.
"so..."

"The pain got to be too much..."

...

"And this is your solution."

"Hiding away in here. In your head."

...

"I guess it only makes sense,"

"Running away always was your best strategy,"

"For facing the unpleasant things in life."

...That's not what I'm doing.
"No?"

"Then what is this?"

...I...

"Reality hurts."

"Literally, in many cases."

"So you turtle up in here, with me."

...

"Nothing to say to that?"

...

"Heh..."

"I'm not surprised."

"Only the most devout of self deceivers would deny such evident truth."

What do you want?

"That's not the question."

Then what is?

"What do you want?"

...Isn't that obvious?

"It couldn't be less obvious."

"Let me show you..."

"Let us explore."

... 

Deku was walking home that day, in the rain, when a sudden upbeat in noise caught his ears. Notebook at the ready, that old volume titled 'For my Future' firmly in his grasp. He ran down streets, past the neon yellow, sodium glare of the lights overhead. Passing by people whose faces he would not remember, drawn toward the center of the spectacle. Signs for Jeet Kun Do lessons, mixed martial arts on a few front windows, signs that he ignored, but would never forget. A classmate was not far away, drawn to the same promise of excitement.

When he arrived at the source, notebook at the ready and hiding under his umbrella, he watched the fight with an eagle's eye. Swiftness of motion, technique and flow pinpointed to their every point of origin, noting every ebb in the flow as he mapped out the intricate way in which the heroine worked her quirk into her combat style. Her quirk and its function, weakness was dissected in a mere moment, put to the pages like the work of the most eager cartographer, mapping out a new sky filled with stars.
As surely as it had been a battle, the clash of right and wrong, good and evil, the boy had felt as though he’d watched a dance. Dance... such an elegant art for those so swayed to partake. Expression of the most intimate and hidden corners of ones heart in motion of their form. So it was, with such understanding, such a lens, through which he viewed the fight and the way the heroine had conducted her part in it.

Outcries, cheers in the crowd were met with humble acceptance, attempts to deflect the praise and focus solely on the peace the moment had given way too. No more notes, no attention payed to the jeering classmate, not far from him, nor the others near his age who had been so drawn and enraptured to the scene. Heels to the ground, he spun about and ventured the rest of his merry way home.

...  

"Did you see it?"

Did I see what?

I saw myself wanting to be a hero.

Making strides toward those goal.

"Really?"

Yes!

"Tell me what you didn't do."

What are you talking about?

"Look again, and look past the distractions."

"Look at what you didn't do."

...

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... "Those lessons, or lessons like them," "They're how people like Aizawa and Uraraka handle themselves," "Without combat oriented quirks." "Even if you'd never met Vanessa," "having never gotten a quirk and had to get by with gadgets instead," "would you be half the hero you are now, without those lessons?"

But...

"Yes?"

But I was...

Those notes...

"How often have they come up?"

... "How often have you referenced them?"

... "Have you added to them since those days?"

"Since before you got into UA?"

"Since before you got your powers?"

"And if you really wanted to be a hero,"

"if that was really what you wanted,"

"wouldn't you have tried to make a friend?"

"There isn't a hero alive that ever made it through life as alone as you."

That was just one night...

"Was it?"

It was!

"What night was that then?"
"Can you pick it apart from all the rest?"

"Okay. Take away the rain, and what is it?"

"Maybe the hero is a man this time too."

...Deku was walking home that day, the Moonlight shining in his eyes, when a sudden upbeat in noise caught his ears. Notebook at the ready, that old volume titled 'For my Future' firmly in his grasp. He ran down streets, past the bright shine of the moon and stars overhead painting the streets a beautiful shade of blue. Passing by people whose faces he would not remember, drawn toward the center of the spectacle. Signs for Jeet Kun Do lessons, mixed martial arts on a few front windows, signs that he ignored, but would never forget. A classmate was not far away, drawn to the same promise of excitement.

When he arrived at the source, notebook at the ready and squinting through the light of the earth's noble guardian at times, he watched the fight with an eagle's eye. Swiftness of motion, technique and flow pinpointed to their every point of origin, noting every ebb in the flow as he mapped out the intricate way in which the hero worked his quirk into her combat style. His quirk and its function, weakness was dissected in a mere moment, put to the pages like the work of the most eager cartographer, mapping out a new sky filled with stars.

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"Any idea what night that was?"

"Any idea what hero that was?"

Why are you doing this?

"Can you really say any day or night was so different?"

..."Can you?"

...no.
"Why not?"

Because I never did anything differently...

"So what was missing?"

...me.

"Yes..."

Me making effort.

"Go on now..."

I-

I was just...

"It's okay."

I-...

"We all make mistakes."

But this...

It's shameful...

I made it for so long...

"It's okay to cry about it."

Damn it...

"But you have to admit it."

Why?

"Because if you don't..."

"What will you do?"

...

Run

...

It's a story we're all familiar with by this point...

A boy, born into a world filled to the brim with super powers with none of his own. Bullied and ignored by his peers and betters, all save for his mother; who did little to ease his lingering and incessant doubts that he could ever live his dream...

"Forget the crappy quirks," Bakugo grinned maliciously, "you're totally quirk-less!" He guffawed, "and you think you can rub shoulders with me!?"
As his back collided with the wall Deku was shaking on the point of jittering. "I wasn't saying I would compete with you, not at all!" Plead he, voice cracking with nearly every syllable. "I mean it!" Bakugo scoffed, Deku lowered his head, staring timidly at the floor. "It's just... been my dream since I was little..."

"what," demanded Bakugo, "can you even, do?" No answer was forthcoming...

Standing up to one bully was a task akin to climbing a mountain for the green haired, freckled boy. What hope did one such as he hold to become something so towering and strong as All Might? His greatest aspiration, forever out of his reach...

Idle fingers gripped at his notebook as he walked, sullen and eyes downcast. He seemed to shrink into the crowds, among the more fortunate members of his species, as he made way to his home. Perhaps that dream being so unattainable was what made it so appealing. If one were to live such a thing in their waking moments, could it truly be called a dream? Deluding himself may have been his only solace, growing up friendless as he had, afraid of human contact even at his best.

Without his dream, begged an unspoken question: what had he?

..."Fear not!" said the booming voice of the herculean man, "Why you ask? Cuz..." whether the dramatic pause was strictly necessary was a matter of debate, but there wasn't a hero alive who hadn't camera-nerves on their debut. "I am here!"

Ever since the first time he'd seen this clip it had been the child's dream to be just like him. Just like All Might. Longing for the day his surely amazing quirk would surface and his ascension would begin. That was until one day when he'd been taken to the doctor's office. "It's not gonna happen." the pediatrician had stated clear as day. While his mother had gone on, discussing the how and why with the man, Deku sat there, expression frozen, unable to do anything but sit there lifelessly. At such a simple phrase so thoroughly had his spirit been shattered that he failed to recognize the world around him. Amplified, was this, by the ensuing foul treatment of his peers and the invisibility he seemed to posses to all adults in the world but his own mother.

So it was in such a state that he watched the video again, late at night, trying desperately to feel as though his dream were not doomed to forever linger beyond his waking hours. Sniffling, watching with but embers of his resolve remaining, "Mom..." Deku let the tears run down his cheeks as the video played. "No matter what kind of trouble you're in..." murmured the wavering voice of the child, "he'll save you with a smile." The chair swiveled round at a crawl, tears overflowing in his eyes and a smile born of quivering lips; a sight to pitiful not to cry at the sight of, and so Ms Midoriya did. "Do you think," strained the voice of this near sobbing child, "I could be a hero like that?"

Her arms were around him in seconds, cradling her child closely as her own tears ran into his hair. "I'm sorry, Izuku!" sobbed she in utter hysterics, "I'm so sorry!" Blaming herself for everything her son was sure to endure from the nature of his birth. What else was a mother to do, with a child so inherently disadvantaged?

No... no mom...

back then...
That was the exact opposite of what I needed you to say...

... Running away from UA after his face had been disfigured...

Waiting on the porch to die after his mother had been killed by Moonfish...

Sulking away from his only all too understanding friends for two entire years while grief and pain reigned over his faculties...

Calling himself 'Deku', even to this very moment...

Izuku 'Deku' Midoriya was a man who ran from life.

"And so you finally admit it,"

"Finally see."

Why...

Why do I do this?

Why do I want these things?

Why do I use my own dreams to run and hide?

"You already know the answer."

Please no...

"Are you going to run away again?"

...

"If you do...

"I don't know what will happen."

"I just know it will be worse."

...

No more running.

"Are you sure?"

Yes.

"This is going to hurt."

I don't care.

"You did once."

I was five!
How the hell was I supposed to react!?
How was I supposed to cope!?
"Exactly as you did."
...
"If you hadn’t locked it away,"
"Hadn't turned from it and tried to stay strong,"
"You would be so broken now,"
"that this version of you would seem a pillar capable of holding up the world."
...
I hate how true that is.
"I think that's a good thing."
Do we have to face this now?
"If we don’t..."
"We might stay in here too long,"
"and then one of them will kill you."
...
Okay.
"are you sure?"
...
yes

Memories are fragile things. Time will corrode them, a new experience might change the way you feel about them or you learn something that twists them all up...

Worst thing about that is with happy memories, they’re the most vulnerable to that kind of decay...

He was in the kitchen, fingers strumming against the table. It was dark, raining outside, crayons and a drawing of All Might were on the table in front of him. In perfect detail, every scratch on the paper, mark of the wax even the crumbs left behind from when he'd put the crayons down too hard; it was all there. All of it.

His eyes went to the window, and he saw the neighborhood exactly as he'd seen it back then. Dark, save for the orange glow of the streetside lights, shining somehow brighter through the rain. Every drop on the window, trailing down and pitter-pattering against it was as clear as that night. The lights from outside cascading in, onto the floor and furniture. It was all so clear, too clear.

There was only one reason to remember it all so perfectly...
Perfectly enough, that he remembered the empty wine bottle in the sink this time too.

Ringing, faint ringing hit his ears, his shoulders scrunched, body shrinking with apprehension. He turned to the one friendly face he had in the room with him. He turned to Shigaraki.

And the dead villain smiled softly. "You know... it started with what you heard."

Slowly, hesitantly, he nodded.

Rain pattered against the window, some light static played over the radio, and...

His mother was crying...

Why was mommy crying?

"You'll have to go find out."

His little hands pushed his chair from the table, legs taking him slowly to the bathroom, where his knuckles knocked softly at the door. "Momma?" he pushed the door open, saw a woman barely sober enough to stand, crying her eyes out with a fistful of letters 'returned to sender'. A razor was in her hand. "...Mom?"

She didn't even know he was there.

Didn't hear him, didn't see him.

She raised the blade, and wouldn't remember what she did.

When the unthinkable played out, when the poor little boy was drenched her blood and screaming, it finally clicked into place. This was the thing that set it all off.

An ambulance was called by the neighbors.

Child protective services, the courts, relatives who resolutely refused to answer any calls.

He didn't... remember much about the halfway home that followed. Not the foster parents, not the other kids, not the ratty bed, not the terrible food.

Just one desperate phone call to his father.

His little fingers dialed the phone's buttons, managing to remember his cell number, and he held the receiver to his head. When the gruff familiar voice spoke, he couldn't help but smile. "Hello?"

"Daddy!" he almost shouted with joy, "It's me, Izuku!" He was fighting back tears. Tears of relief and joy as he continued to speak to his long-gone father. "Mommy's really hurt... I haven't seen her in so long... are you coming home? are you gonna help her?"

... The line stayed silent, no reply, not even a rustle of clothing graced the poor child's ears. "...daddy?"

"No." In just one simple word, a fracture appeared in the boy's heart that would never heal. "I'm not your dad. I'm not coming home. Your mom is on her own," his lip trembled, a small whimper starting to squeak its way out of his throat. "You want some fatherly advice? Here it is:" his tone went severe, like the edge of a knife at his throat. "If you don't want the people you love to leave
you, then be something worth loving in the first place. Then maybe people like your mom wont try and leave you behind like this." Broken... now his heart was just broken... "Never call this number again. Goodbye." and he hung up, leaving the five year old to sob alone in a place he would never feel at home.

...

As was the courts merciless duty, of course Inko would hear of this conversation. Deku overheard the phone call that was sent her way, didn't dare to guess how she'd reacted. In his mind, she was already gone. Already planning to abandon him all over again, just like daddy, just like she'd already tried.

Imagine then, his surprise, on December 11th when his mother charged to him, and flung her arms around him as her body shook. "Never again..." her tears drenched his shoulder in seconds, his tiny little mind struggling to believe this was real. And it was, "Never again, I will never leave you again!" as his shoulder was soaked clean through, through to his very bones, so too did her words bore similarly deep. Lucky, for if they hadn't, he never would have been the same. "You my sweet little baby, I love you so much... I am so sorry... I am so sorry!"

His arms clasped around her, so tight it hurt them both. "Mom!" he managed to squeak.

"I love you..."

"I love you too!"

"I love you, Izuku..."

...

It was Christmas eve, not a holiday the typically celebrated, but this time they would. It was an excuse to cherish each other, to cherish their only family in the world, and they would take it. Hot chocolate in their mugs, huddled up on the couch under a blanket as they took turns making up stories about santa while the radio played whatever was on.

They didn't know any real ones, so they just made up what they could for each other. "And then..." Deku said, in most narrative voice, "they all made sandcastles and beat up the badguys!"

Inko laughed. "Sandcastles?" she teased, poking his nose, "this is supposed to be a winter story."

Deku stuck out his tongue. "Nuh uh! Christmas is magical! It can be whatever you want!"

When he smiled that brightly, it was hard to argue. "Okay, okay, they all made sandcastles." Deku grinned, his voice audibly chirping.

Setting aside his cocoa, he snuggled up to her, wrapping his arms around her.

It was real.

She was real.

Everything was okay!

Now, maybe it was that moment, maybe it was just that he didn't care about anything else, but... he completely forgot about the music that was playing. "Wanna dance, little guy?" So his emphatic yes to that question, somehow, didn't feel the same.
But... he did remember one song...

She scooped him up, holding him close to her in her arms, as the music started to sway them, and all seemed right with the world.

He couldn't remember the song that played...

But he remembered her song.

"Now," said the man over the radio, "Jenny Unreachable did a fantastic rendition, but this time? You need the classic version folks..."

Slowly, playing a tune that seemed to resonate with his soul, the gentle striking of piano keys. Drums, then a church organ filled the empty space where the lyrics should have been, but only served to make the song feel so much more hollow.

It was a memory, and he knew it wasn't right.

Maybe that's why he heard and saw Shigaraki singing it this time.

"I know...
I know I've let you down."

He spun on his heels, microphone in hand and the happiest look on his face as he sang.

"I've been a fool to myself...
I thought that I could live for no one else..."

It was nauseating watching him, dance about like it was all somehow perfectly joyous.

And yet... it was.

"But now... through all the hurt and pain
It's time for me to respect
The ones you love
Mean more than anything..."

Somehow, back then, he must have heard it. Must have known it was all about her. All the same, since that night, since those terrible nights before, he had... done something like what his father said, in only so foolish and self deceiving a way as a young man could.

Memories of chasing heroes, like their auras alone could make him what he wanted, needed to be would brush off on him.

Only all the while, he'd never make any real progress toward achieving said goal.

So it was that his resolve, his goals and methods remained stuck, such as they always would -as youths would often have it- affixed to his convictions and driving forward with the unshakable bravado of his lack of years.

If only it had been enough to save her...

"So with sadness in my heart
I feel the best thing I could do!
Is end it all!"
And leave for-ev-er...
Whats done is done, it feels so bad,
What once was happy now is sad!
I'll never love again
My world is end-ing!

With a final twirl, he tossed the microphone aside and pulled Deku out of his mother's arms. Immediately he started clawing, reaching for her, but the two of them slipped away, and the memory faded back into his mind.

As it fell away, his mind finding somewhere new to center the stage, it was just the two of them again.

Deku was back in the chair, the metal woven into the bones of his arms, head hung low and bleeding as Shigaraki stood over him. "So..." Deku flinched, sniffling a little. "What do you want?"

They were in a vast, empty white expanse. A field of white flowers blossomed around them, only in the immediate vicinity, though he couldn't recognize their kind.

His chest shuddered, drawing in a near sobbing breath. "What are you talking about?"

"What do you want, Deku?"

..."If you can't answer that... can you really face the world now, after all that's happened to you?"

...I...

"You need a reason to live now. Not something depending on her, or anyone else."

..."You need something that you want."

"Something to drive you forward, keep you trying to just... be."

Creaking, the sounds of a door opening, not inside his head. It was slower than it should have been, but a sense of alarm seemed to wash over them both. "Alright little shit," a voice, Muscular again, he thought, snarling... "the others are too busy to do what they should have with you from the beginning. So... I'll just make this simple for everyone."

"Come on... what do you want? What do you need?"

I-

"Don't think, just answer!"

Dull, echoing footsteps, edging ever closer.

"There must be something! A reason behind it all!"

I just-

"What!?!"

Shigaraki lurched forward, demanding an answer as he screamed into Deku's face.
"Come on, Deku! What's the answer!?"

Teeth clenched, the sound of footsteps echoing louder still, his heart racing!

"WHAT DO YOU WANT, DEKU!?"

**I WANT TO BE HAPPY!**

His arms tore out of their binding, ripping them to shreds, sundering the bones, but they rekindled. His flesh wove itself back together, bones regrew in a final effort of strength that his body simply didn't have, but spared anyway. Hands at Shigaraki's throat, pinning him to the floor as his dead, empty eyesockets cried onto his face.

*I want to be to happy! I want to love myself, learn to love myself like everyone else and not feel like that's wrong! I want to love myself so others don't have to! So I can make them as happy as they make me when they chose to be kind!*

As his tears dripped on Shigaraki's face, the dead villain smiled.

*I want to be happy... with the friends and loved ones I have left. I want to look at the sky and scream as loud as I can I AM HERE, AND THAT'S ALLOWED GOD DAMMIT!*

*(when the words... weigh... heavy on the heart...)*

His smile turned to a grin. "That's it! That's it, Deku!" As the two of them shared a grin at each other, the dead villain's visage faded into the face of the one person who ever called him 'Deku' anymore: himself, as he imagined he should be. "You finally got it!"

Yeah... I guess I do.

*(I am lost... and led... only by the stars...)*

"You know what you have to do now right?"

*(cage me like an animal...)*

Remind me... It's been a long day.

"Heh, longer than that..."

*(A crown with gems and gold...)*

"You have to stand tall..."

Fangs extended, his mouth racing to 'Shigaraki's' thoat and sinking in.

*(eat me like a cannibal...)*

"and finally... after all this time..."

His fangs pulled free of the other's throat, and life seemed to pour back into him.

*(chase the neon throne...)*

"Show the world what you are."

Slowly, the world around them faded, and Izuku closed his eyes, embracing harsh reality with
renewed vigor, courage and purpose as both versions of himself said one word in perfect unity.

"Human."

A rush of air told him a fist was incoming. Throwing his body to the side, he launched the chair out of its path as he ripped his arms free of his binds the flesh, bones and skin sundering but clawing themselves back together in a last, desperate display of fortitude. If only his eyes would follow suit, as he spun in the air, flipping onto his bare feet, ears primed and listening for the next attack.

(Breathe in, breathe out! Let the human in!)

"NO!" Muscular roared, lunging forward in an attempt to bludgeon Izuku's skull to pulp, but the vampire felt the wind coming and effortlessly dodged as the cool breeze brushed his burned head. "YOU'RE NOT GOING TO SURVIVE THIS!"

(Breathe in, breathe out! And let it in...)

He didn't need to see, didn't need his eyes to dodge the next attempt to end his life. He had powers, powers he was now embracing to their fullest extent, senses he was overjoyed to have. Power enough to fight back!

(Plants awoke, and they slowly grow, beneath the skin...)

Muscular's next attack was wild as all the rest, leaving him wide open. An opening Izuku used to bite him again, and drink more of his blood down. "YOU Fucker!" Effortlessly dodging the next attack, he felt his eyes beginning to bud in his sockets, his skin reknitting itself.

(So breathe in, breathe out... let the human in...)

Curling his hand into a fist, he leapt over the savage's head, spinning about in the air, and brought his fist down on top of his skull, sending him to the concrete floor. As he landed, he lunged down, and bit into his throat again as the thug groped about for his senses, trying to regain his sapience.

(The air is silk... Shadows form a grin... If I lose... control... I feed the beast within...)

"off...OFF!" His hand swatted, sending Izuku flying.

Shifting with the motion, he cartwheeled, hands finding and pushing off the floor, springing him gracefully back to his feet. As Muscular stood up, his furious eyes on Izuku, he saw something truly beautiful. Blossoming, bursting forth, were new eyes in his head. Sclera black as coal, irises the same, vibrant shade of green they'd always been and glowing. Then, sprouting from his skull and the skin above his eyes, was pure, brilliantly reflective, white hair. His symmetry returned, his sense of self embraced at last as he'd resolved to never again fight against himself or what he was or wanted.

As the villain growled in rage, Izuku smiled. "That all ya got?"

(Cage me like an animal... a crown of gems and gold...)

As Muscular charged, bellowing in anger, Izuku unsheathed his claws, dropping into a combat stance as muscle fibers flung themselves forth over his arms.

(eat me like a cannibal... chase the non throne...)

Muscular swung wild, Izuku leapt over him, and brought his claws to bear. In one, swift motion, he
tore through not only the muscle fibers, but the slots on the man's back where they all sprouted from. In a screaming, horridly pained, realization, Muscular realized that the boy had just destroyed his quirk forever.

(Breathe in, breathe out! Let the human in!)

Landing on his feet, the vampire jumped again, spinning wildly, and slamming his leg into Muscular's back, sending him crashing into the concrete wall.

(Breathe in, breath out! And let it in...)

A lunge toward him, hand at the back of his skull, drawing him back, and slamming his body into the rigid surface.

(Plants awoke, and they slowly grow, beneath the skin...)

Again, and again, and again! He sundered the wall, broke the man's bones, and left him a bloody, weakened mess as he tossed him aside.

(So breathe in, breathe out... let the human in...)

All he wanted was sleep, and to drink and entire cow... panting, holding himself up with will alone, Izuku stated staggering for the door. "The most important thing..." he gasped, "is knowing who you are, right?" as he fumbled toward freedom, Muscular groaned. "I wonder... if you'll still know... who you are... without the quirk that let you be such a monster..."

Muscular laughed bitterly. "Monster? I'm not the freak with fangs and claws, craving for human blood every waking second, you reject of nature!"

Izuku actually laughed. "yeah... but I would never kill you." Smiling he turned around, looking the man in the eyes. "That's my choice. Hurt me as much as you want, Muscular... I'll never let you make me be anyone other than me." Turning away, he exited the room. "No one is ever going to do that again." Somewhere, in his mind, he thought he felt the last flickers of 'Shigaraki' smiling at him.

It wasn't going to be easy, living his life as it never was, but he'd be damned if he let that stop him now.

"Cage me like an animal
A crown with gems and gold
Eat me like a cannibal
Chase the neon throne

If I could only let go..."

"There is one thing that one neglected to mention...

Through heartfelt stories, we have heard of them representing the passing of a loved one, or life struggles that people have endured to emerge as a better person."

Symbolism of the Butterfly
Good Fight

AN: after this... the final two arcs of Blood Butterfly.
Brace yourselves. -Black

Twenty minutes ago...

Standing in the office of his old protege was akin to looking back in time. Posters, figurines, newspaper articles, even some archived footage of his exploits. Like walking through a gallery of all his greatest moments as 'All Might'. Battles against colossal foes, towering over high-rises, legions of villains and petty criminals alike rendered unconscious then captured by his hands alone in single battles... hundreds, thousands, hundreds of thousands of lives saved. 'All Might', one with enough strength for all who needed it spared, the pillar of peace.

Heh... well, that was the public opinion, the labels they'd bestowed him with. In reality, Toshinori Yagi was just another man. A rather pale, frail and tired one, standing in the office of an old friend.

"You know what happens if you go."

Blackened eyes cast to the floor, a sad little smile spreading on his lips. "Your quirk doesn't deal in guarantees." the ghoul gently spoke. "Only possibilities, the most likely of them."

Adjusting his glasses and stepping up beside him, 'Nighteye' sighed. "Be that as it may, the 'most likely' scenario is not often wrong."

" 'Not often'. " Toshinori parroted, hoping it would be such a case.

With a shake of his head, Nighteye relented. "I won't be going with you."

"I know."

"I can't watch it happen. You haven't even chosen a success-"

With a smile, Toshinori cut him off with a gentle hand on his shoulder. "I know..." with some thought, he pats the man before turning to leave the office. "At this point... I'm starting to think that... no. nevermind." With a soft click, he turned the handle and went to walk out of the office.

"Give my best to Mirio? For a while I... I really did consider."

"People are going to die, All Might." Nighteye had turned around, his tone harsh as he spoke, halting Toshinori in place with his hand still on the doorknob. "Your students... Co-workers, the villains- it goes beyond tonight!" In a halfhearted gesture, 'All Might' gave his old friend a sidelong look over his shoulder. "Think of the big picture: yes, by staying away you'll be leaving them to die, but they know the risks! Everything that comes after this, the lives caught in the turmoil! You can prevent so much of it by not going! You won't even be able to save everyone!"

Slowly, with the biggest smile he'd worn in years, Toshinori turned around to look him in the eyes. "I don't trade lives, I don't deal in arithmetic." Nighteye took in a shuddering breath, his brow furrowing and fists clenching. "If can save a life, I will. I will not abandon anyone, no matter what, because if I do... then I'm not a hero anymore."

Nighteye grit his teeth. "You old fool... it's a wonder you didn't chose Midoriya as your successor.
after all." All Might frowned, flinching at the harsh words. "You can't just- no. I will not allow it."
With the flick of his wrist, Nighteye had three, weighted, metal projectiles between the fingers of his right hand, Kunai between the fingers of the other. "You will not throw away- GULK!"

In a blur of motion too fast to see, All Might had crossed the room, his fist impacting into his old ward's solar plexus, doubling him over. "Forgive me..." and then he elbowed the back of the man's head, catching him before he hit the floor. "but if I let what is most likely to happen stop me from acting, if I let it make me chose the easier, more cowardly path... well, I already said." Gently, he carried the man to his chair, laying him out in it in as comfortable a position as he could. "And should your prediction come to pass? It's better you're not involved anyways."

Giving Nighteye's shoulder a final squeeze, he walked out of the room.

*Goodbye... old friend.*

Down in the lobby, the entrance to Nighteye's agency, several people had gathered.

Aizawa, making sure his scarf and goggles were secured. Valentine, who gave him a respectful, appreciative nod. Ingenium and his younger brother, both ensuring the armor of the other was secured properly, exchanging a brotherly smile between them.

"Surprised you're even here... when was the last time you even talked to the guy?" Bakugo muttered at the younger Iida, giving him a bit of a glare while he was at it.

In reply, Iida scoffed. "He's a classmate! Of course I'm here! My issue was never with Midoriya. I merely didn't wish to associate with you or Aka- ah, Stendhal... er, no offense."

Bakugo actually laughed. "Yeah, whatever..." Earning a mild frown from Kirishima, which had Bakugo acting sheepish.

*Hmm...*

Shaking her head, adjusting her amplifiers mounted on the backs of her hands, Jiro quipped at them both. "Try not to kill each other out there, okay?" Jokingly, Bakugo saluted with an eyeroll.

Iida saluted in earnest, "Yes ma'am!"

As he ventured further into the room yet more of those gathered met his gaze. A quiet nod from Shoto Todoroki while Ashido and Kaminari seemed to be nervously talking among themselves. "Look, I... this thing, when they fought it? It had a healing factor. I don't think you need to worry about hurting it so much."

Ashido averted her eyes, shoulders bunching uncomfortably as she gulped. "You didn't see what I did to that teleporter guy... you don't know what you're asking me to do."

He put a hand on hers, giving a gentle squeeze. "Yeah but... he'll be fine! It'll heal right up, just like it never happened."

She turned her eyes right back to his, expression just as vulnerable as it had been throughout their conversation. "When you hurt someone, there is no 'it never happened', Kami. Not ever." At this, the young man looked as though he wanted to say something, but ultimately couldn't. So he just frowned, nodded and squeezed her hand again.

Reaching the end of the room, he found himself looking at Yaoyorozu. Seeing him, she stood up, a question on her lips. "Is this everyone?"
All Might nodded, just as Jiro had wandered over. "Uravity's still trying to get Stendhal out of the hospital, and Jiro's... contact," the hearing hero did her best not to look awkward. "Should be waiting for us when we get there. Otherwise? I think so."

With an appreciative smile, the hearing hero gave the creative hero a hug. "Thanks for running out here..."

Yaoyorozu smiled, giving a nod. "Where we should be, right?"

As Todoroki gave the trace of a smile, across the room, Vanessa whispered to Aizawa. "Four pros and a bunch of kids..." In reply to which, the former hunter gulped quietly. "Considering All For One's and that Nomu's involvement, I'm not liking these odds much."

"Neither am I..." he muttered, earning a knowing glance from Jiro, one the two professionals acknowledged with a nod. "but this is everyone who cares. You know the order..."

Vanessa's eyes and brow twitched at a glare, her lips frowning on one side. "Nameless didn't explicitly order anything, but it's a stroke of wisdom acknowledging he won't be pleased about this rescue mission of ours." To say the least... she did not add.

Aizawa drew in a sharp breath. "Speaking of him and All For One," Vanessa's gaze turned to the ground, already knowing what he was about to say, "if it comes to it, can... you kill him?"

Pensive, biting the tip of her tongue, Vanessa shook her head. "I don't know." Then she turned and looked him right in the eyes. "I've never killed anyone before." From the soft, rather unexpected vulnerability of her countenance, he believed her.

Nodding, pausing long enough to word his next response correctly, he spoke quietly. "Pray you don't have to. It's not the act of killing that really gets to you, it's... living with it after the fact."

No sooner had the words crossed his lips than her expression had changed. She'd blinked, puzzling at his face, his tone. "You know... slowly, at first. "All this time, I... I never really believed you regretted any of it."

Eyebrows shrugging, he exhaled sharply. "Fifty two lives ended by my hands, the entire time I..." he frowned at himself, shaking his head as a twisted feeling pulled at his features. Guilt shouldn't absolve him, didn't make anything less atrocious than it was. That she seemed almost willing to forgive him, didn't sit right with him. "It doesn't matter."

...How had he so much trouble fending her off? Had his strength really been sapped away that much?

You're a better man than either of us have been giving you credit for, Aizawa... She gave his back a wounded smile. But... how long did you have to reconsider along the way, as you kept on taking lives? She sighed, expression losing what levity it held. One can only be an unwitting pawn in another's game for so long before they are a willing participant.

Running water trailed into awaiting, shaky palms, palms that splashed the icy liquid into a respirator clad face. Sounds of the faucet filled the little room, as his fingers dragged down his leathery skin. The thinning, swept back and spiky hair on his head shed a few strands and he sighed through the apparatus that maintained his respiratory functions. Unzipping what was left of his hoodie revealed the jagged lacerations at the hands of that other vampire in Tartarus.

...How had he so much trouble fending her off? Had his strength really been sapped away that much?
That was to address nothing of how much else he had lost in recent times. Kurogiri... Shigaraki... gone. Toga had abandoned them two years ago now. Even the Nomu, having gone mad if reports were to be believed, had found its own way in the world. Brash decisions, indulging an angry youth, pursuing blind revenge... not even the clothes on his back were truly his own any longer. In just a few short years, any level of progress he'd made had either been negated or sundered by his enemies.

Zipping up the hoodie, as he left the bathroom behind him, he realized just how faded and old he had become. His goals were no closer to completion, and everyone he'd sought to better the world for was now lost to him. All For One, was a man out of time, in as many senses of the phrase as one pleased.

**Anger... it seems to be the only thing I 'feel' anymore, and it blinds me... have I lived too long? Become too bitter for this world? Is all I care about restricted to myself anymore?**

Casting a bitter look the the table where Overhaul had been conducting his more rigorous analysis, he sighed. Gallons, entire gallons of that boy's blood, and for what? No viable end result, save for hurting the accursed child. All that, and somehow he was still alive. If the universe, or god, or whatever cosmic force there was reigning over reality had a sense of humor, it was a sadistic one.

...perhaps that was karma, of a sort.

He'd taken a seat in an old, wooden chair, hearing it creak beneath him, when another and much smaller man entered the room. "You seem downtrodden."

All For One didn't even look up, the voice told him it was Overhaul. "Perhaps I am."

The masked man shrugged, perching on the table across from him. "It's just one failed avenue."

"With how much in the way of losses?" Droned the mechanical voice.

Sighing himself, Overhaul shrugged. "It's just you, me, Muscular, Mooney, Seether and Dabi now."

The villain seemed to shrink a little. "So... we lost everyone else in that raid, and it was for what?"

Kicking off from his perch, hands in his pockets, Overhaul started pacing. "You tell me, All For One," at the mention of his name, the old villain gave the younger man a look of surprise, "you're supposed to be a master tactician. The genius that brought the world to its knees, obliterated the Yakuza, kept this world of heroes from truly coming into fruition for almost two hundred years..."

As the younger man continued pacing, All For One only felt more and more confused. "...you know I almost eradicated your organization, yet you agreed to work with me." The Yakuza Boss nodded. "Why?"

Another shrug, head tilting to one side as he did. "Desperate times, and Mooney seems to like you."

"...That's it?"

Beneath the plague mask, he smiled. "Desperate times are not to be taken lightly," and he re-perched himself on the old table. "I'd think you'd know that better than anyone."

Slowly, All For One nodded. "You know... twenty years ago, back when that brat All Might was first making his way onto the scene, I almost thought I'd won." Leaning back in the chair, eyes gazing at the ceiling as though through it he could see another world, a better world, he let himself fondly reminisce. "With my strongest punch, I nearly split Tokyo in half. The chasm that formed,
the section of the city that nearly fell into the ocean was such that the projected death toll was in
the hundreds of thousands. Not from the initial impact, but from the crumbling ruins the city fell
into as it threatened to fall into the ocean."

Overhaul shrugged. "A sight to remember, Must have made for quite the story."

All For One laughed. "Stories... yes, I suppose that's all they are now. Just a faded memory, no
longer so clear as the chaos of today. It's not nearly so talked about as what came after: All Might.
He literally leapt into the chasm and pulled the land back together, as much as he could at least.

While the old man told the story, he elaborated with as detail, as much embroidery as he could lace
into the descriptions of that glorious depiction of chaos; but it was just an empty shell, an echo of
the true spectacle. Nothing could substitute for actually being there, beholding the events as they
transpired, beholding the untold death and destruction wrought by a single blow. In the end,
perhaps no one was meant to truly appreciate the magnitude of this former colossus's power,
referring either to All For One or All Might, perhaps echos were all they were meant to be
anymore.

Ghosts that lingered in the present, refusing to the last embers of strength and malice to fade away.
"By the time some fool had stopped panicking enough to go for their phone, he'd already saved a
hundred people. Pulling them from the ravine, the collapsing buildings, what have you..."

The Yakuza Boss blinked. "Wait... that was his debut? That famous internet clip?"

"The very same..." All For One sighed, nodding and turning his eyes to the floor. "Now? Well, just
look at me: look at what I've been reduced to, what little I've been capable off for a very long time
now." For a long time, the air hung heavy in the room, neither one having the courage to speak.
Until the villain finally did. "I think my time as a force for change in this world is coming to an
end." Hopeful eyes turned to Overhaul, a look met with mild confusion. "It's time for others to
stand up, and shape this world instead."

Overhaul paused, pondering this for a long breath before he finally, softly spoke. "My goals differ
greatly from yours."

The villain shrugged. "The end result will be about the same, I think."

Scratching behind his neck, the younger of two felt a little awkward. "I... suppose Mooney and I
have all the knowledge we'd need to see your 'Endgame' into fruition, but... you barely know me.
You know my true grip with this world, what I think the cause of it is."

"So do as you will," All For One shakily got to his feet, "as you said, 'desperate times'. I have
literally no one else to entrust the fate of this world to. In the end... you may find your viewpoint
on quirks to be a childish one, as they are not the root of the true evil in this world." As he started
to wander from the room, the very foundations of the hideaway trembled around them, shaking so
much of the lair that any loose concrete sand fell like rain around them. "Hmm..."

Overhaul leapt to his feet, eyes frantically searching about as if the source of the disturbance was in
the room with them. "What-!? That was an impact, something hit the ground above-" Cutting into
his moment of panic was the blaring of an alarm, a klaxon ringing throughout the underground
hideout. "That's the alert from the lookouts! The kids upstairs! How did they find us!!?" Once again,
the entire area shook like an earthquake were ravaging the land. Closing his eyes, a feeling of cold
calm washing over him as Overhaul grabbed a radio, and a hunk of concrete came crashing down,
sundering a table in a corner of the room. "Report." he demanded, and it was Seether and Dabi who
replied.
"All Might." Seether's voice spoke in a hushed tone. "He's here, a few other heroes with him. That lady I thought All For One had killed among them, I don't recognize the rest." Another tremor, more of the ceiling came falling down, pocking the floor up with potholes.

Dabi's voice interrupted, hissing into his radio. "They've got us on the run! Mooney's slowing them down, but-"

"Calm down," Overhaul whispered, "how many, exactly, are we dealing with? Maybe we can-"

All For One exhaled, slowing re-opening his eyes as he put a gentle hand on Overhaul's shoulder. "It's time."

Blinking, the younger man gave the villain an utterly confounded look. "What are you-?"

"Exactly as I was saying," All For One reached up toward his face, unclasping parts of his respirator as he took a last breath through it. As Overhaul gaped with wondering eyes All For One pulled the device from himself and dropped it to the floor, "the era for titans like myself and All Might is over." Free of the device, his lungs finally tasted the cold, unfiltered air of the world and he felt his head go light for a moment, and then he started walking to the table where so much of that boy's blood had been gathered.

Astonished, barely cognizing what the other was doing, Overhaul took an uncertain step toward him, a hand outstretched. "What are you doing!?"

Even as All For One brought one of the larger canisters to his lips, the Yakuza couldn't believe it. "Buying time." And he began to drink.

"That's going to kill you!" Overhaul rushed forward, stopping by the other man's side. "The healing factor in his blood will overwrite you before long, even if it does give you some strength back!"

All For One didn't even slow down, he just kept drinking until the canister was empty before tossing it aside with a long breath. "Some?" he said with a smile. As Overhaul looked him over, he saw the man's muscles stretching, growing, his battered skeleton forcing itself back into the shape of its former glory.

Taking a step back, marveling at the sheer lack of self regard before him, the Yakuza whispered. "It won't be enough. You're still going to die out there..." and All For One extended a hand toward him, palm open and waiting. As his leathery skin started slowly returning to that of a man a good thirty years younger than he appeared, Overhaul reached into his pocket. "There's only two left, and the effects are not permanent." and placed the pistol in the villain's hand.

"More than I need... just get them out of here." the ground shook so violently that Overhaul threatened to topple over, and the sounds of concrete and pavement sundering, shattering resonated throughout the compound. "...give them a rendezvous point, gather the others." All For One took the last remaining radio and started walking toward the source of the calamitous noises. "I'll take care of the rest." and he stepped out of the room, wandering the rest of the way toward the unfolding chaos.

Thursday, August 9th, 2255

Thrown off his feet more than one now, Izuku forced himself to stand with even shakier arms than he'd left that cage of a room with. Groaning, no idea where he was or where he was headed, the vampire forced himself to keep running. There had to be a way out somewhere nearby, there just
had to be! Miles of sprawling concrete corridors, and if his nose could be trusted, they connected to the sewers.

Wait... he halted all motion, someone was- no, multiple people were running right at him!

Leaping up, hands bracing against the ceiling, his feet soon met the smooth surface. Scurrying to a shadowy corner he held his breath, stuck fast to the ceiling.

"Are you certain this is the way?" A voice he didn't recognize, muffled through some of air filter.

The one replying was the man with the bird mask. "I built this place. It's this way."

Dabi's voice growled. "What exactly did we gain from this alliance?"

The Boss chuckled. "Information, my friend. Information..."

As the trio ran past, Dabi came back with a bitter reply. "I hope it was worth it, Overhaul."

Then, running out of his sight, he heard Overhaul, 'The Boss', say one last thing. "It will be." And the man in the gasmask laughed as their footsteps echoed away.

Sighing in relief, he started to feel relaxed in time for another complex shattering quake to tear him from his perch. Falling with a yelp, his knee slammed into the concrete with a gut wrenching snap. "RRRRRRRRRRRRRRGGH!" He half screamed half growled through clenched teeth, strangling the outcry with his throat muscles as best he could as the bones and flesh put themselves back together. Panting as it stopped healing, he went to wipe the excess blood away but felt the skin still raw; that last surface layer of skin was still healing, and barely so at that.

"Come on..." his voice was quiet, strained as he focused all his energy on healing. Still short of breath, his hand groped about for the wall, his fingers sticking to the surface as he pulled himself back to his feet. " Burning the candle at both ends..." he sighed, somewhat bitterly. "More like with a flame thrower." Finally standing again, he started stumbling away.

Shaky steps, feet padding at the floor sending sharp pain with his heels. Unbeknownst to him, but the last fifteen days of not eating had not been kind to his body-mass-to-skeleton ratio. He was in for a shock the next time he saw a mirror. "Midoriya?"

Though he knew it was Yaoyorozu's voice, he was slow to believe his ears. The vampire looked up to see three people he'd almost never expected to see again. Right along side the pony-tailed girl he saw his long absent friend Iida and none other than Kyoka. As his heart soared, a grin spread his lips. "Hey!" Staggering a little faster now, the others ran toward him. "You have no idea how happy I am to see-"

He slipped, and Kyoka leapt forward, her arms around him in an instant, stopping him from hitting the all too unforgiving floor again. "Whoa!" Stumbling back as she exclaimed, it was only thanks to the other two bracing her that they both didn't fall over. "Oh my g- are you okay!?"

"Obviously not..." Iida hissed in a horrified tone. "Look at him, he's been whittled down to-"

Slipping about with his feet, Izuku groaned as he fought for his strength. "I'm fine, really." Even as he found his footing Kyoka refused to let him go, her jaw dropped as she looked at him. "Just... just really tired."

"Like hell," she breathed, as her hands couldn't help but detect every bone in his ribcage through what was left of his once green hoodie. God the smell of him... "what did they-?"
He shook his head. "You don't wanna know."

"If it's anything like what they did to Eri..." Izuku's ears perked up, his head turning toward a fourth person in their midst. Toga. "he ain't lyin." Her expression was oddly sympathetic, understanding. "Guy who can reshape whatever he wants by touching it?"

Shuddering, Izuku nodded. "He do that to you too?"

Toga shook her head. "Saw him do it to Moonfish and Nomu."

The vampire blinked. "Why did-?"

"Spliced 'em together. That's what that 'High End' thing is." Izuku felt his teeth grit, a sharp, angry breath entered his lungs. "You didn't know that?"

Slowly, he shook his head, as a memory of All Might backhanding its extending teeth away from him flashed before his eyes. "Guess I do now."

With a smirk, Toga stepped forward and flicked his nose. "Don't go all dark side on em." she said, tilting her head toward his gathered friends, still looking at him as though he were some kind of shambling corpse. "Be a shame if they found you after all this and you weren't the same guy." At that last sentiment, his eyes lingered on Kyoka for a second or two.

Closing his eyes, he drew in a long breath and slowly let it go with a grimacing nod. "Okay... Okay.." *I really was starting to think I'd never see any of them again, wasn't I?*

As he worked on centering himself, Toga started walking away. "Hey!" Kyoka demanded, as her old friend went to go after the fleeing criminals. "Where do you think you're going?"

With a giggle and a shrug, Toga spun round on her heels, winking at Kyoka. "I've got a man I've gotta kill." the collective hero's jaws dropped. "Been waiting two years to put him down, not about to slack on it any further than this." Then glaring down the tunnel she intended to flee through, she grumbled to herself in addendum. "If I can still find the bugger..."

Spinning around again to walk away, Kyoka was visibly torn, gaze darting between Izuku and her. "But- no, you can't."

Not even bothering to turn around, Toga gave one last reply. "You gotta choice: chase after me, or stay and help them!" She didn't even need to see her face to know she was giving that old crocodile smile. "But be careful! Wouldn't bet they'd like it if you left em now of all times!" With a cackle, Toga started running away, faster than any of them had been prepared to see.

Biting her lower, Kyoka's eyes winced shut as her shoulders sagged, head tilting to one side as she looked helplessly after her. Giving Kyoka a sympathetic look, Izuku whispered. "You should go after her."

Looking after her old friend one more time, Kyoka slowly exhaled through her nose. "Yeah... that's how I know it's not her anymore." She gave him a gentle squeeze. "Besides, I can't just leave you now, or them."

Yaoyorozu nodded, giving Kyoka's shoulder an appreciative squeeze. "Someone has to go after her though. We can't just let her try and commit murder."

Sighing, Iida stepped forward. "Considering how fast she's moving, it's obvious none of you would..."
even catch up to her."

Izuku's eyes went wide. "Whoa, hold on!" But Iida was already running. "If she catches with the villains just run! Don't let the guy with plague mask touch you!" as he raced out of sight, the vampire could only hope he'd heed the warning.

"You sure about this?" Yaoyorozu murmured, stepping away from the two of them to get a better look down the corridor as Iida disappeared from view. "She... I don't know what she was to you but..." Kyoka lowered her face, a dour expression cast to the floor. "I can tell she was important."

Slowly, the violet eyed girl nodded. "Even if she was the same person I knew? I don't think I could bring myself to leave you guys right now... not like I did when she first came back." Giving Izuku an apologetic look, she was surprised that he met it with a warm smile. "Come on," she pulled his arm over her shoulder. "We gotta go."

Falling in step behind them, Yaoyorozu let out a short breath. "Think the way we came in hasn't collapsed-" then the entire complex shook again, almost toppling the trio as one hallway in front of them caved in completely.

Gulping, seeing their exit now entirely cut off, Kyoka wasn't feeling so optimistic as she had been. "Ya know... probably not." she remarked, with the edge of dark sarcasm.

"So where do we go?" Izuku said, trying to not burden Kyoka too much as they proceeded.

With a weary sigh, Yaoyorozu started walking ahead of them. "Toward the main entrance... where the others are currently fighting High End or, Moonfish or... whatever he is."

Izuku and Kyoka exchanged a worried look. "Things just don't ever go smoothly, do they?" he breathed as they followed after their friend.

"That's the going trend," Kyoka muttered bitterly, "I'm still holding out hope that changes someday." her hand squeezed at him, eyes giving him a surprisingly vulnerable look. "Has to at some point... right?"

Slowly nodding, taking a moment to make sure of their footing, he leaned in and kissed her, quickly but gently on the lips. "I uh... wasn't sure I'd see you again."

Smiling, blushing, and casting a nervous look at Yaoyorozu, she cleared her throat. "I was starting to get worried about that myself." She adjusted his arm over her shoulder, making their pace a little less awkward. "Do you even know how long it's been?"

He shook his head. "Do I want to?"

"Probably not..." considering how small her voice sounded, he decided not to ask, opting instead to just squeeze her shoulder again.

'Ooh, right." Halting for a moment, Yaoyorozu took a canister off her hip and opened it, handing it to Izuku. When the scent of its contents reached his nose, the vampire almost lost his mind. "Sorry, I didn't mean to forget-"

Brain no longer functioning, he snatched it away and guzzled down the entire two liters in seconds. Gasping for breath, chest heaving as Kyoka gave him a very wide-eyed look and he suddenly felt very, very, sheepishly embarrassed. "s-sorry..." he said in a very small voice, avoiding eye contact with the slack-jawed, pale-faced Yaoyorozu. "thank you."
"D-don't worry about it." the taller girl managed, quite nervously, waving both her hands side to side as she did her best to laugh. "We should probably hurry." After reaching to the other side of her utility belt she handed him a second thermos and spun around, almost jogging down the hall.

"Some things really just don't change." Izuku sighed, giving a tired smile, taking his arm from its position on Kyoka's shoulder and going to jog after her as he drained the second container.

Blinking in surprise, she started after him almost instantly. "Should you really be running?"

He shrugged, tossing the containers aside. "Don't think it matters, I doubt we're getting away from here without a fight." As she matched his pace, the trio now moving together, she silently hoped he was wrong.

Whenever the lot of them teamed up like this, it did not tend to end well.

Stendhal stared up at the ceiling with an angry glare, the hiss of his oxygen mask only serving to further incur his ire. Finger tapping at one of his restraints, he did his best to ignore the news being played on the TV in the room.

"He can't be allowed to go." At the doctor's continued refusal, Uravity felt herself getting a little cross. "With the state his lungs are in he needs at least another day of treatment before he can realistically resume hero work."

Uravity huffed up. "But it's our friend!" She demanded, arms stiff by her sides. "He's in trouble and almost no one is going to go and try save him! We have to go too!"

Shaking his head stubbornly, the old doctor refused. "No. I won't allow it. Sorry."

At his word Stendhal's brow shrugged in annoyance. "Short sighted fool..." Thought really, both thought that about the other. Above his head, on the opposite wall, the newscast showed the fight as it unfolded.

An entire block had been demolished, sunken into the street and sewers below. Building fell into the chasm with deafening crashes, their classmates beaten unconscious while Ingenium took a bowling ball's worth of street to the head. The Todoroki brother's fought, though neither seemed to bringing their A-game to the encounter. Stalling for time, avoiding lethal blows where they could, only accidentally wounding each other and when they did, neither of them hid their worry well. It was heartbreaking to watch...

Meanwhile, All Might pummeled away at that Nomu, trading one world splitting blow after another with the beast, a fellow hero was somehow managing to keep pace with the fight. She was unknown to Stendhal, but her performance was impressive. Agile, swift and devastatingly strong, her claws would rend entire limbs off the beast; their battle was one of healing factors and more than once did she lunge forward and sink her slender fangs into-

...Is that...? Stendhal, his face saturated with disbelief sat up as much as he could. Squinting, focusing his eyes like never before he waited for the camera to finde her again, and saw an all too familiar face: "...Aunt V?" Astonished, breath almost frozen still, his eyes went wide and he felt his heart ache as the Nomu pierced her chest with its teeth, thrashing her about like a rag-doll.

Uravity heard his quiet exclamation and wandered over to him. "What's wrong?"

In an instant, he turned to her, his eyes pleading. "Close, lock, then barricade the door."
Taken aback, her eyes fluttered. "I- what- why-?"

He snarled at her. "Hurry, we don't have time for this!" Nodding and hurrying to it, she did as he asked while he effortlessly broke free of his binds. "I'll not sit idly by any longer." outside the room, personnel scrambled to try and break inside, Uravity nervously backed away. Stripping out of his hospital gown, he tore open the nearby closet as Uravity gawked, her face going redder than a human's face really should have been able to as she tore he eyes away from him. He was only just back into his armor when the door burst open.

With a growl, Stendhal hurled himself forward and in a flurry of punches and kicks Uravity almost hadn't seen, he sent them all groaning to the floor. Stomping back to the closet, he put his sword over his shoulder. "You idiots really shouldn't have left this in my room again..." The half human grumbled, grabbing his medicine -an inhaler- from his bedside table. As soon as that had been pocketed, he hauled it up and smashed through a window with it, motioning for Uravity to follow. "Let's move."

Nodding quickly, clearing her throat, she did her best no overcome her bashfulness as she followed. "Ah, right..." and she jumped out the window after him, charging off into the night.

"Why, I ask...  
Shotgun blast...  
You're the ghost that lingers,  
In my past...  

You don't know...  
What I've seen...  
My lucky number seven  
Is thirteen...  

Do you believe?  
As I believe?  
You earn your reprieve...  

We're gonna fight  
We're gonna fight  
The good fight  

My soul's corroded,  
my heart's exploded,  
And I'm locked and loaded  
And I'm ready baby for you...  

You can shoot me down,  
You can take me down,  
But there ain't a grave to keep my body down,  
There ain't a grave to keep my body down,  
Tonight..."

All For One hummed to himself as he stepped inside into the war zone, there was no other phrase for it. The area outside had been reduced to a crater, the staircase leading down into the darkened hide-away now little more than pebbles beneath his boots. Buildings lay at the bottom of this new concrete chasm, half crumbled into ruin. Fire hydrants fountained water into the air, raining down on the scene. Spires of ice towered high, flames littered the arena in patches. A young man with
spiky red hair lay unconscious, bleeding from his temple and groaning softly and All For One stepped on him as he advanced.

Not far away from him, a blond with spiky hair clutched a nasty looking gash in his ribs. "Motherfu- ARGH!" His other hand propped him up against a hunk of concrete, knees threatening to buckle from blood loss.

Beyond him, closer to the center of the arena, All Might and Valentine were grappling with Mooney. Long teeth speared and wound into the vampire's flesh as she clawed at the monster's head and eyes, the symbol of peace slamming his fists into Mooney's chest as hard as he could manage. Even under an onslaught that would have leveled a bombshelter, the former nomu refused to submit.

Turning his gaze some distance away, he saw Ingenium, lying in a pool of water, head awkwardly angled over a hunk of rock. "Not much use, are you?" All For one muttered, stepping closer to the center of the arena.

Hanging back, watching the fight nervously, were a pair of younger heroes. One was- he had to do a double take. She was... entirely pink, with white horns and blacked eyes with gold irises. She seemed to be incredibly nervous, hesitating at using her quirk almost as much as the blond by her side, electricity arcing off his palms.

To his delight, a younger hero stood with his back to him and All For One crept forward. His entire right side was encased in ice and his movements sluggish as he gasped for breath, hands on his knees as he stood partially doubled over. By the time the dual hair colored boy had heard him, it was too late. A swift backhand sent the boy's body flying, crashing limply to the ground. "A bunch of rookies..."

As if to prove him wrong, a long, impossibly sturdy, white scarf wrapped itself around his neck, as he felt every single quirk in his body go silent. Twisting around, pulling his neck backward he pulled the ambusher toward him at a much faster pace than had been intended. With a soft cackle, he flung his arm into the scarf and pulled off to one side, swinging his would-be-attacker like a flail into the jagged surface of the arena's wall.

The man's back smashed and then dragged along the surface, smearing blood and skin in patches along the bumpy, sharp concrete. He landed with a splash in a dirty water, his wounds stinging as he fought to right himself. As soon as he'd gotten his feet under him, All For One was upon him, his foot arcing around and punting the scraggly man's head. Crumpling to the ground, but still struggling against unconsciousness, the hero refused to submit.

Glowing red eyes glared at one another, and the villain smiled. "Well met, Eraser Head." Drawing back a fist, he rudely robbed the man of his senses, leaving him limp on the cold, hard ground. A sharp breath suddenly stopping made the villain's smile widen as he turned to the wounded blond, who was eyeing him with a rather helpless expression.

Across the battleground, eyes fixed on the now rekindled form of his nemesis, All Might felt his breath stop. Tearing Vanessa from Mooney's maw, he unconsciously spoke. "All For One..."

The villain's smile darkened, and he aimed the pistol in his possession at the wounded blond. "Hello, All Might." Pulling back the hammer of the gun, he didn't hesitate to pull the trigger. A rush of wind so fierce it sent embers flying, doused flames with the sheer velocity of the wind. The sound of the gun firing and a body crashing to the concrete ground.

For just a moment, everyone on the battlefield remained terribly still and silent. Laughter, slow and
rumbling at first, started echoing in the concrete chasm. Pushing himself up, eyes wide in disbelief, All Might looked at himself and saw nothing but his frail, ghoulish form beneath him. Tried though he did, as he stared at his scrawny, scrawny hand, there was no crackle of blue energy. No surging strength to his limb. Looking at the place where the bullet had hit him, he saw not a bullet wound but the remains of a small, spherical canister embedded in his skin, some orange fluid mixing with his blood as both flowed from the wound and All For One's laughter roared above all other noise.

"What..." All Might breathed, getting to his feet, placing himself between All For One and the wounded, younger man. "What did you to me?"

As his laughter slowly died away, the villain sighed, a feeling of completion overwhelming his body. "What you did to me, all those years ago."

As All Might opened his frail mouth to speak, All For One moved in a blur. In less than a second, his fist was embedded in the hero's chest, shattering his ribs, and propelling his wisp of a body like a stone through the air. When All Might landed, his body crashing through the first three walls of a crumbled building, he did not move again.

All looked on with gaping jaws and wide eyes as the villain cackled with triumphant laughter, tossing the pistol aside. "NO THERE AIN'T NO GRAVE TO KEEP MY BODY DOWN, TONIGHT!" And as he cheered, spinning about on his heels a sense of horror settled in over those still standing.

All Might, still alive or not, had just been totally shattered before their eyes.

Izuku, Kyoka and Yaoyorozu stood in the doorway with cold fingers snaking around their hearts. Their jaws had collectively dropped, eyes wide as saucers as the villain laughed with gleeful abandon.

"Wh-" Jiro gulped. "What the fuck just-?!"

Her voice catching, Yaoyorozu barely managed to speak. "I- he just- I think he might have killed..." she couldn't say it, her voice trailing away.

Quietly, as though his world had ended, tone wavering like the hair-thin remnants of an old support beam struggling to hold up a high-rise, Izuku spoke. "All Might..."

"AND THE PILLAR OF PEACE IS FINALLY SUNDERED INTO RUIN!" The villain spread his arms wide, face upturned with a grin to the sky. "Ahhh... I have dreamed of this for so long now, I hardly know what to do now that it's finally come..." slowly, the water that had been raining down stopped altogether as the villain let out a long sigh. "Now then..." he started walking forward, toward Vanessa, the Nomu, Ashido and Kaminari. "Get away from Mooney."

"BASTARD!" With a quirked eyebrow, All For One glanced over his shoulder. Who would it be but Bakugo, soaring through the air like a projectile, his quirk blasting at full tilt. "I'LL MAKE YOU REGRET THA-AH!"

The villain effortlessly swatted him aside, his body smashing against the jagged wall of the crater. "Lesson one, boy:" Baku fell to the ground in a heap, his chest barely rising and falling as he breathed. "never cast aside the element of surprise." Turning back to the quartet before him, he charged.

The Nomu struggled to stand, All For One's shattering Vanessa's claws as their hands met, mid
swing. Ashido's palms sprayed jets of her acid all over the Nomu and Kaminari shot... something from an object mounted on his wrist, embedding itself in the nomu's skin. While Ashido's acid wasn't hurting it, the object he'd shot it with served as a lightning rod for his quirk, and the electricity he sent arcing from his hand homed in on like a bloodhound after its master's prey. In a matter of seconds, the beast was screaming, writhing, then crumpled to the ground.

"Impressive collaboration." His voice barely straining as he battered Vanessa aside, charging forward and slamming his foot into Kaminari's head, sending him flying into Ashido. Out in an instant... "But that wont be enough in the storm that's about to engulf the world." Kyoka fastened her amplifiers to the backs of her hands, Yaoyorozu charging forward as a section of cables sprouted from her palms.

With a savage roar, Vanessa was on him again, her fist driving down across the man's jaw. As he stumbled, she brought her knee up into the man's teeth, breaking his nose with a nauseating crunch. The villain stumbled backwards, Vanessa back-flipping away to sure footing. "Have you no shame... they're just children!"

Cackling as his nose popped back into place, smiling at her, his eyes pierced deep into hers. "Be that as it may, I'd be a fool to treat them as such." his ears perked up, hearing the faint rush of wind behind him as Izuku flew at him, claws extended. With all the deftness of one engaged in a waltz, he twisted about, pivoting out of the young vampire's way, and brought his hand around to grip the back of the man's head. Izuku barely had enough time to close his eyes before his face was smashed into the concrete beneath their collective feet. "Take him for example," All For One grinned, "if I were to go easy on him, he'd likely had decapitated me just then, with all that anger in him." As Izuku twitched, healing factor slow to act, Vanessa roared and swung wildly, her arm caught in the villain's grasp.

As he twisted about, throwing her face-first into the crater wall, his foot hit the ground, Jiro's amplifiers flying to that same surface as her earlobes hooked in. In an onslaught of sound, she reduced much of the stable ground to uneven, sifting, loose stone. All For One's leg sunk and twisted, his face wincing as Yaoyorozu closed in, the cables in her palms launching forward.

Had she been aiming at a weaker creature, a creature as strong as a vampire, his own strength would have worked against him; the cables only becoming tighter as the villain struggled. Unfortunately, his other quirks amplified that strength exponentially and he snapped them like twigs.

"NO!" Vanessa screamed at them. "STAY BACK!"

Only All For One was already charging toward them. His foot to Kyoka's middle, her mouth spewing blood as she flew, body clattering along the ground like a discarded wind chime down a hill. His body spun, fist uppercutting Yaoyorozu's face, making her spin about in the air in a spiral as before she crashed back down to the ground.

This time, in retaliation, both pairs of Vanessa's claws slashed upwards through his torso. Less than a second later, his body was tearing through the remnants of a fallen building, leaving bits of skin, muscle fiber and cloth on the jagged edges of the ruins.

When she landed, her eyes went wide, seeing the man's flesh crawl back together. "You..." as he gasped for breath, his throat finally reforming its broken parts and spewing blood and phlegm from his mouth, she stood there in confusion. "You're a... but how!?"

Spinning around to Izuku, a question burning in her eyes was met with a shake of his head. "I didn't..." he strained, forcing himself to stand. "I never bit him, I swear." He almost looked hurt,
but his astonishment at what was happening overrode the feeling.

She blinked turning back to their opponent as he started coughing violently. "Then how is he healing? He didn't have that ability the last two times I fought him." Then, her expression went grave. "Unless he..." All For One started laughing, having finally caught his breath and her eyes went wide, face twisting with horrified confusion. "You drank his blood without him biting you..." All For One shrugged, his arms splayed out in an exaggerated expression of indifference. "That's a death sentence!" Vanessa stepped forward, her fist cutting through the air in front of her, splaying out by her side.

All For One merely laughed again. "I should be afraid... but really I'm just liberated." From her rather uncomfortable spot on the ground, struggling to stand and watching with a puzzled expression, Kyoka's eye -blood flowing freely into the other- shifted between the villain and the vampires. "The end is finally is sight, and all I feel is a sense of freedom..." then his eyes fixed on Izuku and narrowed like those of a hungry wolf, eyeing a wounded deer. "Just a few last things, before I die."

His form rushed forward, hand spearing toward Izuku was deflected by Vanessa's claws. The hand went limp, hanging on by a single tendon as she spun about in the air, her heel crushing the orbital of his eye. His other hand snapped too, and hauled her up over his head, bringing her down and crushing the concrete beneath them with her body, the vampire's bones snapping like twigs.

Izuku leapt to her aid, his knee hurtling into his spine and snapping it, making him bend backward at an awkward angle as he flew forward. A ragged piece of wood slashing into, impaling his belly and spilling his blood all over the ground with a scream. "Irritant!" He hissed, taking a piece of concrete the size of a car into his grasp and hurling it toward Izuku.

He wasn't able to dodge entirely, one of legs shattering like glass as he spun about like a coin toward the ground, his head cracking against the rocky surface of crater. As he groaned, world spinning a mad blur, Kyoka fought against her screaming innards as blood spilled from between her teeth. "Damn... it...!" She hissed, her body shaking violently, lurching back toward the ground with every tremble of her weakened limbs. "What's the point in trying to help if I always end up being some useless onlooker!?" Wobbling on her feet, vision going black and fuzzy around the edges, she started walking forward. "Where... where is it...?"

The gun, where was the gun? The one that had taken away All Might's quirk?

Coughing, blood spewing from his maw, All For One's skin lost a little color. "Heh... not long, huh?" Eyeing the still wounded Izuku, he begrudgingly tore his eyes to the incapacitated Mooney. "Gotta make this count..." rushing forward, his arms snaked beneath the slumbering beast. Tearing open a pocket of its skin, he shoved the radio he'd grabbed inside. "Your part's not done yet," lurching to his feet, spinning about with his teeth locked together, he focused every bit of his strength into one throw. The strength that had split a city in two, used to send one being hurtling into the sky. He smiled, feeling a little shaky, "shake the world to its core, R.J. Mooney." His ears caught the sound of metal, hands grasping something that rattled slightly.

Spinning back around, he saw the purple haired brat taking aim at him. He went to charge right at her, but the boy, that murderous little thing that killed Shigaraki, tackled his legs. Face crashing to the ground, All For One snarled, his foot slamming into Izuku's face, snapping his jaw as he went sailing back, embedding into the concrete wall. "FUCKER!" All For One almost laughed at her outrage, rolling aside and throwing off her wobbling aim yet again.

As Kyoka hissed through teeth, struggling to open her left eye through the blood flowing into it, Vanessa leapt back into the fray. She had a length of rebar in her hand, swinging it like a sword
toward the villain's head. He ducked, spinning around using the momentum of his dodge to drive his knee into her belly. A gurgling outcry pushed free of her lungs and his hand snagged in her generous hair. Swinging her around in a wild arc, he dragged her face along the ground, stripping the skin free as he sent her skidding away.

When she crashed up against a wall, struggling to move as the skin of her face regrew, All For One picked up the length of rebar. "Thanks for the weapon." Throwing it like a javelin, the piece of metal speared through her throat, lodging itself into the wall behind her. Leaving the vampire gagging, her hands trying and failing to dislodge the metal, her eyes drifted closed as her strength faded away, and All For One stepped toward an all too unconscious Izuku. "Sorry," he said with a smirk, kicking a rock toward the purple haired brat. She screamed when it impacted into her shoulder, sending her sprawling back on the ground. "But this is not your moment, little girl."

Growling, fighting against an overwhelming agony she struggled to right herself again, but her body just wasn't listening. "Damn it...!" she hissed, her one eye glaring daggers at him. Her mind scrambled, struggling to find any way to interfere. "What's your grief against Izuku?!"

His foot ground to a halt, expression twisting with amused confusion. "Ha ha ha ha... 'Izuku'?" he parroted, turning to her a slight fraction. "That familiar?"

Barely managing to sit up, she stared him down. "What's it to you?" as her voice strained, one of her earlobes started snaking toward the ground.

Eyes narrowing, his smile widening, he stepped toward her. "This little brat killed my ward." She quirked a brow at that statement, struggling to remember anyone he could be referring to.

Then, she remembered one person, back at the USJ. "Shigaraki?" she laughed. "You idiot... he didn't kill him... that was the monster you sent with him." With a snarl, he brought his boot her throat, shoving her back down to the ground, and her vision went almost entirely black. "Izuku..." she went on, still staring him down, still smiling. "He tried to save him... end the fight before anyone really got hurt... but Shigaraki, he..." All For One's hands clenched into fists his jaw clenching so tight she could hear his teeth cracking. "that guy... he just wouldn't accept that he'd lost... wouldn't accept that he'd failed you... and went to kill Izuku on his own..."

"Shut up..." he hissed, shoving his foot down harder, her clavicle threatening to snap.

Her earlobes aligned with the ground, hand fumbling for the gun. "They tripped..." All For One's face trembled, somewhere between rage and sorrow, and her smile vanished. "then your 'nomu' thing tried to kill Izuku..." She felt the boot ease up a little, and his expression took a turn toward sorrow. "it missed... and that was the attack that killed Shigaraki..."

Head bowed, eyes shut tight, his entire body shook. "Why the hell should I believe you?"

Kyoka stared right up at him, as he opened his eyes. "You had him locked up here for over two weeks..." and she found the gun, "tell me... did he ever resort to any lethal level of violence to try and escape? You know his strength... you know he could have slaughtered his way out... but he's not like that, is he?" She saw it, right there in his eyes, that bit of shared knowledge between them and it hurt like hell. "He'd rather die than kill anyone... Even your Shigaraki, and he almost did..."

He cast his gaze aside, his eyes at the ground, lost and confused, breath short as his world spun before him. He knew. He'd known since he'd met the boy that he was exactly like that. He had claws, teeth, weapons that negated most forms of defense and countered a great deal of offenses, yet Muscular didn't have a scratch on him when he'd found them. The law likely would have forgiven him for killing that monster of a man in self defense, yet... alive he remained.
"Two years..." he sighed, eyes closing. "All that rage... all I've lost..." Heh... what was the point?
Revenge on someone who hadn't even committed the crime I imagined... But then... no. Toga had
spelled it all out for him, right after it had happened.

He'd just been too angry, too stricken with grief to care... All For One, nothing more than a man
blindly striking out in rage.

Turning his eyes up, toward the moon, he drew in a long breath. "I really have lived too long...",

Her arm finally got the gun lined up, and she winced her eye shut, bracing for the impending blast
of sound. "Got you..." With a bang, the projectile struck true, impacting into the villain's neck.

Feeling much of his strength fading away, he raised his foot in a blind rage. "IMPUIDENT
WHHELP!" only then the ground gave way beneath them, and he fell back. Her hand lashed out,
gripping for whatever anchor she could, pulling herself out of the sink-hole she'd created. Rolling
off to one side, she struggled to crawl away. In a blind rage, tearing through the loose concrete as
his lungs started to weaken, he lurched toward her. "USING SHIGARAKI'S MEMORY TO
MANIPULATE ME!? YOU'LL DIE SCREAMING YOU LITTLE-"

In a blur of white, brown and green, Izuku had thrown his fist into the back of All For One's head.
Now that he'd had most of his power stripped away, the vampire's punch carried significantly more
heft. "No one else is dying tonight!" He landed shakily, his knees threatening to buckle and Kyoka
almost relaxed, seeing him standing between her and danger. "There's been enough of that, hasn't
there?!"

"ONLY WHEN I SAY SO!" Skin significantly paler now his fist sent Izuku flying into a building
that had crumbled into the crater. Izuku didn't have time to retaliate, the villain had flown into the
ruin with him, gripping his throat in a vice, smashing him through wall after wall. "AND
TONIGHT AT LEAST YOU ARE GOING TO DIE WITH ME!"

His momentum was interrupted by a sword, slashing at his back. The villain's grip faltered, Izuku
clattered to the ground and both sets of eyes turned to see a newcomer. "Get..." lips quivering,
voice overwhelmed with rage, "your filthy hands away from my BROTHER!" and the hero known
as Stendhal charged at All For One. His sword flew in blaze of fury, the motions of the strike as
fluid as a raging waterfall, the blade slicing the man's chest clean open.

For once this night the villain didn't know what to think or feel. His arms raised, a feeble effort to
defend himself as the sword lashed through his skin. As the hero went to run him through, he
turned his palm to the tip of the blade. Once it had sunken in to the hilt, All For One wrenched the
blade from the younger man's grasp, backhanding him through a wall, sending him outside.

As that final wall was sundered, and the ruin crumpled to dust around them, its weight turning both
their skeletons to dust. "NO!" Stendhal screamed, rushing back to his feet.

Many yards away, pulling Vanessa free of the metal impaling her throat, Uraraka screamed.
"MIDORIYA!"

Breath stolen away, Kyoka lurched upward. "GREEN-!" She yelped, her body screaming with pain
as she fell just as quickly as she'd risen, clattering back against the ground. Damn it... come on...
move!

Her face only just managed to upturn, right in time to see both of them pushing free of the rubble,
their bodies healing at an utter snail's pace. Izuku stumbled back, trying and failing to find his
footing as he coughed and gagged on the dust in the air.
"No..." All For One choked, tearing the sword from his hand and casting it aside, his spine snapping, jerking back into place with stuttering motions. "You will not get away!" He went to charge, and Stendhal hurled himself between them.

His armored fist knocked teeth free from the man's maw, making him stumble aside. "I SAID GET AWAY!" Motions became to fast to see, his hands, knees and feet crashing into unarmored flesh of his opponent. Bones snapped, skin tore, blood flew, but All For One was just as quick and relentless. Stendhal's every attempt to go for his blood was rudely interrupted by a blow to his teeth, shredding his lips a little more with each passing impact.

Punch for punch, kick for kick, the half human and All For One could gain no advantage. Strength in equal measure, speed paralleled, their level of endurance mirroring the other, the older man's skill countering the advantage the boy's quirk gave him.

If only the dust in the air hadn't made Stendhal's silicosis flare up.

Face twisting with pain, body seizing from his efforts to maintain control over it, he was just a fraction of a second to slow to dodge that next attack. So it was for the next, and the next, and the next, until his violent, bloody coughing sapped away enough of his strength for All For One to brutally bludgeon him aside.

Pausing for a moment to breathe, All For One only became faintly aware of the shadow looming over him before he heard one word: "Release!" Then bus-sized hunk of a building fell on him.

Slow as he was to tear his way back out, body shaking with weakness, he was caught unprepared by the piece of rebar hitting his face. Uraraka, using the piece of metal like a quarterstaff, wailing away at him. She twirled about and his shoulder cracked, her foot flew to his face and bloodied his eye. A jab with the rebar cracked his rib, slamming him back against the wall, her body spinning and leaping into the air as she brought the metal above her head.

She managed to crack his skull, sending him crashing sideways to the ground, before she landed wrong. Grabbing the rebar, the villain chucked it aside, leaping to and hurling his fist into her sternum. As she was sent flying he fell back to the ground, gasping, chest heaving for breath as he started gagging at the air.

His lungs were weakening, back to the point when he'd been wearing the respirator. Looking up with a furious expression, his wrathful eyes found his prey, still too weak to run. "You... will..." he gasped, lurching toward him, bit by bit, hauling his knee over a very, very jagged piece of ceramic, the largest point aimed at the sky like a spear. His knee was skinned completely, paining the jagged material red as he closed on the boy. "Not... escape!"

"Is this all you have left?" His words prompted a snarl from All For One. "Anger and revenge? Can you even claim a person any more?" Despite the harsh words, Izuku's voice and tone were colored with sympathy, pity. "I... know something about what that's like. I've lost people too, the despair it plunged me into nearly killed me, drove me away from what little I had left to care about- URGH!"

All For One's hand speared into his chest, his chest, fingers clawing their way to his heart. "Stop... talking..." as Izuku screamed, struggling in vain against the other man, those digging fingers inched ever closer. "AND DIE!"

With a final scream from the vampire, All For One's fingers finally reached their goal before suddenly stopping. His blood spilling to the dusty surface beneath him, Izuku's eyes forced themselves to open. There, right before his eyes, he saw Akaguro right beside them, the tip of his sword digging into All For One's neck as the Dhampire's eyes blazed with desperate fury.
"If he dies..." Akaguro's voice wavered, blood trickling from his mouth with every word. "you follow..." With a sinking feeling, Izuku realized he was being completely serious. That fire in his eyes said it all better than words ever could.

All For One grinned. "You really don't belong with them do you, boy?"

"Shut up and let him go." his hands were so tight on the hilt his gloves had started tearing at the seams.

"No." Said All For One. "I don't have long left..." as if to drive this point him, his coughed, the motions of which slit his throat against Akaguro's blade. "Killing him... will be my final act..." Grin going all the more unhinged, he turned his eyes to Akaguro. "The only question is... will I die on my own, or will you kill me?"

Akaguro, bared his teeth, preparing to decapitate the man when he heard a tiny voice.

"Don't!" Breath halting with the barest gasp, he looked toward Izuku. "You have a choice..."

Akaguro's eyebrow twitched, heart thudding with fear. No, he wasn't going to lose him. Not like this!

"I know the truth... I know... what you used to do..." The dhampire's eyes widened with fear, looking at Izuku like a man expeacting his heart to be broken. But... Izuku just smiled at him. "It doesn't matter any more..." Izuku's fingers slid on All For One's skin, gathering a few drops of blood from a wound that hadn't healed. "You're here, with us. You're choosing to be better, different than you were..." Izuku's smile only got gentler, eyes shimmering with care. "Like you said... we're brothers, and I know you'll make the right choice from now on."

All For One squeezed his heart, Akaguro's blade dug deeper as Izuku screamed, gasping from his entire body stopping all functions for that brief second. Shuddering in his next breath, he turned his eyes, expression unchanged, to Akaguro. "Just remember... all those times we worked together... like at the USJ, and Tartarus." Then Akaguro saw his fingers, raising for a moment, and he gave a nod. "I trust you..."

One flick, a mouth opened, and All For One went limp. "NO!" Akaguro dropped the sword, lunging toward his brother-in-arms and hauling him away from the villain.

Izuku Gasped for air, his chest slowly pulling itself closed as his strength just faded away in Akaguro's arms. He smiled up at him, eyes half lidding as gratitude flooded him and the villain fell backwards.

His landing on the ground was punctuated with a sickening splatter, as the jagged ceramic he'd crawled over lanced through his heart.

No one dared to breathe. All eyes yet conscious went wide and stared right at the dying villain.

As his blood pooled out around him, his lips spread into a smile and he laughed, rasping a few, final words; singing them quietly to himself.

"Hey Red... You're gonna end up ahead... Every move you make Is what it takes to bring The other side down...

Hey Blue..."
I'm loving the things you do...
From the very first time
The fight you fight for
Will always be mine...

His eyes closed, and All For One submitted to death.

As quiet settled in over them, no one could find the courage to speak. They could only stare at the man's dead, broken body and wonder in terrified silence at how he got to be so utterly broken.
"You complete my fate...
The world unwinds inside of me...
You complete my fate...
The halo crawls away...
You complete my fate...
Rewinding all we can..."

Whirring of the rotors of the news helicopter above, the spinning of its blades remained the only sound for a time. Kicking up wind that wafted gently though the crater, sweeping away the smoke and dust, the chill that followed left all yet breathing feeling still. Still like glaciers before the sunrise, after a long, lightless winter. Warmth, threatening to melt away the cold, changing the world in its wake.

A question arises with such events: is this change 'good'?

Red light flickered away as centuries old eyes lost their life. Total stillness of his form, no more breathing nor beating of his heart, veins no longer flowing. Impulses in his nerves like fading light, a few brief flashes, twitches, before the energy dissipated completely. Still like fresh fallen snow, in every sense.

Red eyes turned white, before drifting quietly closed.

Izuku turned to Stendhal, staring into his eyes and found them wide as his own. Even with those strange, white irises and pupils of his, he could see the faint outline of every part; it was grimly comforting, knowing he was just as shocked and afraid as he.

Around them, though they heard not a whisper, they could feel the world sigh in relief. A symbol of fear, a tyrant and villain had just fallen down for his final time. Equally tangible was the sense of worry, apprehension at the fate of the man that was his mirror. Izuku's eyes turned to where All Might lay and saw him unmoving, the rise and fall of his chest so slight it was nearly imperceptible. His eyes stayed on him, hoping to see some greater sign of movement, and as he tried to speak his name the world started going black.

Not enough fight left in him, to stay awake any longer.

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**Sunday, August 12th, 2255**

Waking up was a task accomplished with no small amount of hesitation. For the majority of the time he spent in the hospital, he had slept, blissfully unaware of the world around him. That was, until he started dreaming...

He was sitting on a park bench, as the autumn leaves fell in a rain of red, orange and yellow. His colors. Rays of sunlight wafted through the leaves as they danced in the wind, somehow appearing frozen, colder than the air following the death of summer. The dead giveaway that it was a dream was that his sunglasses were nowhere to be seen. Beyond the edge of the park, a group of his friends had gathered at some roadside restaurant, chatting and laughing among themselves, yet he could see right through them. Mirages, illusions, not to be addressed, to be ignored. As he remained perched on the polished wood, just listening to the sounds of the wind and leaves, footsteps caught
his ears. At first, he disregarded the sound, reaching to his pocket and pulling a bottle of pills from his pocket, his elbow knocking a cane aside, making it clatter on the arm rail. Eyeing the cane for a moment, he realized his leg hurt, looking to the pills he saw their name and function: Vicodin, opioid, pain killer.

*Lovely...*

When he looked up, he saw Shigaraki strolling toward him, giving a friendly smile. Izuku just sighed. "I wasn't sure if you'd still be here..."

Shigaraki shrugged. "I could say the same to you, though not for much longer. You don't really need me anymore, after all." And he sat beside the vampire, lazily stretching his neck.

Exhaling bitterly, Izuku couldn't help but feel irritated. "Fair, but that's not really your choice, is it? You're a piece of me, not the other way around." Holding up one of his hands, he looked over appendage, wondering if his real hand looked so pristine anymore, after all he'd been through.

The dead villain shrugged, smiling carelessly. "Semantics... in the end... it was only ever a question of which version of yourself you wanted to be..." he placed a hand over his own chest, "the 'darker', more selfish part of yourself, the one that doesn't care much for other people..." and with that same hand, thumb extended, he jabbed Izuku's shoulder. "Or you, the version of yourself that sacrifices everything he has, himself included, for others."

Something about that didn't sit right with him, put an uneasy feeling in his gut and he was forced to gulp back nausea. "You know the answer wasn't so simple, in the end." Shigaraki tilted his head to one side, listening intently, but Izuku didn't have anything left to say.

So the dead man shrugged. "So... you're here again." looking to the cafe, where the illusions lingered, his head tilted back, eyes trailing over the graffiti that adorned the building's side. A painting of All Might, just smiling a friendly smile, the words 'never forget' painted above and below. "Back in the old dream, seems a little sadder this time though." In reply, Izuku merely grunted, turning the pill bottle over in his hand, listening the medicine clattering around inside. I almost seemed as though he were considering having one. "You never did say what brought you here, you know."

Sighing, smiling, turning his eyes to the light that shone above, he let it fill his gaze. "Yeah..." and before long, the entire dream was engulfed in white.

Groaning, shifting about in his bed, Izuku struggled to keep the light from piercing his eyelids. Someone had opened the curtain, letting in the sunlight.

"Sorry..." said an unfamiliar voice, "I forgot your kind isn't fond of the old sun." Fingers clicked and the curtain was drawn back over the window.

Who would Izuku see standing there but Endeavor. Funny thing was, he remembered him sounding very different. "What are you doing here?" he asked, voice a tad quieter than he'd meant for it to be.

His question was met with some jovial laughter. "Oh, he goes most places I do." Slowly, Izuku's head pivoted around toward the source of that voice.

Sitting calmly, one hand in his lap and the other holding an old book. His face was weary, the lines of his skin like creases in old parchment, hair in the process of going grey, cheekbones peeking out just a little too prominently for his healthy weight. As he leaned toward the bed, his hand
outstretched, he gave perhaps the most genuine looking smile a man could possibly have, but for the friendly expression on his face the vampire felt an icy chill envelope his skin.

As Izuku reached out, accepting the man's handshake, that eerily calm and friendly voice spoke again. "It's nice to finally meet you, 'Guren Fang'." Even before he uttered what words he did next, the younger man knew them long before they reached his ears. "I am The Nameless One."

Slow to nod, Izuku kept himself quiet, for the most part. "I've heard of you."

Nameless laughed. "All good things I hope?" Even before Izuku had successfully masked some awkward expression of fear, the old man held up a silencing hand. "Rhetorical question," his smile lost some of its supposed warmth, and the truly sharpened nature of it shone through. "I am not so foolish as to assume Eraser Head told you anything less than what he believes to be 'the truth' about me."

Gulping, the vampire nodded, and the edge vanished from Nameless's expression.

"I came here to make sure one thing was very clear, boy." Leaning forward, any trace of his friendly facade faded away as he whispered in a harsh tone. "It has taken me, my family, a long time to get this world in order." again, Izuku nodded and the old man carried on. "Your kind threatens that order, the delicate balance of power I have worked tirelessly to uphold. You spread like wildfire, thanks to that infectious blood of yours."

Izuku wanted to interrupt, give him the details on exactly how that worked but thought better of it. A man of his resources, a vast amount was the safe assumption, doubtlessly already knew. "Imagine what would happen if every villain suddenly became a vampire, and then consider exactly why I might have hired Aizawa to exterminate your kind."

There was a long pause as Izuku pondered that exposition, hoping his heart rate would level out again. After a time, the weight of the statements sank in and nodded again. "I understand... sir."

Then that smile returned to his weathered features. "Good." Standing up, straightening his suit's jacket, he turned to Endeavor. "Remind me, what else did I want to tell the boy? I'm so forgetful these days."

Endeavor almost looked amused. "I believe there was one more matter, concerning his value to us at present..."

"Ah, see? Exactly as I said." Turning back to Izuku, Nameless put a hand on his shoulder, the weight of which made Izuku wince as his body cried out in pained protest. "I trust you will not disappoint me, Hero. Now more than ever, we need as many powerful heroes as we can have." The vampire felt a planet land on his heart, the bed suddenly going cold, and slowly he opened his mouth to speak. "Take care, Guren." Farewell given, patting the young man's shoulder gently this time, Nameless walked from the room, hands neatly folded behind his back.

Blackened eyes turned to Endeavor, the hulking man stepping close and giving the vampire a respectful nod. "You've impressed me. You handled yourself remarkably well in the battle with All For One, considering what happened to you before hand."

Never in his life had Izuku felt so dirty at receiving praise. "Thank you, sir." He very nearly choked on his own words.

With a polite smile, Endeavor nodded. "I'm glad my son has such a capable, level headed friend." Turning to leave, the flame hero followed after the Nameless one. "Good day."
"Bye..." he said quietly, forcing himself to sit up, when a frightening thought crossed his mind. "Wait! Where's everyone else? Are they okay?"

Endeavor didn't even turn around. "Most of the others will be fine."

Most? That one word sent ice crawling up his spine. Moving to jump out of the bed, he found his body quite emphatically protesting the idea. While he no longer had any open wounds, his entire being was practically swimming in pain. A hand to his screaming chest, he swung his legs over the side of the bed. When he went to stand, he almost fell over. His right leg... it was still weakened from that hunk of concrete breaking it like a cheap pencil.

"Encouraging..." he murmured, before moving as quickly as he could out the door.

No sooner had he made it to the portal when he came face to face with Vanessa, clearly surprised to see him up and literally running. "Little one?" She'd gotten a haircut since he'd last seen her, having decided all for one throwing her around by her hair was the last straw needed to rid herself of her flowing locks. Though he didn't say anything about that. Izuku just hugged her, smiling up a storm, making her laugh. "I'm glad to see you're okay too." and she softly wrapped her arms around him, face pressing to his hair.

Nodding quickly, he stepped back suddenly a bit shy as he cleared his throat. "Uh, where are the others?"

With a smile of her own, she pointed. "Those who are still here are being visited by Recovery girl. They're just- wait, don't run with that bad leg!" Of course, being an eighteen-year-old with his emotions running wild, he didn't listen.

Now more than ever... Disquieted by that ominous statement, he tore down the hospital halls as quickly as he could. Nurses and aides shouted, trying to stop him but he just flitted right past. There were two patients in particular, two people who's fates he desperately needed to know. Wobbling as his right leg was, he tore around the next bend and almost trampled one of them.

Kyoka, still sporting a few bruises but otherwise fine, reeled back in surprise. "Green?" She blurted out, before looking down at his hospital gown clad body and blushing profusely. "D- do you know you're almost nake-?" Overcome with relief, he leaned in and kissed her, earning a very surprised squeak from the girl as her face went impossibly redder.

When he broke away, still smiling, her eyes blinked faster than he'd thought possible. "You're okay."

Slowly, she nodded. "Ah- um... wh-what are you, uh...?"

"Checking in on everyone," he breathed somewhat easier now, even as Recovery Girl gave them the most confused look she'd worn in some time. "Where's Aizawa?" Her brain was still adjusting, trying to process what had just happened, as she pointed down one end of the hall. Nodding, thinking better of kissing her again, Izuku bolted off that way. "Thank you!"

"Green!" She called after him, spinning about to follow with a slight growl. "Should you even be running like this!?"

He was too out of breath to say anything, as he continued charging down the hall. No... not that one... not- WAIT! Slipping on his heels, having to grab the doorway to avoid sailing past it, he came to an abrupt halt at his destination, chest heaving.

Buttoning up his shirt, blinking at the disheveled vampire, Aizawa was slow to react. "Kid?" his
arms dropped, taking a step toward him. "Is everything okay?"

Attentive listeners, even those who knew him best, would have a difficult time finding emotion in the former hunter's voice. Emotionally drained and burdened with the weight of sins he truly regretted, his speech was often monotone, guarded and methodically enunciated. But then? Looking at that one student of his, in such a state as he panted for breath in the doorway? Izuku heard his feelings.

He heard his concern, and felt warmth in his words. Smiling again, he flew forward and wrapped his arms around him, making him stumble back.

To his credit, Aizawa barely reacted, too hesitant to really move he just blinked, his arms not quite deciding if they wanted to return the embrace. "...kid?"

Izuku sniffled a little. "Sorry, sorry." He jumped away, almost falling to his right side, and then Aizawa's arms had definitely made up their mind. "I- I was just-

The old hunter tried not to smile, tried not to laugh, but some of it bled through as he spoke. "It's alright, kid." His hand patting at the younger man's shoulder. "I'm okay."

Smiling, Izuku nodded. "Y-yeah. Good." Stepping away, their arms releasing each other, he cleared his throat. "It's alright, kid." His hand patting at the younger man's shoulder. "I'm okay."

Damn it... couldn't he have gotten dressed first? Some fingers laced over her mouth, her thumb at one of her cheekbones.

By her side, Vanessa chuckled. Still a puppy at heart, worrying after his people. Hands to her pockets. Good... his heart is still open to others, even after everything he's been through. Giving her sister's killer a bit of a glare, she frowned. No accounting for taste, however.

Aizawa, on the other hand, allowed himself a smile. "You might wanna take it easy. That was no minor ordeal you went through." Eyeing the young man's shaky leg he frowned. "Your healing factor isn't working right, is it?" Sheepishly, he shook his head and the former hunter sighed. "You need rest. Your body is working too hard just to keep itself functioning right now."

Nodding, taking stock of himself, Izuku reached behind himself with a blush and tried to tie his gown up tighter. Sighing in frustration at his rather futile efforts, Kyoka stepped forward, cheeks just as red as his, and started tying it for him. "Idiot..." she muttered under her breath, growling when Vanessa chuckled at them. Spinning around her shoulders tensed as she demanded, "What's so funny!?" her face going even redder, and Vanessa held up her hands in surrender.

Squirming about where he stood, Izuku gulped back his embarrassment. "Uhm, wh-who else is still here? Is anyone seriously hurt? Is-" he was silenced by Aizawa holding up one of hands.

"All For One was the only death involved in the incident." at his words, the white-haired young man sighed in palpable relief, eyes drifting closed face turning to the floor. "That said..." The young man's breath caught in his throat, eyes eking back open. "I'm not sure the outcome for All Might was much better..."

Stendhal stood in the room, hopeless gaze fixed on the near motionless body of the world's greatest hero. Beeping of a heart monitor, quiet droning of his respirator, the outside noises beyond the room as the staff scurried about. The clipboard at the foot of his bed listed his status, in plain, red
A bitter breath pushed sharply though his teeth. "You..." his fingers clenched to his palms, fingernails digging into his skin. "Of all Heroes... you deserved this fate the least." Head bowed, he stared at the linoleum floor in fury. "In that fight... So little to gain, so little to protect compared to all you've done, to all you could still do..." his grip loosened, hands going slack. "yet you sacrificed it for him... for a wretch like Bakugo." Turning his eyes to that of the comatose man, he felt his heart grow heavy. "I'd call you a fool, if I didn't envy you that instinct." He drew up a hand, staring at his bleeding palm. "I may make the motions... may scream at this world's fools for their lack of follow through with such, but I..." his hand gripped again, ever tighter this time. "I don't feel any of it myself. Don't come by it honestly."

'You don't belong with them, do you... boy?'

Maybe he was right... ever since I was small, I've been scrambling. Screaming at this world for all its atrocities...

His eyes closed, and there he was, in that burning building. Covered in his mother's blood, helpless to do anything.

Unable to save her.

Unable to kill the bastard who claimed her life.

His quirk unable to stop the nomu, time and time again. Unable to protect his friends.

I remember drinking that thing's blood... but I couldn't stop it. It wouldn't stop moving.

Her body fell, the roof caved in again, he pushed his way through the rubble like a chick hatching from an egg. They toppled, him pinned beneath her, her blood staining his clothes and skin.

I promised myself I would never be that weak, fail that way again...

Staining him to his very core.

Maybe it's myself, my own lack of follow through that has my wrath so incurred.

Or was the real Stain his weakness? His inability to protect those he treasured most? Or was that just a lie? An illusion? He couldn't feel love, couldn't feel almost anything but the urge to hurt other living beings. No urge but that, no need for touch, for sympathy.

For...

Another memory, this one far more recent, of a white-haired friend gazing at him with gratitude. Or was it affection? Familiarity?

All he really knew? When he saw that smile, he felt something fluttering, aching inside as it wrenched at him.

What is this feeling?

Eyes opened, his hand curled its fingers in and pressed to his gut, just below the end of his rib cage.

I know that I feel this when we speak. When we work together I feel happy, warm... but is it an illusion? a product of yearning to be more in touch with my own people? Investing myself in an
illusion that cannot be?

In the next moment, he was looking at All Might's withered, haggard features, as if the man would somehow wake and find an answer to his questions.

*It's just as well you stay asleep... in any case, I am afraid of what the answer might be...*

As he walked from the room, closing the door behind himself, a hand found his shoulder.

*Her* hand.

Staring him down, with a look of shock, as though she simply couldn't believe her eyes, was his aunt. "Chizome...?" Her voice, her scent, the way she said his name...

All *her*.

Unable to contain himself, he lunged toward her and held her as tightly as he could, his face buried against her hair. "I knew it..." he gasped, hearing his voice so different, after all these years. "All this time... I thought you were dead, but I knew as soon as I saw that broadcast that it was you!"

With all her strength, all that would dare to use, her arms wrapped similarly around him. "It's you..." he could feel her smiling against the side of his head, feel the tears flowing down through his hair. "It's you!" She held him tighter, hands gripping at the fabric of his coat like he might disappear all over again, she reveled in his presence. "My little neph." She pulled back, beaming at his face, a hand on his cheek as she took in his every detail for the first time in over a decade. "Only you're not so little now, are you?" He almost laughed, smiling right back at her. "God, I thought for sure you'd end up looking more like your mother." How out of sorts he felt, with her looking up at him instead of down.

Then he was crying too, just a few tears -manly tears, if you asked Crimson Riot- shaking his head. "Dad's face." Reaching up, he brushed some fingers through his hair. "Momma's hair though."

She laughed, nodding as she sniffled. "Got that right. Ah... your mom always did have the wildest hair..." Some of the staff were giving them looks, some irritated, some clearly happy for them.

All the same, they ignored them all. "I thought I was alone..." Chizome whispered, hand on her's that had remained perched on his cheek.

She shook her head, wrapping him in her arms again. "Not any more... I promise, not anymore, never again!"

As his arms clasped around her, his face to her hair again, his own tears started flowing freely.

*Here is again... that warm feeling in my chest, that wrenching happiness and need...*

For the longest time, they just stood there, wrapped in each other's arms, until the dreaded ringing of Vanessa's cell phone cut their embrace short. Work, of course, demanding her presence on the double. "Chizome..."

He smiled, putting on a brave face. "Go," he handed her a slip of paper he'd already written his contact info onto, "and find me later."

She nodded quickly, leaning up and kissing his cheek. "Hey..." her quiet tone earned a curious look from him. "They would be so proud of you... you know that, right?"
For a brief moment, he remembered everything, all the horrid things he'd ever done, lashing out in anger; all the pretenders he'd left broken, feeding the whims of his Dark Passenger, and then... he almost thought he could forget about it all. All the same, he couldn't quite agree. "Yeah... I hope so."

These feelings... this warmth and light inside me, with her presence and with his, my brother's...

Please don't let them be illusions...

I don't want them to be something inside my head... I don't want them to be a lie, just another dream...

"You weren't seriously hurt, were you?"

At the other end of the line, Iida sighed. "Just a bump to my head. Your friend Toga is a lot stronger than she looks..."

Fingers gripping tighter at her phone, Kyoka frowned. "I'm sorry...

Then the bespectacled boy laughed. "Don't be. I seem to remember volunteering to pursue her. Besides, my efforts were not in vain. The police combing those tunnels didn't find a single body, so... your old friend didn't end up killing anyone."

At that, Kyoka smiled. "Thank you, Iida. You're an awesome one."

Even through the static of their weak signal, she heard him salute. "Of course! Anything for my comrades, you know that!"

Then she laughed a little. "Promise you'll hang out us more from now on, yeah?"

Again, Iida sighed. "This means I'll be seeing more of Bakugo and Stendhal, doesn't it? Very well, I've been missing everyone else anyways."

"Who're you talking to?" Even over the phone, whenever she heard Uraraka speak, Kyoka couldn't help but feel some small twinge of guilt.

"Hmm?" Iida again. "Oh, it's Jiro. She was calling to see if I was alright."

Uraraka was quiet for a moment, and Kyoka was saddened to think of what she might have been feeling. "Send her my best, okay?" and that twinge of guilt expanded, hearing the sincerity in her voice as muddled in sadness as it was. "I know these past few weeks have been really hard on her too... Tell her she's tougher than she thinks, being such a badass through it all. Uraraka giggled, and Kyoka thought she might cry. "That's something I'm not sure I could really do..."

Iida hummed affirmatively, then spoke once again. "Uraraka's here, she says-"

"I-I heard." She managed to say levelly, smiling as she fought back a round of tears, wiping at the edges of her eyes. "Tell her I said thanks? And... and to give herself that same credit. If she hadn't been there, Green would probably be dead now." I'll always be grateful for that, Uraraka...

"Of course." She could hear him smiling, softer as tone had gotten. "Take care now."

She sniffled. "You too." and they both hung up.

Izuku gave her a concerned look, seeing the tears and hearing the cracking in her voice.
"Everything alright?"

She nodded, giving him the warmest smile she could. "Never better..." Following him back to his room, Kyoka kept pace beside him, she couldn't help but feel herself fussing every time he stepped with his bad leg. "Should we get you a cane until that's better?"

Overcome with a bout of self-consciousness, he tried to laugh that idea off. "Rather not..." *I'm not that enfeebled.*

Rolling her eyes, she shook her head, trying not to feel amused at his 'typically male' behavior, refusing the physical aid. "Alright..." One hand to her pocket, she kept an eye on him just to make sure, easing her own nerves if nothing else.

Venturing back into his room, he limped to the closet. Inside he found his school bag, a note with hastily written handwriting seated on it.

*Stopped by your house and got these for you. You might want to find a better hiding place for your spare key than 'under the matt'. Shoes under your bed.
Stendhal*

Izuku allowed himself a smile. "Thanks, Sten." Reaching into the bag, he found a rather... different sort of an outfit than he'd been expecting. Black undershirt, faded grey button up, dark jeans and socks. "...not what I would have gone with." Grabbing the clothes, despite the rather adamant protesting of his shoulders, he hobbled his way to the bathroom, almost yelping when he saw his reflection.

Ignoring the fact that the entirety of his hair had gone vibrantly white, and that both his sclera were now black, most of the skin around his left eye was colored with a dark bruise.

"Wh-what the hell!?" It almost looked like he'd overdone 'corpse makeup' for halloween on one side of his face. The scratches that were still healing, the bruises that seemed content on remaining where they were. Turning back toward his room for a moment to see if Kyoka had turned, he found that she hadn't. "You, uh... might wanna turn around."

Cheeks colored with a faint dusting of pink, her shoulders tensed a little and squirmed. "Do you want me to?" She seemed a bit antsy, some hopeful glimmer in her eye, however uneasy.

Giving that some thought, gulping, keenly aware he was about to be in nothing but his underwear, he was slow to speak up. "You um..." he started, words catching in his throat. "You can... look."

She shifted where she stood. "Are... you sure about that?"

He nodded. "Yeah. Just... don't freak out, okay?"

Cheeks flushing a little, she nodded, taking a deep breath as she watched him shed the garment, and her expression sank almost as far as her heart. "Oh, Green..." her eyes traveled up and down his body, her expression's only could have been pity.

Though his face was a sight to see, to be sure, his upper body was somehow worse. Two jagged scars marked where he'd been impaled, fist by muscular, then by All For One, bruises so dark they were almost black dotted his chest where his ribs had been broken. Looking at his arms, he saw the coiling marks from where the rebar had been woven through his muscles and bones. "How am I even alive..." he whispered.

Quietly, almost imperceptibly quiet, Kyoka's voice reached his ears. "You got me..." he didn't even
turn to face her, couldn't. The two of them were both stuck, looking over his injuries, as she wandered up beside him. One hand slid up her arm, gripping tightly at her other elbow. "Those injuries are terrifying, Green. I..." She exhaled sharply, taking a moment to compose herself. "I mean... obviously you're fine, but..." Somehow, she managed to get even quieter. "I'm sorry..." When her eyes found his again, she almost looked heartbroken. "I'm so sorry we didn't find you sooner." From that waver in her tone, he thought she might have been on the verge of tears.

There was almost no stopping the smile that spread across his face, sad as it was, as he turned toward her. "This was not your fault." He went to reach for her but immediately thought better of that decision, opting instead to scratch at the back of his head. "I uh... let my guard down, was all. Got myself captured for it." Hand rubbing at her other arm again, her eyes went off to the side. It was awkward, the pair of them standing there like that, letting the noises around them fill the air. Although, it did give Izuku time to remember something, and it did not sit well with him.

He'd rather die than kill anyone...

Noticing the rather grim expression on her boyfriend's face, Kyoka tilted her head to one side. "Izuku?"

Blinking, pulled from his thoughts, he looked her in the eye and gulped. "You're..." though his nose, he sighed. "Do you love me because I'm... gentle?"

Eyebrow quirked, lips pursed pensively, she considered her answer. "No, not only." she let her arms down, swinging freely for a second before they came to rest at her sides. "You stand up for what's right, even when it hurts you. You don't give up, not ever. You're thoughtful, sweet, cute as hell," he bushed, clearing his throat as she went on, "you look out for your friends and always go running if they need help, regardless of your own baggage. If your room was any indication, you're passionate about the things you care about." She reached up, brushing a section of her hair behind her ear. "What brought this up?"

Bracing himself, he was slow to voice what he was feeling, thinking. "...I um, remember that guy with the hockey mask who was going to capture Eri?" She nodded and his nerves refused to calm as he paused, delaying what little he could. "I- I destroyed his quirk." She raised an eyebrow, giving him an odd look. "Slashed his back open with my claws, I-" he couldn't look at her any more. "I bit him, several times just so I could heal, I-"

"Look at me." Surprised by the softness of her tone, he reluctantly obeyed, finding her looking at him with crossed arms. "Tell me why."

Another, this time audible, gulp. "Because I knew I wouldn't be able to beat him otherwise, if I didn't he would have killed me." His eyes darted away again, expression totally vulnerable. "I just-I didn't want to die."

She stepped forward, a hand on his face turning him back to her, expression unchanged. "Good."

"Okay what the fuck? Expression broadcasting the forceful resetting of his brain, he blurted out his reply. "What!?"

Her eyes narrowed. "You'd rather I was disappointed that you want to live?" He blinked, puzzling this over, unable to word any sort of reply. "Green," she sighed, "I spent the last two years wondering, worrying if you were going to... give in to your depression." her thumb pet at his cheek, only to stop when she saw him flinching, and withdrew her hand. "Yeah, I'm... a little shocked that you went that far, but I'm not going to complain about the end result. Besides," she shrugged, giving a half smile, "it's not like you tried to kill the guy, right?"
It took some effort to hold his gaze at her eyes. "Not sure he was far from death, the way I left him..."

She just rolled her eyes. "Honestly..." she brought a hand up, pushing her palm to her forehead. "Do you want me to be mad at you? Is that what this is right now?"

He opened his mouth to go on, but, rather suddenly, realized how foolish he was being. "Sorry..."

Sighing again, she shook her head, arm folding with the other again. Eventually, after another lengthy round of silence she gave him an odd, embarrassed look. "You're... getting dressed, right?"

Surely, at that moment, steam must have blown out his ears as he quickly nodded. "Ah, right, yes!" Deciding pants were the best first choice, he stepped into them, hoping she wouldn't notice how shaky he was. To his relief, she turned around. "Um, thanks for saying all those nice things about me, just now..." fumbling with his belt, he soon slipped into his socks.

Without turning around, she shrugged. "It's just the truth." She heard him grunt in pain as he pulled the undershirt over his head, and she almost turned around. "You okay back there?"

Grabbing the shirt, pulling the sleeves over his arms, he made to button it up. "Just really sore." He left a few of the buttons undone, rolling the sleeves up to his elbows. Looking at himself in the mirror, he almost thought he looked presentable. "Okay, all ah, covered up."

Turning around, looking him up and down, she nodded. "Trying something new?"

He laughed nervously, "I didn't really choose the outfit..." shrugging with an awkward smile.

A smile she warmly returned. "Well, it suits you, goes with the new look." Stepping forward, she straightened out his collar, brushing some of the creases in his shirt away. "...can I say something you might not like?"

Uncertain where this was headed, he nodded. "Sure."

Expression going a bit vulnerable, she peered into his eyes. "I um, kinda like the way you look now." Reaching up to his face, she ran some fingers through his hair, relaxing a little when he closed his eyes, leaning his scalp into her gentle touch. "Your eyes, your hair, they're... kinda beautiful."

A soft laugh went through his nose. "Most guys wouldn't like being called that, you know." Opening those eyes again, he didn't quite open them all the way. "I'm relieved though." Another quirking of her eyebrow, prompting him to explain. "I... was worried you'd freak out at the change."

Rolling her eyes, smiling again, she shook her head. "My eyes and hair are naturally purple." To further drive the point, her earlobe raised, poking lightly at his cheek. "I'm in no place to judge."

All the same, he was mildly surprised. "The eyes I expected." Looking at her hair, he added, "the rest, not so much."

With a swaying of her arms, she stepped away from him. "You expected wrong." When he started after her, following her out of the room, she looked a little concerned. "You're really limping."

Sheepishly, the vampire nodded. "Healing factor isn't working like it usually does." When they made it to the center of the room, he lowered himself to the floor, fishing about under the bed for
his shoes. He was very surprised to find they were not his usual, red high-tops. As he puzzled at these new sneakers, a sense of complete disappointment in himself flooded him. "Right..." Feeling like an idiot, he slipped into his new shoes. Of course they weren't his red shoes, those had been practically vaporized by Overhaul's quirk.

When he went to stand up, he was met with Kyoka offering him a hand. Blushing a little, he accepted her help. "Thanks."

She nodded, helping him stand up. "Sure." After he grabbed his school bag from the closet, flinging it over his shoulder, she let him go first out of the room. "Got everything?"

Pausing for a moment, he checked his bag for his phone. Still there, right where Aizawa had left it over two weeks ago, as they took Eri to his house. "Yeah." Of course, the phone would be dead. Closing up the bag he hobbled out of the room, hand in hand with her. As they made their way outside, she handed him sunglasses -those ridiculous, round rimmed things- and he smiled as he put them on.

Stepping out into the light of day, he turned his face to the sky, eyes partially closing as he let the sun warm his skin and he grinned.

For the first time, in a long time, she looked at him, and took in all she saw. Impossibly pale skin, his shallow cheeks, cheekbones perched just a hair too high, his slender yet slightly muscular body, the extra few inches he'd grown; his brilliantly reflective white hair, those blackened eyes and the way his eyelids looked when they relaxed. There was something... otherworldly about him now, the way he looked.

Heh... Talk about a predictable, but... little moments like these...

You know, if someone had said I'd "meet someone" on this crazy trip to becoming a hero? I'd have told them they'd lost it.

Hell... it was't even an option, as far as I was concerned. All I really wanted, all I'd aimed to do was live up to how I'd always imagined K.

Maybe it's not really her example I'm chasing after, she was always a bit rebellious... She'd go on about "breaking society's shackles" if you gave her the chance.

I guess "Magne" was some part of that, part of that plan. I'm not sure I really want to know what that was really going to be.

The questions, reasons that drive me here, are the same as they've always been: "Trying to make myself a hero when I don't even know if that's what she would have done"... "What else am I really supposed to do?"

Maybe...

...

I think I need my own reason to keep doing this.

Being a hero is insane, we've barely even started and I'm losing track of the number of times I've almost died.

Through it all, after everything I've been through, my friends have been through, I want to be happy.
I want them to be happy too.

Considering the crazy road ahead? I'd like to think there's some kind of better life we can build along the way.

When he caught her staring, his little smile vanished, eyes opening up again as he turned to her. "Something wrong?"

Smiling, she shook her head. "Nope." Squeezing his hand a bit, she started leading him away. "Not at all..."

Shrugging it off, he kept pace with her, not that it was difficult as she'd been making it easy for him.

Yeah. Little moments like these, when I think about who he is -this weird little human of mine- I feel lucky.

I'd like to think that luck can carry us all just a little further, through these dark times ahead...

With the press of a button the contents of his inhaler were propelled into his lungs. Cool as the medication felt as it slid into and lingered in his airways, it made him feel a bit faint. Even as he exhaled, taking in the air around him freely once again, something about it didn't feel quite right.

Like I'm stretching myself even further somehow. Pushing my body to function past the point where it was supposed to.

Wind swept through his hair, brushing up the tail of his long coat. Whispers reached his ears, worried murmurings of the average citizens. Of course, news of All Might's fall had been quick to spread. That news chopper, the same one that had been broadcasting to his hospital room, had shown the his defeat, his fall, on live television for all the world to see.

It's so vulgar... making such a horrid thing another in a trillion recordings, videos of real life people hurting each other. He almost laughed. "I own a tv... cuz tragedy thrills me... vicariously I live while the whole world dies." I hate how spot on those lyrics are.

Already, in the last few days even, petty crime had seen an increase. Criminals were getting bolder. Villains would no doubt follow, their numbers rising in the wake of the disastrous fall of the symbol of peace.

Ah, Ingenium, Creati... your lesson about keeping the public calm, I think I understand the importance of it now...

All Might knew it, better than any of us. He took that concept of the hero's patrol, making the public feel safe, and raised it to its greatest possible potential.

Taking a look around, seeing the worry on people's faces and the quiet, unspoken fear in the air, he saw another terrible lesson.

But in the end, a hero is just another person. A glorified cop in a flashy outfit, albeit with abilities beyond the common being. When a hero falls, when the world watches a hero fall, the fear they kept at bay by acting as a pillar of support for their communities comes crashing back down on the shoulders of those they fought to protect.

The Symbol of Peace, The Pillar of Peace, upheld a greater burden of fear than any other Hero the
world over... now that he has been broken, now that he has been shown to be human like all the rest, that overwhelming burden of fear has fallen back down.

Back down to us.

Stopping for a moment, pulling a pair of sunglasses from his pocket, he placed them over his face.

All Might... your mission to keep the world feeling safe has begun to backfire.

I can only hope we are able to handle the world you’ve left in our feeble hands...

As he brought the lenses to his eyes, he saw their reflection staring back at him.

What... the hell!?

Alarm spread through him, as shining of the blackened lenses, was a reflection of glowing, red irises. Tearing the front gates of UA, into the recently opened dorms then his nearby room, he ran to the restroom and gazed into the mirror.

Glowing red eyes on his own reflection, staring him right down.

...

What the hell happened... to my eyes?!

Overlooking the city, from a long abandoned and partially demolished high-rise, Overhaul stood with hands in his pockets, looking at it all. The people scurrying in the distance, the farcical masquerade of heroes as they strolled about, putting the public at ease and he scowled at it all, with his hair and coat swaying in the wind.

"This world is diseased..."

Behind him, perched on a crate as he munched at an apple, Dabi smiled. "That's nothing new, you know." Slumbering by his side, still recovering from their injuries, were Mooney -how they'd found him was another long story- and Muscular, who had been so exhausted they'd just fallen asleep immediately upon arrival.

Dabi had wasted no time wrapping them in blankets and getting a fire going. There wouldn't be any police patrolling this neighborhood, after all...

Overhaul sighed. "Perhaps not, but illnesses demand a cure, and we only have one vial left."

Hands to his pockets, walking up beside him, Dabi shrugged. "Well, we're not starting completely from scratch then." A sentiment his boss took little comfort in. "What's our next move?"

Overhaul turned and looked him right in the eyes, his gaze sharp and icy. "Obvious: we find the girl, perfect the serum and cure this disease of quirks once and for all."

Dabi nodded, a bit gravely at that. "And... the Prophet System?"

The Yakuza Boss drew in a long breath, reaching up and taking off his mask. When he looked to Dabi again, this time, his younger friend saw the smile plain as day. "As All For One said... it needs to be destroyed." Motioning to the others, he gave a last command for the evening. "Get them inside, get them fed and warm. We're going to need them, moving forward." Dabi nodded again, and set to shepherding their injured lambs inside.
Tilting his head back, eyes closed, Overhaul breathed in the crisp, nearly autumn air.

_The stage is set for the final act... curtain drawn and tied._

_All that remains is for the remaining actors to make their final performances, in this coming storm..._

"_Believe in me and_
Drink the wine and
Take my hand and
Let me follow..."
Not so long ago, in a smaller part of a great and sprawling city, there was a little girl. An odd little thing, pink hair and skin, white horns poking from atop her head. Her eyes were black as coal, save for her golden irises which shone like the sun, so brilliant and sharp. Growing up in their little house was like growing up in a fortress, or so she used to pretend. Stalking down the corridors, under tables and chairs like a sprite frolicking on sacred ground where it was forbidden to wander. Every now and then, her mother would notice this and snicker.

A game of cat and mouse would ensue, mom chasing daughter across the entire house in peals of laughter. Eventually she'd take shelter below her father's desk and that would be that. Her own little place to belong in the world, and she hoped it would never change.

Of course, inevitably, it did...

School began before she knew it existed, and it was off to find other children her age. Playgrounds brought the only outlet for energy she really had, and she was always eager to go charging off into the great outdoors, climbing up the side of the structures. Using quirks wasn't allowed of course, but keeping upwards of fifteen small children on good behavior was a challenge for just one teacher.

Bits of the structure were damaged, corroded and broken over time. Eventually, all that was left of the old teeter totter was just a hunk of spiky plastic. The children, especially the pink, little troll, never seemed to mind.

No, they had other things to worry about.

One recess, while she was busy on the swings, a group of children came up to her.

"Where'd you get the horns?"

The little troll blinked. "Huh?"

"Also the eyes," said one girl, "how'd you get your parents to buy you those?"

She laughed. "I was born with em!" and she jumped off the swing, all smiles. "See?" she made a show of tugging on one of her horns, stuck in her skull like glue.

One of the boys was not so convinced. "You're lying!"

And her smile was gone. "Huh?"

Crossing his arms, the boy stuck out his chin. "If people could grow those, wouldn't we all have em?"

"Hey, yeah!"

She frowned, shocked that they didn't believe her. "No, really! It's just how I am!"

"No one but Mongoose is that much of a freak!"

The boy's hands grabbed her horns, hauling her about, trying to tug them free of her head.
"No! Stop!" she screamed, water in her eyes. "That hurts!"

The other's present descended like vultures, some poked at her eyes, another tried to hold her still to get the horns off faster.

"HELP!"

But nobody came...

She was alone, screaming and scared, thrashing about against her captor's grips. It was only when one of them tripped, throwing the others off balance that she finally found freedom. Relief soared across her brain, putting a teary smile on her face and she tried to run away.

Only one of them grabbed her ankles.

"No!"

She fell, her little body flying right toward all that was left of the old teeter-totter. One sharp sliver of plastic sliced through her shirt and only then did the teachers step in. Their jobs had been on the line, after all... A frantic heartbeat, shallow breaths and utter helplessness where chief among her most vivid memories of that day; of those that followed, were what others said now that it was known her appearance was not a costume.

"Freak."

Of course, that was all now twelve years behind her. Here she stood, in the rain, at the very spot where it had happened and the teeter-totter's remains were still there. She just stood there, staring them down quietly, not sure why she was really here.

Her confidence had never quite recovered from that day. Hard to feel normal, after something like that. Naturally, such a label was not easily shaken.

During her first year or two of middle school, she'd been more or less alone. No active bullying, no real friends. Just a lot of quiet solitude.

Until one day...

Lunch was going quietly by as it usually did, until a boy with green hair wandered over. "You look lonely."

She gave him a nervous look, and he laughed just as nervously.

"Don't worry," said he, "I wont bite..."

He sat on the opposite side of the table, they shared what lunch they'd brought with them. Slowly, bit by nervous bit, they started getting used to each other. Cautious laughter, awkward looks and only moments of actual eye contact.

They went to a movie, she tripped on the way out and he caught her. He brought her up and she twirled on her toes, making him leap after her.

"Don't fall again!"

She just laughed. "But you're still right here! How can I?"

Between classes they'd find each other, start talking and bit by bit she started coming out of her
shell. Other girls made friends with her, she started talking, dancing, going to others and smiling happily, openly like she was a small child all over again. Of course, it hadn't been so simple. Old fear was a bit like instinct, on some level, some deeply seated one like the roots of an ancient tree, your mind thought it wasn't supposed to fight against it. She'd get nervous, shy away from others, but he'd be right there.

"Go on." He'd say.

She'd shake her head, chewing at her lip. "But... but what if they...?"

In reply, he'd just smile warmly. "They wont." And that would be that.

Weeks passed, and even when he wasn't there, it was all much the same: like those early days of school had never happened.

Months passed, snow had begun to fall and she led the boy to the old playground.

"Why are we here?"

She laughed. "I wanna tell you a story!" she hugged him, before skipping away across the playground. "See... this is where it all happened. Where I uh... kinda turtled up... inside my own head..." He walked slowly back over to her, a disarming smile on his face. "I just wanted to say thank you." She beamed up at him. "You helped me work past all that... it's because of you that I have all these good things going for me now."

He chuckled, a hand sliding up one of her arms. "Glad I could help..." his hand reached her cheek, and he started leaning in.

Her eyes widened, unconsciously she took a step back. "Ah, wait..." her eyes batted, breath stolen away when his grip tightened on her shoulder. "What are you-?"

"Don't you feel the same way?" he kept leaning in, even as she backed away. "I mean... after everything I've done..."

Her heart fell into her stomach. "I- No, I just-!" she twisted her face away from his, a flicker of confusion on his face, almost like he was angry. "But we're friends!"

"Ashido, I-"

"Let go of me!"

"No, wait! You're-"

Her foot slipped, dragging her other heel forward as she fell, tripping him right along with her. All over again, she was toppling toward that plastic spike and he away from it. Only, this time, instead of her clothing, it speared through her skin and she screamed so hard her lungs burned. The color red, pain and screaming where chief among her most vivid memories of that day... her 'friend' had called an ambulance but by the time it had arrived, he was long gone.

Weeks went by, her recovery as smooth as could be, and she didn't hear from him. Her friends at school had all been worried, and this surprised her. They'd practically swarmed around they day she'd come back to school. All of them expressed worry and relief, some of them hugged her outright, and reality set in.

Her friends... they'd been by her side because of her, not the boy she'd thought she knew.
Or... was that true? Was it really her? Or... was it...?

Eventually she ran into him again, calm as could be. He'd been surprised, to see her still acting so happy.

Acting, she thought, was the operative word.

"You're okay..."

She couldn't tell if he was happy, relieved, disappointed or just too tired to emote. "Better than ever." She chirped, very aware of where he was at all times.

He almost smiled. "Wasn't so sure you would be."

She met his gaze head on. "Thought I'd go back to being the old me?"

"...I..."

Staring into his eyes, she made one thing perfectly, crystal clear. "I've had some time to think, and I was wrong." He almost looked hopeful, but only for a second. "You might have helped me come out of my shell... but it's thanks to myself that people see me better these days. It's because of who I am, not anything you've done."

Not at all where his ego had wanted. "I see..."

In reply, she turned around and started walking away. "Good."

...Because I'm not letting the world, or anyone else, change me ever again.

In the end, she was the only one there who got what she wanted, and that was fine by her. What was not so fine, either by her or her parents, was how he'd handled it all in the end. A mark had been left on her, both in body and soul, and really, sometimes, she wasn't really sure if her confidence had really stayed.

Was it all an act? Was she really so strong as she hoped and wanted to be? Was her personality really the outgoing, confident, social butterfly she painted herself up as being?

In the end, even now, she wasn't sure of any of it.

Years down the line, she was attending UA High, training to become a hero. One day, after a particularly grueling bout of training, she and the others had gone out to blow off steam. Some grisly bit of news had been making the rounds at school, and no matter how much she tried to get her friends to spill, no one would tell her. Ordinarily, she'd let it go, writing it up as too personal for gossip, but almost literally everyone else knew already.

In a last ditch effort, she asked Kami what was going on. "Hmmm, dunno, but all the grim talk reminds me of a joke."

She blinked. "I... wha-?"

"Dark humor is a bit like food."

"...Kami?"

He winked. "Not everyone gets it." Her eyes narrowed, and she frowned, crossing her arms. "Eh? Ehh?"
She sighed, shaking her head. "You coulda just said you didn't want to say, Kami. It's okay..."

Something fishy was going on...

She was done pouting about it when they'd finally all ventured away from UA. Their destination was a club, one that hadn't bothered to card any of them on their way through the doors. Immediately she'd launched onto the dance floor, her body twisting and swaying about in an almost frantic need to shed some pent up energy.

As high as her heart-rate climbed, the heat of her skin, every bit of motion only served to calm her further. It was like instinct, just swaying, shaking, stepping in time with the music and throwing herself along, it was letting her body express everything all at once. All emotions, all jumbled up and finally free, on display where anyone could see them and her along with them. Exhilarating, thrilling, liberating and a rush that left you feeling serene.

"Ain't you a bit young for place like this?" Mina turned around, to see a rather tall and grey haired man staring down Kami.

He just laughed it off. "Thanks, good looks aren't easy to maintain."

"Er, no I-"

Kami shrugged. "Alright you got me: I'm a half elf. Basically immortal, doomed to look younger than I really am till the day I die. Still, I can think of worse fates."

"That's not-"

"Wow, persistent. Okay, truth is I'm from the future. Medical technology there is practically magic."

Snickering, Mina decided to turn her attention elsewhere.

Mina had only been all too eager to get a taste of alcohol, something sweet and fruity with a bit of fizz. She'd been sitting at the bar, dancing already having taken what was left of her energy, when she noticed Kami take a seat near her. He just downed an entire glass of something strong looking in one go, a grim look in his eyes.

"Easy, sailor," Mina smiled, scooching over to him. The grim look vanished when he noticed her looking at him, "you don't wanna wake up hung over."

In reply he just looked right at her. The smile that spread across his face... confident, almost suave.

"Well, I wouldn't mind if I was waking up next to you." Very not like him.

Instantly, her cheeks flushed, eyes fluttering. Then she laughed. "Aw, that's just the hooch talkin though." She batted the idea aside, turning back to sip her drink. "Silly boy..."

His hand, gently, placed itself over hers. "It was half a beer, just enough to take the edge off, promise." She gave him a curious look, and he seemed nervous, paler than usual, certainly. "I uh..." he tugged at his collar. "Just wanted to work myself up to finally say this..." Slowly, he reached his hand for her cheek, she closed her eyes as his palm pressed against her skin. "You're gorgeous." her eyes fluttered open, suddenly feeling very warm, and aware of how much skin her outfit was showing. "You kinda drive me crazy sometimes, and I don't mean that you bother me by being silly. Heh... actually, I really like your sense of humor."

Her smile, radiant in his eyes, was rather involuntary. "Kami..."
"Ah anyways," he shrugged, withdrawing his hand, "just wanted to mention."

Kami went to stand up, but she grabbed his wrist. "What brought this up?"

Blinking, he laughed nervously. "Nothing! Just... had it on my mind a while." He pointed back to the floor. "Imma just... dance some more."

Only she wasn't so sure or content to leave it at that. "I wanna dance!" She hopped off her chair, following after him.

There was something off about his behavior... Deflecting that earlier question with a joke, then that other guy until he walked away, now what was this Casanova act? Questions that stirred in her mind as the two of the twirled about. There was something... frantic, desperate about his energy. Almost like something was tearing at him, inside somewhere and he was trying to escape.

"Hey..."

He looked up. "Hmnm?"

She gulped. "It was something you were involved in, wasn't it?" His eyes widened, he almost stopped moving entirely. "The news that's been circulating today..."

The music stopped, motions of those around them got a little confused as they waited for the song change.

"...I-"

Then it started right back up, like nothing had happened. Awkwardly, as the much slower, more... romantic sounding rythm eased into the crowd, they looked about. Some had stayed, pairing up and dancing. Off in the corner both Todoroki and Yaoyorozu looked like they were in some competition to see who could get more embarrassed without saying a single word, implication simply hanging over them. Others just left the dance floor altogether.

Kami laughed awkwardly again, and when he looked back, Mina was waiting for him. Hand outstretched, smiling disarmingly, she said, "I won't mind."

Whether it was the dance, or the earlier topic she was referring to, neither of them knew. Although, as the story would go, he accepted and took her hand. Neither was very good at slow dancing, at being so close to someone while they moved about. Arms around each other, so close they could feel the heat of each other's skin radiating outward to their own it was difficult to remain calm.

She looked up, expectant and awaiting what he'd say next. He just sighed. "You're not gonna let it go, are you?"

Hearing him so dejected had guilt gnawing at her stomach. "I'm just worried, you don't have to tell me."

Another sigh. "Good. Because I don't want to think about it." He squeezed her a little tighter, neither was very sure if he'd meant to. "In fact... I don't really feel like thinking at all..."

There was no implication, his gaze shifted away, his expression back to being grim. In reply, she rested her face against his shoulder. "Okay..."

He laughed bitterly. "Is it really?"
She shrugged. "Only if you are."

Eyesight wasn't needed to know he was far from smiling. "Yeah..."

Idly, she stared stroking his back. "Can I help?"

Another laugh. "Nah, you don't have to do that. Besides," when she looked at him, he had that smug smirk on his face again. "If we keep talking, I'll probably just start babbling about you being pretty again."

She giggled. "Turned off your brain when you said that, huh?"

Now he was blushing. "Maybe... ah just forget I mentioned it. I was just-"

A finger placed itself softly over his lips. "Didja mean it?" After a moment's thought, he nodded. "Then I'm not forgetting." She stuck out her tongue. "So there."

Not sure how to react to this, he just continued dancing with her as the soft melody kept playing.

Her face was resting against his shoulder, eyes closed as they kept swaying, moving along to the sounds. Calm, relaxed and he thought lethargic, once or twice.

Except quiet was one thing he couldn't deal with right now. "It doesn't bother you that I... think of you like that?"

She smiled against his shoulder. "Not at all."

His hand roamed over her back, almost teasingly low and he squeezed her to him, but just for a moment. "Does... touching me bother you?"

A thought flitted through her mind, one that had the devil and angel on her shoulders pitching fits. One was flustered, nervous and not at all sure how to take this. The other was smirking, making cat calls and all manner of suggestions. Whichever was doing which, she couldn't tell.

"Not in a bad way."

It took him a moment to decipher that one. "...do you think of me the same way, Ashido?"

She moved back, to look up at him. "I might..."

Gulping, eyeing around them for a moment, he decided he had enough alcohol in his system to go for the craziest most thought purging thought in his head. "Wanna... get out of here?"

Her eyebrows jumped. "You are daring tonight."

Shrugging, he masked his nerves with a smile. "Is that bad?"

She pretended to think about this. "Dunno. But I might be able to be talked into it..." That shimmer in her eyes, she could see his heart skip a beat when she read his face.

"Can I have a hint as to how?"

Leaning up, her lips whispered in his ear and she could feel him shiver at the touch of her breath. "How much of this the alcohol, and how much is you needing not to think?"

Slowly, his hand ventured up to the middle of her back, and pulled her a fair bit closer. "Not much,
Honesty... she decided she liked honesty. "Wherever we're going, will tell me more about how gorgeous I am once we get there?"

"Heh... that was the plan."

So that was it, that was the night they'd made it official. Her, somewhat like putty in his hands for all her insecurities and him, all too eager to lose himself anywhere but reality. She didn't know it then, but at the time, the urgent need to escape his own powerlessness had come from the deteriorating health of his grandfather. It was only by the 'grace of god' that he'd turned out to still be fine, back then... Though, really, she didn't need to know the reason. His usual coping mechanism, as it had always been, deflecting anything serious with humor and bravado had played right into her insecurities.

Insecurities she was only too happy to have him, in particular, to sway aside to make her feel like any other girl.

His grandfather was out, seeing a friend, and he was already kissing her when they stumbled inside. It was short jaunt to his room, but they seemed to take forever to get there. Far too busy running hands over each other, tongues flicking at each other as they fumbled about with each others clothing.

To her ceaseless amusement, his confidence seemed to vanish more and more with every article of clothing he coaxed her out of. He wound up feeling like a silly, hopeless mess, but she loved it. Better than any attempt at flattery and then some, watching him squirm like that as his eyes roamed almost as greedily as his hands.

If you asked her about it, what it was like when they finally got around to completely exploring each other, she might have said, "kind of like dancing."

Dark as the night had gotten, stars and lights from the city shone into his room as the pair of them lay there together. She was lying on him, her hands petting at him as his fingers tangled lazily in her hair.

"Is it weird that I'm hesitant to believe that just happened?"

She smiled. "Want me to pinch you?"

He managed a laugh. "I'm good."

Nuzzling his neck, she purred. "That's what I thought."

Sighing, he dragged the blankets up and tucked them both in. Only... he still couldn't quite close his eyes. "Hey, there's something I want to ask."

"Ask me."

Another nervous gulp. "Ah, heh... can I... call you Mina from now on?"

She gave him a look. "Where you seriously considering not doing that?" It was very hard not to laugh.

"H-hey, I-I've never really ah, done this whole... relationship thing before."
Looming over him, she bumped her forehead against his. "Me neither..."

His turn for the whole fluttering eye routine. "Forgive me if I'm not quick to believe that."

She gave him a playfully challenging look. "You calling me a liar, Kaminari?"

"Maybe."

"Meanie." She stuck out her tongue and he leaned forward and nipped at it, earning a startled squeak and then a laugh before he kissed her again.

He smirked. "Don't like em mean?"

She shook her head. "Sorry, Den, my ideal man is a hero."

Rolling his eyes and smiling, he pounced, flipping her beneath him. "What a coincidence... cuz I don't like a woman who's stuck on the sidelines." Leaning down, his lips very, very close to hers, he murmured softly. "Even if she's cheering me on... Mina."

Before he kissed her again, she smiled. "Partners?"

"Partners." And that was the last they said for the remainder of the night.

Of course... that was the past now.

Now, she was standing in that old playground, wondering when it all had gotten so much smaller.

Really, she didn't know why she was here. Maybe it was feeling guilty about All Might. Maybe if she'd used her quirk like normal, nothing held back like she had against that man made of purple mist, he wouldn't be in a coma. Maybe then her friends fight for their lives wouldn't have been so bad. Maybe she'd be back with them, warm and cozy.

Still, as long as she was here, she'd do what should have been done the way she was hurt. Palm outstretched, she coated the jagged hunk of plastic with acid and watched as it melted away.

It didn't really make her feel better. It didn't fix anything. It was just done, and no one else would get hurt by it.

Maybe that was enough.

Mina Ashido, weirdo, friend, confidant and hero. Her first foray into romance had been awkwardly timed, clumsy and almost hadn't happened. Still, she'd be lying if she said it hadn't done wonders for her self esteem. That she was still with him, a year and some change later? Just made it that much sweeter.

Of course, that was to say nothing of her friendships, but those? She was more than happy and comfortable with, for the first time in a long while.

She reached into her pocket for her phone, flicking through a few screens as she put some earbuds in her ears. At the sound of the old drums, followed by the more delicate and melodious instrument, she almost smiled.

In truth, it didn't remind her at all of Kami; the one it did remind her of? Well, she'd forgotten his name back in middle school.

Really, for every reason she could think of, that was for the best. As she started wandering back,
she sung under her breath as the words caught her ears.

"Ain't it just so easy to say

You don't feel the same way
As that nice boy does, hey?

He misses you, he wants you
But, you just don't feel the same
Why don't you tell him today...?

Yeah, huh-huh-huh

She doesn't want him because he cares too much
But now he's gone and she's alone again
Maybe if she tried a little harder to find
The gem within his heart that was there this whole time
(Bitch!)

Baby, what did I do?
Baby come through
To me
Baby I think it's you

Never was me...

AN: Next arc to start hopefully soon. just wanted to publish the one while my brain would allow me to. Second guesses... best ignored sometimes.
He hadn't packed very much into his bags. Just some clothes and what few blankets he felt that he needed. It was a little disheartening, watching him ignore everything else in the room. Awkwardly, Bakugo scratched at the back of his neck, giving his old friend a lopsided frown.

"None of it?"

Izuku was slow to nod, but nod he did. "Yeah..."

Eyeing the merchandise, the vast collection that spanned his room, the warhead felt a little sad. "Why?" Blinking, Izuku turned to face him, waiting for the blond to finish his thought. "You've been working on this collection since we were kids, probably before we could even remember." Izuku smiled, and that was no comfort here. "What changed?"

A little lost, uncertain of what to say, Izuku just went with his first instinct. "Guilt." He said quietly, with the barest hint of a shrug. "I feel responsible for his... condition now, for how easily he was defeated." He laughed bitterly. "I couldn't even face him in the hospital..." Shaking his head at himself, he went to his closet and opened it. "If I took any of it with me, I'd just feel... rotten. Selfish, I guess." Unplugging the minifridge, he hoisted it up, carrying it behind his back as he gave the room a final once over. "He's in a coma because he came to save me, and in a twisted way, we're lucky he's the only one who wound up like that..."

Bakugo's features flickered, pain and remorse twisting him outward and inwardly and he was slow to respond. "...You're not the one he took that bullet for, Green."

Both boys's faces were speckled with bruises, scabs and other marks from that all too recent encounter, making them slow to read each other. All the same, Izuku had enough practice with people by now to know shame when he saw it on someone's face; it helped that the face was so familiar. "Kacchan..."

"Don't." Bakugo's fists gripped, but there was barely any life in them. Just the shell of the motions, and his body barely moved while once it would have quaked with the weight of his emotions. "Yeah, his choice to save me. I get that..." Eyes almost closed, he just shook his head at himself. "But... he was there when I-" Izuku's eyes flitted away for a moment, realizing what his old friend meant. His face matched again, but the memory of what Kacchan's egotistical rage had done would remain for as long as they lived.

A conclusion bit at Izuku's heart. "...You think he made a mistake in trying to save you." Bakugo's eyes just winced themselves closed. "If that gun had been loaded with a normal bullet?"

Bakugo's eyes opened and he gave Izuku a look that was emblematic of waning patience. "Then he'd have kicked that guy's ass and this conversation wouldn't be happening." Bakugo scoffed, shaking his head again though not at himself this time. "Either way, he made the wrong call."

Since they'd both been little, the man they now mourned had been their hero. Something both had aspired to become since their earliest memories, though certainly for opposing reasons. Both boys felt a weight of responsibility on their shoulders, a notion that they were to blame for the downfall of their childhood idol. Some time ago, years ago, their positions might have been reversed; one
boy found the weight of guilt spurring him on to earn the right of being seen as so worthy of the sacrifice, while the other questioned their own worth and considered that sacrifice a total waste.

Where the boys differed was how they would have chosen to react to the other's self deprecation some time ago.

In that moment, one did exactly as always may have. "Katsuki?" Surprised, the blond silently looked Izuku in the eyes. "If you feel that All Might made a mistake in saving you, then..." Izuku felt his features intensify, a bold look of determination as he met his friend's gaze. "You have to prove him wrong."

Katsuki blinked. "...what?"

In return, Izuku smiled. "Be someone worth saving." The warhead's eyes fluttered and his jaw dropped, all the while just quietly listening. "The Kacchan I know would never let a mistake like that slide. So it's up to you to correct that mistake, and turn it into the right decision."

His voice and expression were both soft, the clearest picture of gentle encouragement, and it made Bakugo feel... small. He felt very small and, at that moment, that didn't feel wrong at all. Taking a deep breath, he just nodded as he bent to pick up the bags that Izuku had packed. "You don't give easy advice, Izuku..."

The two of them were slow to venture out of the house, Bakugo stopping to grab one of Izuku's old hoodies. It was an All Might hoodie, themed after one of his newer costumes and had those absurd hair antennae on the hood. 

He's even leaving this behind? Frowning, and stuffing it into one of the bags, he soon followed his friend outside, locking the door behind them before slipping the key into Izuku's pocket. "Would a problem like this even have advice like that?"

To his credit, Bakugo almost laughed. "Guess not."

Taking a good long look at his friend, Izuku felt oddly at peace. Having Kacchan back, even after everything that had happened, felt like a breath of the freshest air. There was an odd softness about him now, an air of quiet regret now from multiple sources that served to cool his once flaring temper. It was plain to see, how the boy felt, that he had decided himself unworthy of All Might's saving, wishing instead that the man he wished to be were alive and well in his stead.

"You wont be alone."

Bakugo smiled, shaking his head as they finally started walking, leaving the house behind them. "Neither will you, and I know you'll be doing the same, trying to make sure his life wasn't wasted saving us."

It was a sad smile, but Izuku smiled back all the same. "Guess we both have the same goal, no matter where end up."

"Always have." Bakugo said simply, looking up at the sky. "tch... looks like a lousy storm is brewing, in those damn clouds."

Turning his own gaze skyward, Izuku slowly nodded in agreement. "Yeah, but we'll pass through it soon enough." They ventured on in silence, all the way to UA, trying not to think too hard on whether or not those storm clouds were any sort of omen.

We've made it this far, haven't we?
Police Sergeant Ken Nakamura sat at the bar with a cigarette between his teeth. People who could best be described as thugs from their appearances surrounded him, absorbed in either drink, conversation or games of cards and pool. Up above the bar, the TV newscaster was going on about the increasing crime rates. Basically, aside from the alcohol, it was nothing he wouldn't find at the office.

Glancing at his phone he saw that Hero-to-be 'Stendhal' had texted him again. No doubt going on about Eri and her as yet to be solved missing persons case. Although, considering that she was now *found* the sergeant felt his fixation was utterly pointless at this juncture. So he kept smoking.

Curious that he hadn't answered it, Lieutenant Kira Katagawa sipped her drink. "Not gonna get that?"

Wishing that his boss hadn't decided to join him, Nakamura shrugged. "I'm off the clock."

Kira smirked. "You really don't like him much." Her smugly made observation was met with a groan. "You know he'll just keep at it until you answer."

Taking a long, long drag from his cigarette, Nakamura growled out a sigh. "That has been his pattern of late..."

Leaning back, stretching her back a little, Kira gave the TV a somber turn of her eyes. "Hard to believe it's only been three days... the way the city's already started changing." In silence, Nakamura turned his eyes the same way, a soft touch of vulnerability shifting his features.

Again, he sighed out a long plume of smoke. "Nothing's changed, boss. It's just... not as quiet as it was, now that All Might's gone."

She gave her subordinate a frown. "You really think so?"

Nakamura chuckled. "Optimism is the fool's invisible blindfold." Standing up, he gave the barkeep some money and started walking away. "Yeah... this is just the same old song and dance we've always been a part of."

As he left, Kira sighed. "One of these days, Ken, I wanna know what made you so jaded and bitter." *So that I can avoid turning out the same way, one day.*

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**Sunday, August 12th, 2255**

As far as living rooms went, this one was by far the most spacious Kyoka had managed to comfortable in. It didn't matter what the weather, season or how many people crowded into a room; the more spacious it was, the colder she felt. It helped that she wasn't alone as she'd tried to settle in, the others of her class were busy ferrying their belongings and various pieces of furniture into each other's newly acquired rooms.

Not long ago, yesterday in fact, she'd been almost convinced she wouldn't be allowed to come back to this school. She and her mother had been sitting in the hospital, in her room for a very long time as silence weighed them down. This wasn't some merciful, awkward, 'not sure what to say to your mother' silence either, no: this was the dreaded 'can have a conversation about literally anything other than what we are about to discuss' silence.

It was the kind of silence one wished would never end despite clearly knowing that it would, and when it did it would end well.
"Well..." Tired, worried eyes were on her daughter's face, and she was staring at her lap, dreading every second she hadn't continues to speak. "This has been a nightmare."

It was as if she'd sensed exactly what to say about everything in as few words as possible, and still make every second of dread that much heavier. "Mom..."

"What else do you expect me to say?" Wincing, Kyoka had to look away from her mother altogether. "I know everything that happened. Your teacher told me." Her fingers gripped tightly at the sheets, twisting them up against her palms as she closed her eyes tight. "You're still going to try and be a hero, aren't you?"

The phrasing was somewhat unexpected. "...You're still giving me a choice?"

Her mother sighed. "You're legally an adult. Live under my roof though you do, I can't decide this for you anymore." A sentiment that hurt far more than the junior Jiro had ever been prepared to cope with. "I just-" her mother bit her lip, almost tearing up for a moment. "Can't you tell me why?" In something along the lines of 'shame', Kyoka lowered her gaze yet further, unable to reply. "This has been your aim for almost five years now, ever since..." Kyoka had braced for her name to be mentioned, but her mother chose another way to say it. "Middle school." The daughter sighed in relief. "Is that reason really enough for you to keep risking your life, in spite of all this?"

For as much as she wanted to answer that question, Kyoka knew that she could not. So it was with a heavy heart and a quiet voice that she gave the only reply she could: "No..." And, for the first time during their entire conversation, she turned and looked her in the eyes. "But I have to keep doing this, now more than ever..."

_Since we lost All Might._

Now, Kyoka was sitting cross legged on the couch, an earlobe hooked into her Zune as she listened to an old song. She debated listening to something about 'dumb americans' but she was already wearing that shirt: a shirt of a cartoony hand holding up a heart with the pin of a grenade inside one its valves. Listening to that song felt a bit like overkill. Eri was by her side, sleeping with a half-read book in her lap, her head pressed against the side of Kyoka's leg as the hearing hero stroked idly at her scalp, earning the occasional, sleepy hum from the little one.

Not too far from her, Uraraka was sipping tea at the table adjacent to the dorm's kitchenette. Serene as she looked, you'd never have guessed she was front-line for the death of All For One three days ago. Every once in a while they'd look at each other, one giving the other a polite smile before they resumed their differing activities, the others moving about and around them without much fuss.

Kurishima was lugging an entire punching bag up the steps -with Todoroki's help- and looking somewhat confused. "You'd think they would've dusted this place out ages ago, had us move in during year one." As he and Den rounded the corner they almost knocked over a potted plant, had Iida not lounged in and caught it.

"Mind your surroundings!" the bespectacled boy shouted. "Break your own things if you must, but leave the school's property unharmed!"

Scoffing and smiling, shaking his head, Kaminari was sitting in a chair behind Yaoyorozu who was on the floor in front of him as his hands rubbed at her shoulders. "Hard to believe you're still this high strung..." Iida almost looked offended as he glanced back at the electric blond, who just gave him an amused look in turn. "You stepped in before anything broke, no harm done."

Sedately, with a little smile on her face, Yaoyorozu nodded, somewhat lost in tranquility as Den's
fingers worked the stress out of her muscles. "Plus, it's been a long few days. Some quiet would be very welcome about now."

As the two boys hoisted the punching bag onto its mount, Todoroki grumbled out a reply. "Amen to that..." and he massaged at a particularly sore spot on the side of his head. As he exited Kirishima's room, he noticed Kaminari and Yaoyorozu, his brow furrowing in perplexity. "...What are you doing?"

Somewhat surprised, Kaminari glanced over his shoulder. "Rubbing her shoulders."

Nodding slowly, Todoroki blinked. "Why?"

It seemed they were both in a contest to see how much they could confuse the other. "...To help my friend relax? It eases muscle tension."

Now the heterochrome understood. "Ah." and he stepped a bit closer, leaning down a little to observe the process. "I wasn't aware of this."

Blinking rapidly, Kyoka shot her eyes right to him. "You don't know what massages are?" Todoroki shook his head. "Explain."

With a shrug, the dual quirk user answered simply. "Never had one, never been told about them."

Somewhat in disbelief in Uraraka turned toward the conversation. "But... not even on tv?"

Another simple answer. "I don't watch tv." A decision that denoted extreme wisdom, lest one's brain be bombarded with the indignity that is 'advertising'.

As Iida took a seat at the opposite end of the couch, taking deep breaths as he did, Kyoka felt bad for her classmate. It was no secret that his home life was awful, thanks to the happenings of the sports festival, but sometimes the reality of it snuck up on her. How long had it been since someone had just... touched him? Given him a hug, a pat on the shoulder, something to tell him he was cared for. Judging by the brute of a father he had, she'd be surprised if the only familial touch he knew was that of knuckles flying wild.

From the look on Yaoyorozu's face, she'd thought exactly the same thing. "Um... would you like one?" There was a flicker in her eyes that had Iida quirking an eyebrow, and Kyoka hiding a smirk behind one of her hands as she quietly looked toward the kitchenette, taking note of their stock of tea.

Eyes to the side, Todoroki thought about this. "Yes, but I don't think that would be fair."

Kaminari laughed. "Then make it fair." Standing up, he motioned for Todoroki to take his place in his chair.

Todoroki's momentary confusion was met with a gesture from Den to take his seat, which he hesitantly did. Yaoyorozu, on the other hand, had a moment's confusion flutter across her brain just before her eyes went wide. Before she realized she had to actually open her mouth to voice the reservations screaming across her brain, the boy now perched behind her had started working his thumbs at her shoulders.

Heedless of the woman's reaction, Todoroki soon found himself focused solely on what he was doing. "So... like this?" Yaoyorozu's eyes batted in a blur, her face turning a rather lovely shade of red. It was almost funny, watching her simultaneously relax and tense up in an altogether different manner.
"Yeah," Kaminari nodded, "that's it." Taking a step back, it was only then that he noticed his friend's flickering emotional state and blinked, casting a confused look Kyoka's way.

One she met with an expression that said, 'take a guess' shortly before they turned their attention back to their friends, one oblivious and the other flustered to high heaven.

Frowning, the heterochrome whispered softly. "You're really tense..." Yaoyorozu only gulped. "Is everything okay?" All the while, he kept his thumbs and fingers working at her shoulders.

She nodded quickly, barely squeaking an affirmation that she was, in fact, okay as the boy hesitantly continued trying to knead away her tension. Somewhat lost, Iida turned to Kaminari, who seemed to be trying his damnedest not to laugh as he put a shushing finger to his lips.

Silently -for the most part- observing this, Kyoka sighed and shook her head. I wonder if it was this obvious for everyone else when it came to me and Izuku... Looking between them, her obviously flustered state and his quiet concern as his fingers kept moving, she hoped not. So, painfully, fucking, obvious.

Interrupting this moment, whatever it was, was the noise of three people entering the building.

"How the fuck were we supposed to know it would start raining that fast!?!" Bakugo. "And what the fuck were you doing out there anyways?"

"Melting some old memories, not that it's your business." The tired sigh of a reply was Ashido. "And, I dunno, by looking up and noticing the rumbling thunder and lightning?" Bakugo grumbled something incoherent and there were heavy footsteps climbing the stairs. "You were supposed to look after Green, and you know how he is with running water."

That time, Izuku was the one who responded. "Actually, the rain is fine... I kind of like being in the rain these days."

"Yeah, well, tell it to the clothes we wanted to keep dry." Bakugo muttered as they reached the top of the stairs, Ashido in the lead. "It's coming down in buckets, probably soaked right through the damn suitcase."

Once atop the steps Ashido waved to Den with a smile. "Hey, lover-boy." Wordlessly he waved back, still amused by the sight of Todoroki and Yaoyorozu. Ashido didn't say anything, she just silently snickered as the boys tromping up the stairs behind her failed to notice was was going on.

Looking around, Izuku blinked. "Where's- um... I don't know where my room is?"

Clearing her throat, pointing down the hall, Kyoka finally caught his eye. "That one, barely even around the corner."

Smiling at her, he nodded and slowly made for his door. "Whoa, Midoriya." Iida was on his feet in an instant. "You're still limping! Should you be be carrying something that heavy on your own?" He moved to aid his friend, but the vampire hadn't even slowed.

"It's okay," Izuku assured, "it's really not that heavy..."

Kaminari, finally given an excuse to laugh, chuckled. "Show off."

From his doorway, Kirishima was quick to shoot that idea down. "Not really, the man can lift and throw 20 tons without too much trouble. If he decided to throw the building? That would be showing off."
The electric blond scoffed. "Jealous, Bakugo? Your boyfriend is currently suck-"

"Do not finish that sentence!" The warhead snarled, as Kyoka facepalmed, Yaoyorozu blushed even brighter and Uraraka hid behind her teacup. Ducking into his room, Izuku tried to ignore what they were talking about as he put the minifridge in his closet. Noticing the red on the boy's cheeks Bakugo almost laughed. Almost. "Still not used to positive reinforcement?"

As the warhead started putting away his clothes, Izuku shook his head. "Not really." Considering the others, he added one thing more. "Or um, openly talking about... things like that."

Bakugo smirked. "Try it sometime, it's liberating."

"I'll just take your word on that one..." And the vampire quietly plugged his appliance into the wall socket within its new housing, before hanging up some of his clothes over it.

Walking out of the room, Bakugo had one article of clothing under his arm as he rejoined the others. As he exited the room, he saw Kyoka looking expectantly at the doorway, so he threw her the All Might hoodie he'd smuggled along.

 Caught it though she had, Kyoka looked very perplexed. "Why did you-?"

Bakugo put a finger over his lips. "Just hold onto it. He might want it later." Nodding slowly, Kyoka stood up and ferried it off to her room without a word.

As she wended her way back to her room, Ashido trotted up to her. "Stealing more clothes from your bf? For shame."

Their words carried down the hall, echoing in the restroom of one boy's room. "Hey, this one isn't on me, okay?" The lone, pale and presently worried inhabitant payed the conversations no mind even as they echoed around his head.

Kyoka just sighed. "This one's not on me, okay?" The long fingers on his hand trailed along the perimeter of one of his eyes, and their faint, red glow illuminated his skin.

Quieter now, as they moved down the hall, Ashido snickered. "Pun intended?"

"...Shut up." Then they both laughed, one far more quietly than the other.

Labored breaths, a young man staring at his reflection as the faint, red glow of his eyes served as the only light within the restroom. It had been quite some time, that he'd just been standing there, gazing into his own, changed eyes. His phone was in his hand, some text sent away to distract himself gone unanswered, and he'd almost forgotten what it was about.

You know this isn't normal, Stendhal.

Startled, Stendhal whirled about, his eyes everywhere in the room but seeing nothing unusual.

As he'd started in the room, he was still alone.

Forcing his breath and heart-rate to calm, he started coughing, feeling a build up of fluid trying to force itself free. Not now... Hunching over the sink, he forced his muscles to push the excess blood and other bits of clear and yellow he didn't dare name to evacuate his airways. Wheezing, gagging, he reached with a shaky hand for his inhaler.

There was a faint knocking at his door. "Sten?" He groaned, rolling his eyes at his own present
helplessness. "Everything okay"? It would be Ashido, worrying after him.

Taking a moment to breathe in his medicine, he went to the door and swung it open. He was met with the sight of a quietly worried troll girl, peering at him front beneath her hood. "Everything's fine." Sidling past her, he started for the kitchen.

He needed tea... Not wanted, needed. The past three days had put his emotional state into a complete tailspin and something had best center him quick.

In his stupor, mindlessly wandering down the hall, he almost plowed right over Izuku. They collided and the pair of them flung their arms about for any sort of handhold to keep them balanced. After exchanging an awkward mumbling of apologies and hurriedly backing away from each other, Izuku stared at his face and blinked.

"What-?" he started, eyes fixed on those of his friend. "Your eyes..."

Stendhal sighed. "No clue." Without another word between them, he started for the kitchenette again, doing his best to ignore the others's prying eyes.

Arriving in the kitchen he noted that the sun was almost set. Groaning, realizing he wouldn't be making any headway with Eri's case tonight, he turned around with a sigh. Propping himself up on the counter he looked to the group out in the common area.

Kirishima and Bakugo were playing a game of shogi, Yaoyorozu was busy massaging Todoroki's shoulders -for some reason- and Iida was nose deep in a book. Kyoka was snuggled up to Izuku on the couch, and the white-haired vampire looked like he was barely even awake, his cheek perched against the top of her head. Uraraka was still quietly sipping her tea, Kaminari sitting across from her at the table and idly reading through the news on his phone.

All in all, it was rather tranquil. Hearing the kettle whistling, he turned lazily around to pour the water in an awaiting mug. Recent events had had them all at their wits end until not long ago, even one such as he was not about to cut such a moment short. Opting for silence rather than conversation, he waited for his tea to cool as he just relaxed.

He never really knew what to do in quiet moments, not unless he was truly drained. With the rain pelting down at the roof, walls and windows it was hard not to reminisce.

Many years ago, around ten he thought, he remembered being curled up in a friend's room, under the bed. While the rain had driven him from his usual place to sleep, Toya had snuck him inside the old family home. After giving him some towels, grabbing a few books, the two boys had settled in to read until they fell asleep. Things had gone along quietly, until he'd reached one passage in particular of an old history book.

"Hey... Toya?"

"Yeah?"

"What's this part mean?"

... 

"'Stendhal Syndrome'? ... heh, oh. Have you ever seen someone so happy to see something or someone that they almost faint?"

"...you mean like some people look at heroes?"
"Exactly."

... "That's stupid... That's really stupid."

He remembered that Toya had smiled at that. "You think so?"

"yes." He remembered glaring at the wall, as he curled up beneath the bed. "No one should ever react that way to heroes. Heroes are awful."

"Why do you say that?"

Flames, smoke, the smell and feel of blood drenching him to his bones. Hilt of a dagger protruding from his mother's chest, a hilt he would never forget, and he could see, smell and see the fire in her dead, vacant eyes all over again.

Screaming for help, for anyone to save her, to take the knife from her heart, only for no one to come and save him.

Not until one man, clad in blue, red and yellow stepped into the hell he'd all but surrendered to and scooped him up.

"It's okay little one..."

_No it's not!_

"Because I am..."

Stendhal gasped softly, a voice snapping him back to reality. No one had spoken to him, exactly, but someone had said something. Ashido he thought.

"It's okay, Midoriya. No one's being serious right now, we're just playing." It was Ashido.

Whatever was going on, Stendhal wasn't sure he really wanted to know, so he just sipped his tea while Izuku looked a little unsure.

At Kyoka's nudge to his ribs and a reassuring look, he seemed to ease into whatever idea was in the air.

"See," Ashido crossed her arms, in a mockery of offendedness, "even she thinks it's okay to playfully make fun of your friends, _dummy_!" Punctuating this rather... interesting declaration was the troll girl blowing a raspberry at the boy the with blackened eyes.

Slow on uptake, Izuku stammered about for any sort of witty retort. "Uh, n-no you!" and he, in turn, stuck out his own tongue.

Blinking a few times, eyebrows inclining practically to her hairline, Ashido was at something of a loss for words. Then, raising a hand, spinning her finger about in a way that seemed to imply she wanted a replay of that moment, she said something. "Do that again?" Confused, he did as he was told and his long, long, somewhatprehensile tongue stuck out in plain view as Ashido nodded sagely. "Jiro is a lucky girl."

What followed this rather innocuously made statement could only be described as 'total pandemonium'. 
Midway through a sip of her tea, Uraraka promptly spewed it violently back into her cup in embarrassed shock. Bakugo and Kirishima, utterly bewildered, turned slowly to stare at the woman in silence, their expressions comically between astonished, shocked and impressed. Both Yaoyorozu and Kyoka turned scarlet and rigid, their jaws hanging open as they recoiled, unable to scream and instead quietly squawking in a long, monotone shrill as Iida and Todoroki quietly exchange a fruitless, questioning glance between them.

Kaminari, on the other hand, slowly went to hide his eyes behind his palm. "Hon... you don't-" he shook his head, shrugging and letting his jaw hang open as he breathlessly laughed for a moment. "You don't say that kinda thing out loud." Only he was trying -and failing- not to laugh as he spoke, Uraraka with hunched shoulders and a face so red she'd outshine a fire engine as she stared at the table in front of her with spinning eyes.

Izuku, having read the entire room at this point, slowly retracted his tongue and turned red in the face as he drew up his legs to hide behind his knees. He said nothing. He didn't have to say anything. In fact, he'd at that point made a vow that his tongue would never again be used for anything, but that was a promise he would be keeping in his lifetime.

Sighing and rolling his eyes, Stendhal took a sip of his tea. I shouldn't be so angry that their minds are so far away from the state of things right now. His eyes ventured to Kaminari's phone, while the others took turns poking fun at and reassuring each other he read the most recent article with a frown. Crime rates, in just three, short days had already risen by seven percent. But when I consider all the facts I have... I cannot help it.

Polishing off his tea, he set the glass to soak in one of the sinks and walked toward the stairs.

Things are shifting, and I sense the worst of it yet looming over the horizon.

As he made his way outside he put his umbrella up and over his head, slinging his sword over his shoulder as he strode away from the dorms. A certain woman and her hacker of a husband may yet prove more useful and willing.

A group of children against the coming storm... then again, I suppose that's always the way it goes.

Whispers of a breeze, carrying into the wind, rolling in tune with other small breaths along a shared path, this is one such beginning for a hurricane.

"It has been said that something as small as the flutter of butterfly's wing can ultimately cause a typhoon halfway around the world."

- Chaos theory, a quote about the phenomenon known simply as the Butterfly Effect.

The Saffir–Simpson hurricane wind scale (SSHWS), formerly the Saffir–Simpson hurricane scale (SSHS), classifies hurricanes – Western Hemisphere tropical cyclones (typhoons) – that exceed the intensities of tropical depressions and tropical storms – into five categories distinguished by the intensities of their sustained winds.

Category one is the smallest, and therefore weakest variation. Ultimately -logically- this leaves the strongest to be...

IV: Category Five
AN: Buckethead.

Also excessive fluff warning.

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Glass windows, when properly cleaned, can sometimes appear to be invisible. Now this is hardly groundbreaking knowledge, anyone with a rag and some soap can know that one. Hiding right in plain sight is a trick, it takes a few things to execute efficiently. One: there has to be something more eye catching than what one wishes to hide very close by. Two: a certain amount of transparency, atmosphere around that which needs to be concealed. Lastly, three: the object must be place right where anyone can see where it is, and the is the most obvious piece of the puzzle, lest this description carry on or offend needlessly.

One man in particular had just been going on at length about this particular topic, and he was standing in front of a very clean, large window. A glass of wine was in his hand, the setting sun cast his shadow far across the room. Aging features, graying hair, a plastered on and empty smile as he sipped, and the other three reacted as they would. One rolled her eyes as much as she could, wishing that she was the only one in the room with the man rambling as he pleased. That glass window was begging for a body to be thrown through it...

The second was a man, thumb fussing at his forefinger, wishing he could either take a long drink from his hip-flask or have a cigarette or two. He was long past the point of having that much ire, that much rage as she. It was being so passionate and illogical about his work that had placed them all in this room, as they were.

Last in the room, and most indifferent to it all, was a man just watched them talk. His eyes flitting between the others, reading them, watching them. Occasionally, the flame of his beard and brow would flicker, casting more shadows across the room. In truth his attention, much like the smiling man, was on the sight just outside the window.

"Hiding things," the smiling man, a Nameless man, sipped his wine, "it's a lost art form, wouldn't you say, Eraser Head?"

Steel girders, interlocking, connecting and branching like the veins in a body. The skeletal structure laced around the more precious spire it surrounded, a cage or perhaps a shield to the vital internal organs, if one wished to continue the previous metaphor.

With a sigh, the very tired hero gave what passed for an answer. "I suppose..."

Vanessa suppressed a groan and the compulsion to roll her eyes. Great. Just what the conversation needed...

Nameless chuckled. "Not so chatty today?" Whenever the two of them were summoned and Aizawa failed to entertain, inevitably, she was the one who wound up having to do so; lest Nameless get his hackles up. "Very well then, I'll ask our pre-eminent expert."

She decided to cut him off before the question could be repeated. "Most are not very adept at it, it's true." Nameless, though he continued to smile, glared at her in the way most would at a wasp buzzing around their head. "But this structure is hardly hidden, even in plain sight."

Working like bees constructing a hive within, people worked tirelessly to put the finishing touches on the spire. It resembled a massive smoke-stack, only there were secondary and tertiary ventilation ports all along its length. Intake filters, meant to siphon toxins, pollutants out of the air. A state-of-the-art air purification system to be implemented for the benefit of the city: SHROUD.
Nameless laughed. "True," and he sipped his wine again, "but so far as people know, this isn't anything special. Just another construction projected funded by Philanthropy."

Aizawa shifted in his seat. "Unless they checked the official website, or if someone spread it to social media." Nameless raised a brow at this. "Sir... you have to know this is no secret any longer. People know about this project."

Taking another moment to laugh, Nameless polished off his drink. "True... but consider what I've already said, my little hunter." Aizawa's fingers clenched into a fist, Nameless raised an index finger to emphasize the importance of his point. "There's more to this, isn't there?"

Blinking, Vanessa thought she might understand. "This is the diversion, isn't it?" Again, the CEO's eyes turned to her like daggers, poised to pierce through her flesh and bones. "The more obvious object to keep the public's eyes attention focused right here."

For a flicker of a moment, Nameless almost looked pleased. "So... your mind retains some of its former capabilities." Standing, he chuckled darkly as he took a step toward her. "Here I thought you'd surrendered your potential along with your will to carry on, after the death of your family."

One of Vanessa's eyes twitched, then they both narrowed. "Murder." The vampire's voice was sharp, cold as she spoke. "Don't mince words about what you've done." Over in the corner, Endeavor's eyes turned to focus on her and the flames flicking about from his body flickered again.

To his credit, not that Nameless appeared to have many emotions to jostle, he took that quiet, defiant outburst rather well. In fact, he laughed. "My apologies, Valentine." Shaking his head, pacing back to the window to observe the creation of his conglomerate progress. "I forget sometimes that you think being people matters." Turning back around, his smile all but vanishes, he met her gaze again and they glared at each other without subterfuge. "Or did you forget the real reason I had your kind exterminated?"

Aizawa's eyes darted back and forth between the two of them, a thin layer of sweat beginning to glisten on his forehead as Vanessa stood. "I know full well: preventing villains from getting their hands on our abilities, right?" Her fingernails were cutting into her skin, arms shaking as her eyes burned with fury. "What I'm not so clear on, at this moment, is whether or not you knew we were people from the start."

Silence hung over their heads for a long moment, Vanessa, bold as she pleased for the first time in years, waiting defiantly for an answer. Eventually, somehow proving to be far more unsettling than anything she or Aizawa were bracing for, Endeavor laughed. "You're more clever than you let on..." His grim little smile prompted another quirked brow from Nameless. "Even I hadn't considered that."

Both her and Aizawa's expressions sank, though his a great deal more. "Sir...?" the former hunter scarcely dared to breathe. "You- tell me that's not-"

"Shall I?" Nameless flashed a rather crazed, impatient mock of a grin. "Though I thought that would be rather pointless, indulging such an... irrational request." Aizawa flinched, eyes averting from the man he ever reluctantly answered to. "I thought you were done with irrationality, as it was what got you into this exact mess to begin with."

Old memories stirred in his mind, images of dead bodies, literal blood on his hands made his skin go cold and pale. Breathing a good deal heavier, he bit at his lip as the corners of his mouth twitched, unable to look the man in the eyes.
Nameless didn't care. "Then again, I suppose I shouldn't be surprised." Another step toward his pawn, his 'favorite hero', forced Aizawa to look him in the eyes again. "After all I said about considering his capture good luck you went and found the Yakuza, with All Might no less, to try and save him." His glare was unmasked, bearing the full brunt of his ire as he challenged the quivering hero. "The boy is a problem, a potential risk not unlike the upstart." He thrust a finger at Vanessa, who simply rekindled her glare at him. "I thought the plan was to control her, to make sure this exact thing did not occur."

"Sir, I-"

Nameless grit his teeth. "I was not. Done. Speaking." Gulp, Aizawa silenced himself and The Nameless One took a steadying breath. "The more vampires there are, the higher the risk of some weak willed fool caving under pressure and putting that power in the wrong hands."

Vanessa rolled her eyes. "And you think we are anything so worth the worry?" Another gritting of his teeth was Nameless's only reply. "If that were really true, one human who's quirk was useless against us would not have been able to kill nearly all fifty three of us that lived in japan." The irritation, rage on his face dropped in place of confusion as she kept talking. "Truly, you're over reacting."

For a moment, Nameless merely blinked. Then, after a few rather lengthy moments, he started laughing. "Oh, is that so?" Walking to the other side of the room, his fingers dialing away at a small key-pad, the large window became an enormous television screen. "Let's explore that claim." Both the vampire and the hunter watched with mild apprehension, exchanging a quick look before the first clip began to play.

"Event one," Nameless narrated, as an all too familiar sight played before them, "the yet-to-be-mentored child confronts a Zero-Pointer at UA." The footage was played from the perspective of the machine. Distorted as the video was, it was difficult to deny the utter blur Midoriya had become in his rush to attack it. Harder still was it to refute the damage he'd wrought with only a single, swift swipe of his claws.

Aizawa's brow declined, angling toward the ridge of his nose. "You should know he lost that encounter. It's not exactly proof of what you say, Sir."

Nameless smiled a cold, little smile. "Event the second." A different spectacle this time. "That same boy goes up against a student considerably more capable than he, with a quirk that he is weak against no less, and all but triumphs."

His battle against Bakugo, a fight both the boy's mentors remembered better than they would have liked.

"Third, and this one is by no means minor," security footage from the USJ. Bits of Midoriya's battle in the inferno zone played alongside his fight with the Nomu, "combating real villains while significantly disadvantaged, poisoned, and then fighting a beast meant to kill The Symbol of Peace to a draw after only one previous engagement in combat that we have just reviewed."

By this point Vanessa was starting to feel her stomach twist, and Aizawa wasn't faring much better. Again, they exchanged a look and it was far more dire than the last.

"Fourth." A recap of the Sports Festival, Midoriya's fight with Todoroki. "After a paltry two weeks under your tutelage, he confronts a boy trained from the moment his quirk had manifest by the country's second greatest hero and would have won."
From his corner, Endeavor growled, but Nameless's awed and sever tone as he spoke had left no room for a second assessment. With great reluctance, the others had already begun to concede.

"Last is, by far, the most indicative of your species potential." Clips of the fight with All For One, "though far less impressive on the boy's part in appearance, consider the context:" again, he raised an index finger. "Fifteen days, was it? Fifteen days of constant sleeplessness, intermittent torture and starvation." He pointed to the screen. "Yet still he continues to fight and even hold his own well enough to protect those around him at times."

Tired of this, and feeling a bit pained from being reminded of her uselessness during the battle, Vanessa snapped. "Your point?"

Whirling about, Nameless's finger stopped millimeters from her nose. "That you are ignorant of your potential! Personal or otherwise, child!" Eyes glazed with anger, his shaky hand went back to his side. "I wonder... were you so bogged down by preconceptions or the weight of what you have endured, how capable would you be?" Vanessa blinked, her jaw dropping by only a hair, but drop it did. "Free to explore his own limits, to push himself as hard as he pleased, and that boy, that foolish child..." Nameless shook his head, releasing an exasperated sigh. "Well, he is already considerable."

"...You forgot one detail." Aizawa breathed, and all eyes turned to him. "The circumstances of that last battle, of the time he was missing?"

Aizawa was almost smirking. "Midoriya didn't turn anyone."

Nameless seemed to be given serious pause by that, his eyes narrowing and head tilting back a touch as he realized the younger man had a point.

Still, there was something in his face that spoke of another realization he'd yet to voice. "Your worst fears have been all but refuted. He's adamant that not another soul, least of all ones so vile as his captors, be turned." Vanessa gave him small smile, nodding as she did. "Honestly, sir? He's not anything you need to concern yourself with. He's already proven that."

With a click of his tongue, Nameless finally gave voice to what Aizawa had unintentionally revealed. "So you do play favorites with your students after all."

All appearance of victory vanished from the hunter's face, replaced by quiet, confused and subtle worry.

"No..." Nameless rubbed at his chin. "It's not that simple, is it?" Aizawa gulped and Nameless smiled. "Your old guilt, mingled with being the one to coach him through his survival... that mixture brought about something more than a favorite, didn't it?" As the CEO grinned, Aizawa's fingers clenched again. "You care about that boy."

It wasn't a question, and phrasing as such would have been an insult to the obvious. When Midoriya had been captured, his own student had to reign in his feelings of powerless rage, frustration at Izuku being in the hands of monsters. Imagining what was happening to him, thinking of one worst case scenario after the other, had pushed him to brutalize more than a few petty criminals.

That aside, he had more personal evidence of his own feelings...

Resisting the urge to hug the kid after I found out he had PTSD... In the hospital too...

"I actually wanted kids once... a long time ago now."
He had to look away. Having his own feelings pointed out like that, by him no less, was too much. Shame, self consciousness and no small amount of guilty regret gnawed at him, and so he remained silent.

In reply, Nameless smirked. "Well... I can't fault you for being human." Casting a look to Vanessa, the vampire just rolled her eyes. "In any event, this is all rather off topic, but the rest can be said very quickly." Eyes narrowing, he stepped forward, gaze boring into the soul of his favorite pawn. "Any remnants of All For One's followers and the Yakuza must be eliminated."

Over in his corner, Endeavor smiled.

Aizawa and Vanessa exchanged another weary look, before the vampire spoke. "All For One is gone." Nameless gave a dark little smirk. "The Yakuza have been an incredibly minor threat up until very recently. The only consequential action they've taken has been the creation of that serum, and it doesn't erase quirks permanently."

Nameless just laughed, quietly. "No, but don't you think it's supposed to?"

Crossing her arms, Vanessa shifted her weight to her other leg. "I would assume as much, yes."

Clearing his throat uncertainly, Aizawa added. "Additionally, Midoriya's testimony stated that their numbers were exceedingly few. The Yakuza have been reduced to practically nothing, thanks to All For One's attempt at a prison break."

"True," Nameless nodded, "but the brains of the operation, the leader, remains."

Expression gone dire, Vanessa murmured his name. "Overhaul..." Then, her expression shifted to one of wary curiosity. "...What does this have to do with the shroud?"

Nameless sighed. "Isn't it obvious?" and he turned on his heels toward the glass window, walking back over too it. "I want Overhaul and his associates dealt with before construction is complete."

Reaching for the bottle, he poured himself another glass of wine and with a click of his fingers, Endeavor stood up. "See them out, would you?"

Endeavor nodded. "This way." He said, as he lumbered out of the room, the other two following closely.

In a moment that surprised them both, Vanessa turned a concerned eye to her companion. "Did he scare you?"

Aizawa scoffed. "He always does these days..." Hands to his pockets, he glowered at the ground as they walked quietly behind Nameless's new favorite right-hand-man.

Vanessa shrugged. "You should know by now how quick he is to pick up even on the smallest details. Does this really come as a shock?"

At that, he just shook his head. "I'm not surprised that he knew..." Eyes back ahead of them, he murmured one thing more. "I'm... not happy that he was right."

In spite of their history, and herself, Vanessa released a tired, little sigh. "It pains me to admit it, but that boy needs every person in his corner that he can get." The hunter by her side quirked an eyebrow at her, and she wasted no time with her reply. "So long as you keep him safe, who gives a damn how you feel about him?"

Aizawa grumbled under his breath, immediately reaching for his hip flask and draining it in one go.
"My sense of professionalism, my distaste for irrationality." Shaking his head at himself, the flask went back to his pocket. "It's not relevant to anything immediately or eventually concerning either."

Snorting, almost laughing, Vanessa rolled her eyes. "You know... I'm not at all surprised that you're thinking that way, Aizawa." You always were as cold as they got. After everything involving you and my kind, it's no surprise that wouldn't change at all.

Chains rattling...

Scraping of a metal chair against the floor, his body thrown against it by hands with strength he no longer possessed...

Icy fingers touched his skin, the world exploded in a firework of agony, his body bursting, his every seam tearing asunder at the man's touch...

A slight cough, echoing under the leather and metal plague mask...

Skin unraveled like a shattering stone, blood cascading like the raining sparks of a faulty power line as his tissue hurled itself back into the proper place...

Veins up the side of his captor's neck turned black, skin growing paler and a thin layer of murky sweat lined his brow...

"Impressive."

Another touch of the cold digits, his body ripped to shreds as though by a billion, infinitesimal razor wires, only to cobble back to its original shape...

Pale hands remained pure, unscathed as his body seemed to sicken...

A trick of the light made it look as though their very existence flickered and his captor's cough rattled with the weight of fluids in his throat...

"Your abilities show promise, little vampire."

Over and over, and over again... moments stretching into days, then the days blurring into a span a time he could no longer grip... His body was relentlessly, ruthlessly subjected to being dematerialized by the man's simple touch, only for his healing factor to put everything back like it never happened...

"I wonder... does your body hold the cure to this worlds greatest ailment?"

Fingers ghosted over his face and soon skin, muscles, tendons, nerves and the barest trace of fat spread open in a splash, a misty spray of gore. Bare as the bones of his skull had become, he screamed anyways, and the cold fingers kept right on ruining his flesh...

"In death, you were serve the world greater than any 'hero' before..."

At the utterance of those words, the chill running down his sleeping spine, Izuku's eyes tore open. Shaking and sweating, his lungs seemed intent on breathing as fast and hard as they could while his heart was galloping toward a pace equivalent to an escape velocity. Unsteady legs swung over the side of the bed, and he almost fell, forgetting about his limp.

He didn't care.
Hobbling into his bathroom, filling a cup with water, he splashed his face, again and again. Panting, hands on the sides of the sink, he just stood there, waiting for his body to calm. Slowly, as his breathing returned to a slow, steady pace, he chanced a look at himself in the mirror. Same white hair, same blackened and glowing eyes, same faint remains of burn scars on his skin.

A nightmare about something real... Something that actually happened... something without abstract...

Sighing harshly, he slumped his head forward, eyes drooping closed as his forehead thumped against the mirror. Raising his hands, palms against the mirror, his fingers curled until his nails dug into the skin of his palms.

I almost miss the ones from when I was first turned...

Grabbing a towel, he rubbed the water from his face and started back toward his bed. On the table, by his bedside, his phone had activated, the screen shining brightly with a notification awaiting his attention.

Naturally, someone had sent him a text.

Kyo: You feeling okay?

Izuku blinked, staring at the screen for a moment before he started typing.

Izu: How’d you know I was up?

Kyo: I could hear you moving around, and how freaked out you were.

Izu: okay... why were you listening closely enough that you could hear me?

Kyo: I wasn't. I just can't sleep, damn earmuffs keep falling off. Woke up when I heard you stomping around.

Izu: I wasn't stomping...

Kyo: With ears like mine, it might as well have been.

Izu: You sure you're not exaggerating?

Kyo: omg, okay, lie back in bed and just relax completely. Don't focus on how much you do or don't hear.

Sighing, he did as he was told, phone on his chest as he waited. Outside, a gentle wind rustled through the remaining leaves on the trees. Rain pattered against the windows, the walls and roof. After a few minutes, when he almost thought he was going to fall asleep, it happened. Through all the soft, rhythmic beating of heartbeats and breaths of his slumbering classmates, he heard it: A sound like a thunderclap, something slamming into the floor so loudly his actually bolted upright.

Izu: What the hell was that?

Kyo: Now do you believe me?

Izu: Yes, what was that?

Kyo: *sigh* I dropped Moosin on the floor.
Izu: ...

Kyo: What?

Izu: "Moosin"?

Kyo: My plushie. A stuffed moose.

Izu: "Moosin"?

Kyo: Yes. Moosin. The moose with the quirk of being the best moose. Happy now?

Izu: Yes.

He really was, so much so -in fact- that he was trying and failing not to laugh.

Kyo: Grrrrrr... I can hear you...

Izu: Sorry, sorry. ^^, I just... wasn't expecting that from you

Kyo: I got him when I was three, okay?

Lying on his back, looking up at his phone, the vampire was grinning like a loon, his thumbs typing away.

Izu: I'm not judging. You saw my room, how can I?

He almost didn't believe he'd spent the last two weeks living inside that waking nightmare. Truth be told, he'd been trying not to admit how much it still had him rattled. Overhaul was still out there.

Kyo: If I say "good point" will you feel hurt?

The man who'd had Eri in his clutches for lord knew how long. The man who'd subjected Izuku to a realm of pain unlike any he'd previously known.

Izu: Not really. I know it's a bit much...

That same man who, no matter how he looked at it, had undoubtedly done what he'd done to him to Eri at one or multiple points.

Kyo: Sorry, handsome.

Of course, focusing on any one thought was difficult with constant mood whiplash...

Izu: Liar...

Kyo: Hush. You know I like how you look.

Ah right, it was a bit warm in his room, wasn't it? Probably should've turned the thermostat off when he'd wandered in.

Izu: I didn't mean about that. You're not sorry.

Kyo: Well, you did laugh at the world's best moose. That warrants retribution.

Izu: You know we're never gonna get to sleep at this rate.
Kyo: you think so?

Izu: yeah. staring at a bright screen, it keeps your brain in 'awake mode', you don’t get tired.

Kyo: "Awake mode"?

Izu: I'm still really, really tired... I can't remember the science right now.

Kyo: Should I let you sleep?

Izu: we should both sleep.

Kyo: shame... I was enjoying your company.

Izu: It's true we haven't really had a chance to talk or anything since... that night.

Kyo: That night was both incredibly awkward and kinda the best.

Izu: Sorry to cut this short, Kyoka.

Kyo: pity there's not a solution where we can still talk without the phones being involved.

He was about to type out his reply when his thumbs abruptly stopped moving. Blinking, once or twice, he stared at that last sentence, pondering over the implication. Whether she’d meant it or not, the idea was still in his head. Even over the text, he could hear the sarcasm on her voice, as he read it over again. Gulping, a little red and nervous, he shifted about on his bed, feeling squirrely as he typed.

Izu: We're in the same building. We could just as easily talk in person.

Kyo: Don't we need sleep?

Okay, he was starting to get even more nervous now. How the hell was he supposed to tell what she meant over text? Or rather, how she meant that. Tone, body language is everything in conversation. Even a phrase so genuine hostile as 'fuck you' took on an entirely different meaning if you said it a certain way, tone, facial expression, movements all giving it a different context.

One he was desperately trying not to think about.

Izu: Obviously, yeah.

Kyo: Kinda like 'that night', right?

He gulped.

Izu: Exactly.

Kyo: Izuku?

Hesitating, eyes off to the side for a second, he was slow to respond.

Izu: Yeah?

Kyo: Get over here?

No more dancing around it now.
Grabbing his bathrobe, dropping his phone into the pocket as he draped it over his shoulders, he carefully left his room. Even with an uncooperative leg, limping as he was, Izuku was the about quietest person on earth when he wanted to be. Just a simple, silent stroll up the stairs to her room. When he arrived, he was pleasantly surprised to see her peeking through her open door.

Bashfully, the vampire smiled. "Heard me coming?"

She was not so bashful as she smiled. "Miles away."

Once he was across the threshold of her room, her arms were around him, holding him tight. With some mild contortion of his back, he managed to lean far enough forward, and into, the room while still standing upright to avoid the door scraping his back as he closed it. Only then did he return the embrace, his face smushing against her hair. When she hummed, almost purred, with his arms around her, his heart skipped a beat.

One of her hands reached up, dragging fingernails along his scalp. "We need more of this, in our lives."

Nodding, his cheek mussed up her purple locks a bit as he closed his eyes. "Yeah..."

Just a little time passed, with them standing there like that, before she cleared her throat, backing away with a slight blush. He almost apologized when she took his hand, leading him over to her bed. As he lay down beside her, she gave him some earbuds which she plugged into her phone along with a set of her own. If anyone was to have an adapter for multiple earphone jacks on their phone, it would be her.

"What are we listening to?" He asked as she nestled in, snuggling right up to him, her head on his shoulder.

His suspicions, nerves really, had been completely wrong. Just cuddling and sleep, one thing he didn't know he needed until he was in the middle of it. Not that he minded, of course, he was so far passed exhausted his own healing factor couldn't keep up anymore. The act of staying awake past the point of needing sleep takes a toll on the body, with long term affects one would shudder to consider. Izuku's body, though different, experienced the same effects, even though his healing factor worked around the clock to mitigate them.

She pulled the covers up over them, thumb ready and waiting to start the music. "Ever heard of 'delta wave' music?"

He shrugged. "Never listened to it, no."

"Then tonight will be a first. It'll help you fall and stay asleep." As her thumb pressed play, she set the phone aside and put her arm over him. "Goodnight, Izuku..."

"Goodnight, Kyoka..."

Neither of them were very sure if this constituted as 'moving fast' in a relationship. Little did they know, there was no exact answer to that question. Different people, different preferences, speeds and feelings. As it is with all things human, 'according to the individuals involved' was the only way to operate. Seeing how neither of them felt awkward or silly or uncomfortable, it seemed a natural turn of events even if others might not have agreed.

Plus, what sane person would turn down snuggling someone they loved? There truly isn't a feeling...
on this earth, like falling asleep in the arms of one such person.

To Kyoka's delight, it was only moments before Izuku was asleep. Even through the earbuds, her head resting on his shoulder, she could hear the soothing, dulcet rhythm of his heartbeat.

It wasn't long before she was floating after him, fast asleep.

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Pristine, cold, shiny and new. The mask in his hands had a weight his young fingers hadn't expected. While it complimented his costume armor, and collection of blades perfectly. While he held it, looking into it, he saw that his own face reflected off its surface, distorted yet clear. It was as he was sitting there, eyeing it over, that the sound of one of others cleaning his weapons caught his attention. The man who was constantly wearing that odd bodysuit, covered from head to toe, was reassembling a gun.

He never knew why, but at that moment, the man's gas mask caught his eye; the man cleaning his gun took notice of this. "What is it?"

Startled, but only mildly, Stendhal was slow to respond. "...Why do you wear that mask, that outfit all the time?"

Through the lenses of the mask, Stendhal saw him blink. "Why do you look to wear that one?"

It took him only a moment that time. "So that people don't see my face."

The man nodded. "There it is." And he turned back to his work. "A mask's sole purpose is to shield one's true face from view. Because they are afraid of being seen. Rather obvious, no?"

This answer, when the young man considered the suit, seemed insufficient. "You have another reason."

Setting aside the weapon, he sighed. "Yes, child. I do." Slowly, he turned toward the younger one. "I wear this mask because the face beneath is far less pleasant to look at."

"I understand."

The man smiled. "Do you?"

... Monday, August 13th, 2255

A crash of thunder ripped him from his dream, and Stendhal almost fell off the couch he'd been sleeping on. His breathing was heavy, and it took him a few seconds to realize where he was. In the apartment above Twist and Sparky's nightclub, having passed out on the couch.

"Morning, sunshine." Stendhal almost smiled hearing Sparky chirp the nicety aloud. "Sleep well?"

Groaning, the dhampire righted himself, stretching his neck. "How long was I out?"

Spatky shrugged, not bothering to look up from his computer. "Long enough that it's now tomorrow." Then, over his shoulder, he gave an apologetic smile. "Promise not to get mad if I found next to nothing?"

With a sigh, Stendhal was slow to squeeze his eyes shut. "Yep."
"Marvy, fab, far out." He gave a thumbs up and a nervous laugh. "Cuz I've got nothing."

In another part of the room, sitting against the wall, was Twist. "Burned the midnight oil for nothing?"

Sparky gave another shrug. "Well, if you call confirming that every record of Eri's family ever existing has been deleted, expunged or just plain destroyed as 'for nothing'." He gave her a smile. "Sometimes nothing ain't nothing."

Twist almost looked like she'd gone a little pale. "Every record of them?"

"Enough that this looks to be some sorta coverup." Sparky nodded, turning back to his computer. "That said, if I had Eri's full name to work with, maybe I could track em down. But as it stands? All I've got is that the house I sent you guys to has no recorded owner for a good... seven years."

That bit of information gave Stendhal pause. "Wait... you know when they living there based on that?"

Twist's turn to shrug. "Seems a set bet, based on the present lack-of-evidence-evidence."

Stendhal grinned his wicked, unhinged grin. "Can you track down any of their neighbors?"

Nodding approvingly, Twist smirked. "You wanna ask them about the family."

Sparky smiled too. "Now that's using the old noodles." His fingers set to typing, though this was all a matter of public record, so his talent for hacking wasn't necessary this time around. "Okay... I've got a couple of folks in the city." Taking a pen, he scrawled down a pair of addresses before handing the paper to Twist. "Don't get into trouble?"

Laughing, she leaned down and kissed him. "I won't, dear." Then she turned to Stendhal. "Ready?"

"And raring." Standing up, he slung his sword over his shoulder. "Let's meet the neighbors."
Can't Say Goodbye to Yesterday

"I stare at the stars and the sky up above
and think 'what am I made of?"

Am I full of sorrow? Am I hurt and pained?
Or am I filled... with love?

I walk by myself on the streets below
and ask every child I know,

'Do you think tomorrow will bring sun or rain?
Which one of these will show?'"

Hey... why are you eating so slowly?

Chizome chuckled morosely. "I'm savoring it. I don't know the next time I'll have actual food again."

Actual food? What do you usually eat?

At that, Chizome gave him a guarded, studying look. "You ever have to fight stray dogs?" Slowly, Toya shook his head, uncertain how this related to the question he'd just asked. "I have... to get at garbage that's technically still food. Restaurant dumpsters, the like... the dogs usually find the best of it, what's still edible, but it's never very good."

Dabi remembered it all too well. In the months that followed running away from home, covered in rotten, moldy bandages stained with blood and pus, he'd had to do much the same. Without Chizome's strength, without his speed and agility, a pack of dogs was a considerable threat. Hell, he'd nearly been eaten more times than he cared to have the nightmares about, were it not for his quirk; a quirk that, at the time, had only kept his wounds raw as the dressings over his skin continued to rot.

It doesn't sound like it would be...

Pain from a dog bite wasn't the jagged, slobbering maw full of needles that Dabi had expected. A dog's teeth, compared to other predators, were not very sharp. Just pointed enough that the sheer strength of the animal's jaws got the job done, and savagely so at that. Jaw muscles, throat muscles working in tandem to shake and tear flesh and bone asunder. What use is a sharp, needle-like fang with such capability at one's disposal?

"Wanna know something crazy?"

What?

Chizome just smiled. "I don't regret it, not one second of it, running away from home."

Heh... I can't even imagine.

When he'd run away from home, leaving Endeavor and his little brother behind, it had served to twist his heart beyond the point he thought it would survive. Fleeing home meant he would be safe, but Shoto...
His baby brother...

Dad, I can't-

"Yes you can."

Shoto tugged at their father's sleeve, that hero costume he wore all the time. "Daddy, please. He can't handle it!"

Endeavor's fist cuffed the little one's shoulder so hard he spun around, clattering to the floor. "Yes he can. Yes he will."

Don't hit him you fucker!

He remembered what it was like, being struck by that man. The way his ribs always threatened to crack, the bruises lurking under his clothes. Endeavor was always sure to strike an area that had to be obscured by clothing. His spine, his abdomen, his hip; anywhere cloth would always cover.

At that moment, he'd lost his temper enough to hit Dabi so hard he broke his nose.

As his enemy snarled at him, he saw the reflection of himself in the man's eyes. "Boy, you will keep a civil tongue in that mouth or I will sew it shut." Blue light flickered in the room, Toya's body wreathed in flame.

He remembered, that at the sight of him, Endeavor backed away. It was only for a moment, just one, sweet moment, Toya saw fright on the old man's features. Seeing his son, his body glowing with a fire stronger than that of his own quirk was shocking, daunting even. Small as the child was, there was rage in his eyes, rage Dabi still remembered. A rage that Dabi still felt burning in his bones.

Touch him again and I FLAY YOU ALIVE!

If there was thing Dabi remembered about Endeavor, one thing he hated more than anything else, it was his grin. A toothy, broad and coolly malicious grin. It was the grin he wore when his guard slipped, putting a twinkle in his eyes as he'd pull back his fist for another strike.

He wore it plain as day, that night, as he put the heel of his boot on Shoto's little throat.

"It's not enough to mimic me, boy." Shoto gagged, Endeavor ground his heel in as his son looked up him, a desperate plea in his eyes. "You can match my stance, match my literal fire, spot for spot." He gestured to his older son's body, the flames crackling over the same places as his own. "But can you really beat me, as you are?"

Memories can be a fickle thing. Clear one moment, foggy another, and it's never the things you want to remember that stay so clear.

Wolves in the valley, if one were to remember the metaphor.

Dabi didn't remember the fight very well, if it could even have been called such, he just remembered the pain. Throwing his body as hard as he could at his brute of a father, hurling one torrent of flame after the other at the man's body. A lifetime of practice had made him all but impervious to flame, his own or otherwise. As for the pain Dabi felt, genetics and only a sliver of that same practice would never be so kind to him.

That poor child had the misfortune of inheriting his mother's skin, but a stronger version of his
father's quirk. His mother, as history went, was an ice quirk wielder. Dabi couldn't use his quirk, almost at all, without risking serious harm to himself and serious harm befell him that night.

Searing, nearly literally blinding pain had the lad screaming louder than his vocal chords could tolerate. His voice tore, shredding itself raw as he hollered, skin bubbling and melting as blood seeped from his crispy, blackened flesh. He fell, writhing, twisting in agony so severe his vision went white as he rasped with tears and blood flowing freely from his eyes.

Endeavor merely stood over him, and ground his boot into Dabi's bleeding, skinless throat.

"Remember your roots, boy. Remember your capabilities, all that made you and yourself, and you will know the outcome of all you may attempt. Remember them, and never suffer another moment such as this."

All he remembered after that was Shoto's horror, staring at his wounded brother, then his begging. Begging Endeavor not to hurt Toya any more, to leave Toya alone. Then Dabi woke up in the hospital, some weeks later.

The rest, as they say, is history. He ran, not bothering to wait for his injuries to heal -the rash bravado of one so young and angry- and never looked back. At the time, he made a vow to save his brother, to go back one day and free him from that life with Endeavor. It was a vow he would one day realize was only made to make sleeping easier. Really, when he'd fled, Toya Todoroki was just a scared kid, running from a father who now had the son he really wanted. His place in the world wasn't there, it never was nor would be.

When he met Overhaul, the young man not much older than him, and he'd offered to stitch him back together, how could he say no?

But that was the past, and in the present Muscular was the one reeling from the pain of Overhaul's quirk being used on him. Like ten years ago, it was to help the one he'd subjected to that pain, to try and put the brute back together.

Blood speckled on the old, dusty floor, each splattering was preempted by one in a series of ragged, wet coughs. One man, Dabi, stood in the doorway, watching with some morbid curiosity and worry as his boss tried not to asphyxiate in his own lungs. Shaky on his legs, hand on his knee his other, untouched and clean, clung to the wall as he struggled to breathe.

His other subordinate, Muscular was shell shocked from the pain his nerves were still screaming about. It was a pain Dabi knew very well, from long ago now... Much like this night, it had been raining then too.

The result was not what either he or Muscular had expected. His back had been put back together, a mess of rubbery scar tissue, stretched over the bones of his spine and rib cage along with the muscles. There was no sight of the slots where muscle tissue had spouted from, the source of his super strength.

"What do you mean you couldn't save it!?" Muscular fumed, his snarl pulling Dabi from his recollections.

Overhaul was still short of breath, gasping as he slumped his shoulder up against the wall. "You lost it all in that fight," Overhaul breathed, "that kid's claws shredded everything. There was nothing left of it to salvage." Muscular just stared at him, his expression going soft, nearly vacant and sad. Bags eyes looked as though they were made of dead flesh, purple and reflecting light, much like Dabi's. "All I could do was fix your musculature."
Numbly, Muscular nodded, slow to climb to his feet as he just left the room leaving Dabi to fill the silence. "Not sure how useful he'll be." Overhaul staggered over to a chair, dropping himself into it. "Or you, in that condition." Putting his mask back on, Overhaul gave him an almost offended look but Dabi was unperturbed. "You've been spreading yourself too thin, Kai."

Shrugging, his shoulders moving as though they'd been weighted with lead, Overhaul sighed. "We need everyone as healthy as we can have them. Our numbers are too few for the operations ahead with anything less."

Dabi nodded, looking off toward the small cot that Seether was trying to sleep on. "Then I guess we'll have to go out recruiting."

Seether laughed, sitting upright and looking at them both from behind his mask. "Really now? And what foolish soul would want to enlist with us, hmm?" Dabi rolled his eyes, waiting patiently for Seether to finish. "The cause we're fighting for now is suicide or worse, depending on your point of view. No one raised in this society would think anything else."

"Quirks are a disease." Overhaul said with narrow eyes, eyes that had no visible effect on Seether. "We need to cure-"

Seether laughed. "Cure quirks? With what, a serum that doesn't work?"

"Not permanently." Dabi cut in, voice level and quiet. "Not yet."

The former professional's eyes remained sharp as they turned to Dabi, taking a moment to collect his thoughts. "Even if we succeed at perfecting it, our entire society is built around quirks. Next to no one would help us or even let us do anything that drastic."

Overhaul started cackling under his breath, shaking his head. "Yeah... that's the point." Seether's brow furrowed, giving the Yakuza Boss a searching glance. "Society has embraced a plague, a disease that has changed us all down to our DNA. Even those with salvation, immunity to it, the quirkless carry it with them. Their children can still pass quirks on to the youth of the future."

Seether took a moment to consider what he'd just heard, blinking slowly. "You're speaking literally?" Overhaul sighed, exchanging a weary look with Dabi. "What evidence do you have that quirks are an illness?"

The Yakuza boss chuckled. "Do you know the definition of a successful virus?" Dabi sighed, face in his palm as Seether shook his head, bracing to hear the shpeel once again. "A successful virus doesn't make its host sick, doesn't kill it. It forms a symbiotic relationship with the infected. A virus that kills its host, kills the thing that keeps it alive. Over time, as our species evolved alongside this Quirk virus, it adapted to more and more of us. Making itself a benefit, in most cases. Most."

Overhaul stood up, pacing to the wall and inspecting the dirty, dusty surface. "I met a man once who's quirk made him shoot thirty feet into the air every time he sneezed. You should have seen his legs, his bones had been broken so many times it was a miracle he wasn't more deformed."

Slow to respond, Seether simply nodded. "If this is our main objective now, what about the mission set for us by All For One? Are even planning to do anything about the things he warned us about?"

Overhaul shrugged. "Once we cure the world of quirks, it won't really matter."

This time, it was Dabi who interjected. "You're forgetting about the 'Prophet System'. " He said,
crossing his arms, looking a very tired Overhaul in the eyes. "Even with quirks out the picture I don't like that thing existing, especially not in the hands of the powers that be."

Smiling, Overhaul walked over to his friend and patted him on the shoulder. "One thing at a time."
And he walked through the doorway passed him. "Rest up. We resume operations in a few hours, once Mooney and Muscular have had a chance to rest."

Standing up, Seether walked over to Dabi, watching as their boss walked away. "In either case, no matter what we do, we need more men and a better hideout than this shambling ruin."

"Yup..." Dabi agreed quietly, dusting off the shoulder that Overhaul had touched.

Noticing his blase demeanor, Seether sighed. "Am I the only one who gives a damn if we survive this?" Dabi just rolled his eyes. "I'm not here to fight the good fight, I'm here because I need to eat."

Turning to him, Dabi chuckled. "Says the man who brought up All For One's crusade." Seether crossed his arms, shifting his weight to his other leg and averting his gaze. "You're not very good at appearing to be the hard-ass you try to." Then Dabi grinned. "You still wanna be a hero."

Through the goggles, Dabi could see him glaring as his head slowly swiveled back. "Heroes are nothing more than a club of corrupt cops daylighting as movie stars. I'd appreciate it if you would refrain from lumping me in with them."

Shrugging, Dabi patted his shoulder. "Relax, Seether. If all goes to plan today, we should have some folks lining up to follow us before long." At that Dabi started walking off to find Mooney.

Outside, on the roof again, he saw the creature sitting out in the rain, gazing out at the city as the thunderstorm rumbled above them. A lightning bolt went down, a bright flash of white before a deafening boom shook them and the building. Off in the distance, all around them, lights started going off. First power outage of many to come, or so he assumed. Walking over to Mooney, he tapped his shoulder and the beast looked at him quizzically, blinking once or twice.

"Come on," Dabi gestured indoors, "we've got work to do soon, you should eat something before then."

Slowly the creature nodded and stood up, lumbering inside on all fours, still moving about like a gorilla.

Sighing, Dabi looked out at the city and listened as he watched. Car horns, screeching tires, screaming, yelling. Sounds of violence for a second or two before it was all over. Even from where he stood, so far away, he saw more broken windows on the smaller buildings than he was used to, out in the seedier neighborhoods. When some brute of a man with blades sticking out of his elbows jumped and mugged a man, Dabi just watched.

It had only been three days...

Shaking his head, hands to his pockets, Dabi started back for indoors. Now wasn't the time be worrying after the state of the world like the hero he obviously wasn't. Now was the time to get ready for work.

Loose bits of trash, paper, plastic and anything light enough to be kicked up by the wind scuttled about the grimy street. Whenever they thought they might have seen a rat, Stendhal bared his teeth, scowling menacingly at them.
That's right, run. His flaring temper roared silently, as the yelling was purely inside his head. Flee before I eat the rest of you vulturous vermin.

It was, perhaps, within everyone's best interests that this bit of derision went unheard; the story behind its origin involved a nasty leg wound, a lack of shelter and hiding from the police in an abandoned building. Well, what the young man had assumed to be an, abandoned building. Any shelter unused by humans will find itself housing all manner of other occupant, flesh crazed rats for one, random, unrelated example.

'Eat or be eaten', as the old saying goes...

"This is the place." Twist frowned, looking up at what might have been an apartment building once. Having been neglected by the owners and all others, it had fallen into disrepair. "Jeez..." She rubbed the back of her head, "from the state of this place I wouldn't be surprised if the ivy is what's holding it together..."

Casting a last scathing look at the rats, Stendhal cleared his throat. "I'm inclined to agree... hard to believe anyone lives here anymore."

Sighing, Twist started for the door. "There'd better be, this is last lead we have anymore."

With a round of grumbling, Stendhal went for the radio and chimed Sparky. "You find anything else yet?"

Not that either of them heard, but at the other end of the line Sparky laughed bitterly at being addressed so brusquely. "I'm doing fine, thanks for asking." Stendhal rolled his eyes while Twist gave a nasty look, hand on one hip. As Stendhal suddenly felt sheepish, Sparky chimed back in with more to say. "Currently still digging, I'll let you know when or if I turn anything up."

As Stendhal put the radio back on his belt, Twist flicked his nose. "Don't be so rude to him." She said with a glare, "Neither of us have to be here, you know. We're helping you because it's right, cuz we want to."

Rubbing his nose, Stendhal nodded. "I'll apologize to him later," and he started walking up the steps, "I've let this case drag on for too long as it is and I'm running out of time." Then he sighed, looking out a window at the rest of the city. "Plus... who knows where the monsters that held her captive are lurking, or when they'll try and snatch her away again?"

Grimly, Twist inclined her head a slight bit, eyes at that same window. "Considering no one's reported him turned in? No one who should." Lights flickered for just a few seconds, teasing that they might stay as they were, but ultimately went dark. "Great..." she muttered, reaching into her pocket for a small flashlight.

Stendhal sighed. "You still have signal?" As he reached the top of the stairs.

Twist shrugged and pulled her cellphone from her pocket, moments before she shook her head. "You?"

"I barely use my phone, I've got data if nothing else." Eyes searching down the hall, he started scanning for the apartment their would-be-informant occupied.

Rule number one from the old days, never go anywhere without some way of calling for help; even if that somewhere was 'home'.

Nodding, Twist followed after him when he found their destination. "Think he'll talk?"
He didn't answer, opting instead to knock on the door and find out rather than speculate. "He'd best."

They only had to wait a few moments, some stirring and shuffling about behind the door later and there was a small man answering the door. Standing at a humble height of five foot three and with sparsely any of his hair, he looked at them curiously with wrinkled skin around his eyes. "Good morning?"

Twist smiled, bowing politely. "Good morning sir," by her side, though more awkwardly, Stendhal did the same, "we were hoping to ask you a few questions."

Smiling, bowing in kind, the man laughed through weathered vocal chords, quite and raspy. "I see. Well, why don't you youngsters come inside then? I'll make some tea."

Nodding, Twist turned to Stendhal, a hopeful glimmer in her eyes.

Stendhal just shrugged. "Well, off to a good start."

"Better than the door being slammed in our faces again." She tried to laugh away the memories of earlier that morning, but it didn't really work. If anything she just reminded him how rude and utterly tight lipped the others had been.

As they followed the man inside, worried he might topple over as his wobbling knees carried him forward, Stendhal looked at the apartment's decor. Stacks of books with thready spines, string and bits of fuzz sticking every which way as dust layered on a few of them. Furniture with faded color, sagging and creaking with the weight of their burdens, much like the old floor they rested upon. As he looked about further, he thought he heard Twist introduce herself, her real name, not that Stendhal needed it. He had her true name, and that had always suited them both just fine.

Pictures with faded color, photographs from decades past lined the walls and tops of bookcases. Some had people that looked vaguely like the man in them, others did not. One was of a man who looked like their host, only with more hair on his head and less wrinkles in his skin. By his side was a man dressed as he, in a lab coat and a sweater, grinning wide with teeth that seemed inhumanly long while the man laughed. By the grinning man's side was a far younger one, a boy with cold, golden eyes and short, shaggy, auburn hair. Something about his abnormal teeth and those gold eyes on the younger one... somehow looked familiar to Stendhal.

Names were written on the photo's frame: 'Tobo, R.J. and Kai'.

Laughing by his side interrupted his quiet observations. "That's just me an a pair of old friends." Stendhal looked to see the man smiling by side, a lit candle in hand. "R.J. and I, we went on to work together at the same company, for a time. The boy, Kai, he went on to other things, bigger things I'm sure." His eyebrows arched in such a way that hinted at a long forgotten sad longing, missing a friend not heard from in too long a time. "Haven't heard from them in over a decade now," shaking his head, batting a hand at the air, the sadness vanished from his face. "But enough of that. You two had questions, and the tea is nearly ready."

A small nod and Stendhal followed him to the dining room, which was also the kitchen. "What did you and your friend do at that company?"

"Oh, just some computer work, here and there. Nothing a young pair heroes such as yourselves would take much interest in, I assure you."

As Stendhal claimed a seat at the table, fingers folded and nose resting on them as his elbows
propped up on the table, Twist smiled. "You'd be surprised, but you're right: we came here to ask you about something else."

The old man, Tobo, laughed. "Oh? Perhaps you'll have to tell me what sort of mischief you've gotten up to with those dreaded machines later then." Pouring them their tea, he took a seat at the little, round table with them.

It almost seemed rude, cruel even, to delve into the topic they were about to when they considered the man before them. So joyous was he, to have guests to his humble home that neither former vigilante guessed he'd had many, over the years he'd lived here. He'd lived a long, lonely life, here in his home. Stendhal's eyes turned to the walls of the kitchen, finding little adorning them. Still, one bit of the man's past hung on the wall, just between a pair of doors. A certificate with a gold seal, "For outstanding achievement in Algorithmic Modeling in Deterministic Chaos".

*Hmm...*

"Indeed," Twist's gentle speech brought Stendhal, however reluctantly, back to the conversation at hand, "In short, we'd like to know about your neighbors. One family in particular, who you lived near about five years ago."

It took a moment for the confusion to slip away, but slowly -very slowly- it was replaced with an all too serious dread. Stendhal's eyes fixed on Tobo's face, going over every wrinkle and flutter of movement as if some secret were there in the features of his face. The old man's eyes shone, flickering with the candle light as he exhaled a tense bit of air.

"It might help," his wheezy vocal chords managed, "if I heard a name?"

Understanding the stress this might be causing the old man, Twists smile adopted a more sympathetic appearance. "That's what we're looking to find ourselves." The old man swallowed, his eyes off to one side for just a moment; a moment Stendhal was scrutinizing in his mind. "All we know is that they had a daughter... a daughter named Eri."

The flicker of an expression that flashed on Tobo's face was enough to convince Stendhal that he knew. Tobo knew the family and their mere mention had filled him with enough dread that he'd been completely unable to hide it. "The daughter was captured by the Yakuza." At Stendhal's sudden vocalization, the old man turned to him, horrified. "We're trying to solve her case, figure out exactly what happened to her after she was taken."

As the words hung in the air, heavy and oppressive over their heads, Tobo stared at the table. For a long time, as he sat there, wondering, blinking, Stendhal just stared at him while Twist sipped patently at her tea. Behind those old and shining eyes a story danced, with movements, details left a cloudy mystery to his guests. Stendhal could guess some of it, but not specifically. There was a look a person got, when they looked back in time toward painful, terrible memories. A look somewhere between quiet wonderment, awe and then a cold fear.

If one were to give a voice to that look, it would be a trembling waver, devoid of any real understanding. Maybe understanding would only make it more horrible, make the pain heavier to carry. It would be a voice asking 'why', why such things were ever allowed to happen.

"You know..." Tobo spoke very quietly, almost imperceptibly so. "There was a day, about that long ago, as you say, when some men came around the neighborhood." His face was cold, pale and serious with widened eyes as he looked back to them. "Men in suits, police men or something more than that, but not heroes."
Now Stendhal was listening as intently as he'd been watching.

"They came while the family was away, spoke to a few others, signed a few checks, moved things from the house and cordoned it off from all outside eyes." The old man moved a pair of shaky fingers to massage his temple. "When they finally got around to speaking to me... Well, they made me swear never to speak of that family again. Not their names, not anything I might have allegedly known."

So... the cover up wasn't perpetrated by the Yakuza in secret but someone else, out in the open, someone with significant authority. Fingers at his teacup, Stendhal drank it down. This just got interesting...

Nodding, Twist felt her smile disappear. "So, you wont tell us anything?"

Tobo shook his head, more quickly than they would have thought an old man could. "No, and if you know what's good for you, you'll stop looking into this matter at once." Standing up, he politely motioned for the door. "I must ask that you leave now, I am... not feeling well, all of a sudden."

As Twist stood up, complying with the old man's request, Stendhal took a scrap of paper and scrawled down his number. "If you change your mind, call me." He handed Tobo the paper as he stood, turning to leave as the old man nodded sullenly.

They closed door behind themselves, making for the streets as the old man simply stood there.

"Think he'll be alright?" Twist had spoken, pulling Stendhal's gaze to her as they wandered through the rain, toward where they knew not.

In reply, the dhampire shrugged. "So long as no one figures out we talked to him."

They found shelter at a bus stop, staying for a moment to collect their thoughts. "What have we stumbled into...?" She breathed, palm over her face as she shook her head with closed eyes.

Again, he merely shrugged. "Don't know. Is this you wanting out?"

Twist quickly shook her head, crossing her arms with an uneasy expression. "No. We need to set this right. Find out if that girl has any real family left to go to."

Stendhal smiled, but did so with great reservation. "Alright... I'm not sure I can do this without you and Sparky anyways. Not if I'm right..."

She cocked her head at him, blinking once. "You have an idea?"

Slowly, he nodded. "There was an award in his kitchen, the company that issued it to him? It was the same one that one of Eri's parents worked for."

"Philanthropy..." she couldn't help the sense of dread, putting a pit in her stomach. She reached for her radio and hailed her man, "You think they knew each other."

Another nod. "And knew each other well, my dear Twist."

Her hand went to her radio, bringing it to her lips. "Honey?"

Sparky's reply was considerably warmer this time. "Got something for me?"

She smiled, and Stendhal went for his inhaler. "Maybe," said he, after taking a dose of his
medication, "can you see if a man named Tobo had any contact with Eri's parents? He worked for Philanthropy once, he was also one of the neighbors you sent us to interrogate."

Sparky chuckled. "On it. Who knows, maybe we'll get lucky and he'll mention them by their full names, somewhere. I'll get right on it, but I've got something too."

Things were looking up. "Let's hear it."

"This bit of info was actually in the police's records: around the time Eri went missing, the Yakuza saw a significant decrease in activity."

As the rain patted heavily around them, the two presently in each other's company exchanged a look. "...what does that mean?" Twist said wearily.

"Like I'd know?" Sparky guffawed. "Maybe they diverted all available resources to perfecting that quirk erasing thing and didn't have the manpower for much else. Could be anything."

Stendhal exhaled tensely. "It's the 'anything' that scares us here, Sparks."

Sparky sighed. "I'm just one guy... I can't look into everything at once. Ask the police about it, yeah? I'm gonna have my hands full with Philanthropy's servers. Tracking emails isn't hard, but half the accounts I'm looking into have been deleted. Only finding a handful of actual communiques are left to sift through at a time here."

Twist sighed, but spoke reassuringly. "Just do your best out there, babe. We'll follow up with the police." Then the line went quiet as she put the radio back in her pocket. "Think our friend the Sergeant will be helpful this time?"

Stendhal groaned, running a hand over his scalp. "Is he ever?" Tired, exasperated and not looking forward to what would come next, he started walking and she followed.

Offering an optimistic appraisal of the situation, she shrugged. "You never know."

Walking along an old, familiar path outside the city, she felt a bit serene. A cool, gentle breeze brushed at her cheeks, the sunlight above flickered through the vibrantly green leaves and warmed her back through her clothes. Humming as she walked along, shadows flickering, waving about like seaweed in a gentle current, little Kyoka started hopping across a small brook. With every splash, every feather-light footfall into the water the years rolled by.

She was a child, a tweenager, a teenager then... then she was herself.

Weird thing was, she could tell it was a dream. Even with this awareness, she could do nothing with it, no control. All she could do was feel, react, move along with the currents of her slumbering dream-logic. She wandered into the city, walking past people without faces, strangers she guessed. Once upon a time, that forest she loved to travel had been near enough to her home, but that was before the city. Far back as she remembered, the Jiro household had only truly moved once, right after she'd come out of the closet and they'd been made certain it wasn't an act.

Nothing like fresh surroundings, new faces to make sure people accept you as you and not who you supposedly used to be. But that wasn't the point of such musings, all she knew was that the forest was nowhere near the city now, not like the dream seemed to believe. Kyoka missed that forest... As she passed by a window she saw her reflection and smiled. Her 'real and present self' was her in her hero costume, for whatever that meant, it was reassuring in a way.
As she wandered along, looking at the city and its people, she couldn't help but smile. Surrounded by people who'd accepted the real her, accepted Kyoka Jiro, Earphone Jack the future hero. The thought alone filled her with a sense of warmth, bright and proud and before she knew it, Kyoka blinked and she was somewhere else: an award ceremony for some act of heroism. At one time, an event like this would have been something to be proud of. A crowd of applauding people, their faces hazy and obscure, cheered her name. Standing at the front of a podium as a man in a suit pinned a medal to her jacket.

She couldn't make out the words people said, but the tones were jovial, celebratory as they cheered her on. It all felt so gratifying, if only she deserved it.

*If only I deserved it...*

A hand clapped down on her shoulder, and a laugh hit her ears.

*Maybe I could, one day, but even the greatest heroes don't get things like this done for them.*

She looked out at the crowd, taking in the faceless people that smiled at her, applauding. She surprised herself by feeling out of place, overcome by a notion that screamed she didn't deserve to be here. As she looked out at them, a quiet sense of dread, a coldness spread throughout her. For moments she thought she saw shadows snaking into the room, over the lights.

Then the laugh caught her ear again, and it sent a chill down her spine. It was hollow, dissonant and resonating like an echo, delayed as though by some phantom clawing at the intangible, delaying sounds as though bending time itself.

"Don't deserve, shouldn't be here'..." The voice was feminine, familiar and it all but stopped Kyoka's heartbeat. "Have you really forgotten so much of yourself? Misplaced what put you here, on this path?"

As she turned around, her eyes crept wide and she bit back a scream. Standing right beside her, smiling, was K. Her skin was paper white, the veins beneath gone grey and her eyesockets and mouth were jet-black voids, shadowy ink oozing from their edges as she smiled. K's every movement was chillingly slow, as her other hand grabbed her sunglasses to perch them on her face.

"You're funny, Kyoka." She took a step back from her dead friend in horror, as shadows swarmed around her. "Think about it, won't you? Your reason is more obvious than you think, my hero."

Kyoka tried to let out a scream as the shadows swarmed about, and the room disappeared. Blackness swallowed her up, icy hands tearing at her clothes, skin and hair as she thrashed about like a wild thing. Raking fingernails through the shadows, screaming mad with fear as she fought against an ocean that had simply enveloped her. As the last embers of light disappeared from view, her screaming grew louder still, her movements more frantic.

It wasn't until she heard a voice, felt warm hands petting at her back, her neck, her hair that she started to calm.

"Shh..." her heartbeat was hammering in her ears and her breathing was hard and fast. "It's okay, it's okay..." Kyoka's eyes fluttered rapidly open, finding herself safe in her own bed, snuggled up to Izuku's chest. "You're okay... it's just a dream..." His face was pressed against the crown of her head as he whispered softly, his hands still petting at her.

Blushing, feeling altogether too vulnerable and ashamed of being so riled by a bad dream, she hid her face by shoving it more firmly against him. "I-idiot... I know it was just a dream already." Her
fingers gripped at his shirt, pulling him closer as he kept right on trying comfort her. "...thanks though." she mumbled into his chest.

He smiled, nuzzling the top of her head. "You don't have to thank me."

If his voice was anything to go by, he was still a little worried. "I know... but I wanted to anyway." and she felt him squeeze her. "Lets hope this isn't a nightly thing with us."

When he nodded, she felt his chin and mouth brushing against her hair and skin. "Yeah, no more nightmares, right?"

Then she smiled too, wrapping her arms around him and squeezing. "No more nightmares." They lay like that for a little while longer, just hold each other and running hands up and down the other's back, slowly realizing they were both awake. "Not that I want to get up but, what time is it?"

Adjusting, looking about the room, Izuku had trouble finding a clock. "Um..." he had to grab her phone. "Oh hell."

Raising both eyebrows, she leaned back, enough to look at his face. "What?" He blinked a few times, turning the screen around for her to see. "What the f- it's almost noon!?" If she wasn't awake before, she definitely was now. "Why didn't my alarm go of?"

Thinking that was a good question, Izuku looked to her nightstand and picked up her alarm clock. "Huh." He handed it to her, the extension chord easily making the distance. "I guess the power's ou-"

At that exact moment, about the loudest clap of thunder either of them had ever heard crashed like a bomb. Izuku's hands flew to his ears and Kyoka's mirrored this as they yelped loudly in pain. Somewhere else in the building several people screamed, yelling obscenities in surprise.

Tentatively taking their hands away from their ears, they waited and listened only to hear the sounds of rain and their classmates rousing from slumber. "Well," Izuku gulped, chuckling nervously, "I guess everyone's awake now."

Groaning, swinging her legs over the side of the bed she made for her closet. "We're late for patrol..."

Nodding, slow to get up with her, Izuku wondered where his hero costume was. He hadn't seen it since day he'd carried Eri to his house with Aizawa, it had been in his bag, the same one Stendhal had used to bring him his clothes in... the hospital. Oh. Stendhal had it, or knew where it was at least. If he was gonna go on patrol with the others he'd need something temporary for today, until he got it back.

Sighing, realizing he'd be bothering the support department again he stood up, finding his footing a bit better than yesterday, he- "Oh my go-" he brought an arm up over his eyes, his face turned crimson. "um, y-you know I'm still in the room right?"

"Hmm?" She was halfway through putting on a bra when he'd started yammering. After a moment, considering what she'd just been doing right where he could see, he wasn't the only one who was flustered. "Ah- um, ah... right." her hands started moving hurriedly, trying to fasten her bra but in her current state, well. Kyoka's fingers might as well have been thumbs. "Argh, damn it!" She hissed, face only getting redder as her fingers kept floundering at clasping her bra.

Realizing that this might take some time, Izuku cleared his throat. "Um... n-need some help?" Oh
Kyoka completely froze, even her breathing stopped for a moment as the suggestion took its time to settle into her brain. If he stayed here, waiting for her to get her clothes on, they could be here all day if her present level of flusteredness was any indication. If he left, opening the door, someone might see her nearly naked as she was. Of course, the obvious solution, cover herself with a bathrobe or blanket, let him slip away.

But...

She gulped, heart hammering in her chest. "O-okay..." she'd be lying if she said she didn't like the idea. Red as she could possibly be, Kyoka turned around, hands holding the bra to her chest.

Slow to lower his arm from his eyes, Izuku took a moment to blink, his eyes just roaming over her body. Flickering up and down, his embarrassed state only became more and more pronounced. She was standing there, her back to him, in nothing more than a bra and pair of panties.

Is- is this real?

Growing extremely worked up, feeling his eyes on her, Kyoka's shoulders tensed, heels grinding into the floor as she growled at the floor. "If you're just gonna stand there staring like a-!"

"I'm not, I'm not!" Shaking his senses back to himself he stepped forward, hands reaching for the straps that dangled just by her shoulder blades.

He gulped, quietly as he worked at the fastening, but he'd never seen one before. Kyokya cleared her throat, eyes fluttering. "Um, you're gonna want to hook the... hooks into the..." she gestured over her shoulders and he nodded in reply. Shaky as his hands were, he got the job done quickly enough and she let out a little breath. "Okay, good..." she opted not to call him a good boy, the poor thing would likely lose his brain completely if she did.

If that happened it might take forever to convince him to take his hands off her shoulders. She opened her mouth to speak and his fingers started gliding down down her skin. A little gasped escaped her, the feather light touches of his fingertips sending shivers through her skin.

Oh my god... why does that feel-? Her eyes fluttered back open, his hands at the small of her back. "U-um... Izuku?"

He blinked, drawing his hands back a little. "S-sorry, should I not have?" He blushed, feeling a little guilty. Damn it... way to get carried away, Izuku.

Smiling shyly, she turned around slowly, a hand at her own shoulder, fussing at the strap, her shoulders bearing the faintest dusting of a blush. "Guess we're even now."

Again, he blinked, a little confused. "Ah- what?"

"Back at the hospital?" She laughed nervously. "I kinda saw you like this too."

He rubbed the back of his head, smiling lopsidedly. "Considering all the bruises and whatnot? I'm not so sure..."

Kyoka shrugged, and Izuku had to visibly fight to keep his eyes off her chest. It was almost funny. "We're going to be heroes. It's kind of expected. I'm sure you'll see me all banged up at some point."
It took several moments for Izuku to realize just what Kyoka had communicated. One, that seeing her like this could and would happen again if she had her say. Two, that she saw them staying together long enough for that to happen. He stood there for a second or two longer, his brain puzzling that out and Kyoka let him, reaching for her hero costume.

"So," she said, snapping his brain away from it's thoughts, "we should probably try and get in touch with Aizawa. See what's going on with patrols and whatnot." She slid into her pants and he nodded, he nodded very quickly, finding anywhere else in the room to place his eyes. "See you on the road?" She said with a playful smile, pulling a shirt over her head.

Clearing his throat, regaining his composure, he nodded. "You got comfortable with this quickly..."

Although, he did not notice that her cheeks were still pink. "It's you, Izu." His brain did a backflip, jaw dropping. "How many times do I have to tell you you're harmless before you believe I believe it?"

Oh, I know you believe it... "I'm good," he put forward, grabbing his bathrobe and draping it over his shoulders, "I uh... gotta see about getting a costume for today." Then before he slipped out of the room, he said one last thing. "Oh, yeah, um... see you on the road."

As he left the room and she was putting on her socks and jacket, she waved goodbye. When the door closed behind him, she let her guard down enough to frown. Dropping back into the chair in front of her desk, she hauled her boots over her feet.

That dream...

For a few moments she just sat there, letting the images, words drift through her head a few more times.

Gotta find my one reason, one that's not living up to what I think of her, huh?

Bitterly, somberly, she smiled, standing up with a droop in her shoulders, arms swaying by her side.

Easier said than done, Kyoka...

She made sure to grab her phone on her way out the door, locking it behind herself as she left.

"I can't say goodbye to yesterday, my friend
'cause I know how good it has been
facing forever, here I stand, come what may
in the old, in the new yesterday

It's there that I'll find,
inner peace, not war...
and dreams that I let slip away,
I'll find the joyfulness I'm looking for...
way back...

in yesterday..."
AN: Sequel hook characters ahoy. Maybe.

Also, some of you may recognize parts of this chapter, but I'm not counting on it. For those of you do: prepare to be surprised.

Silence hung in the air like thick smoke, oppressive and strangling. It was far from quiet outside the room, but in there it was as though all sound had been swallowed up. Blood dripped from the knife in his hand and from his injuries, standing between them and the freshly made corpse, his face was still raw and bleeding, eyes open wide. The look on his face screamed of shattered innocence, so shocked, wounded and betrayed. The three others stared at him, waiting for him to say, do something and when he did... it threatened to break the youngest one's heart.

Slowly, lip almost trembling as his jaw hesitated to speak, his words were scarcely breath against a ringing that had started to form in their ears.

"...You knew?"

Three Days Ago...

The clothes he'd been wearing yesterday were as clean now as then, and he was in a hurry. Undershirt on, button-up over his shoulders, jeans straightened- "Fuck!" he hissed, falling back against the wall. Left hand slapping the wall, unable to find a hold on anything, he slid over and hit his head on the tub. Growling at the indignity of it all he grabbed the sink and pulled himself up. Yeah, that got old quick. Damn leg...

All he'd done was twitch those leg muscles wrong, leaned on them at an awkward angle for one second, and it hurt like boiling lead was being poured into an open wound. Sighing, he fought the urge to scream as pulled on his socks and shoes. He actually whimpered a little as he put weight back on the leg, slow to find his balance. Reaching for his toothbrush he caught sight of his reflection. If the fifteen year old him could see that face... he wouldn't even know who it was. That once ordinarily smooth face was now pebbled and veined with well healed burn scars. Almost unnoticeable, unless you looked very close.

Upon closer inspection, he found that his facial hair was as white as the hair on his head, eyebrows included. That his facial hair matched the hair on his head would have been funny, if not for how it had come to match. His messy hair had become noticeably longer, bedraggled and snarled. For a minute or two he idly ran a comb through it, but ultimately decided it was pointless. It never cooperated anyways and it looked better messy. Buttoning his shirt as he ran through the rain, Izuku tried not to slip on the sidewalk on his way to the support department. Running in unfamiliar
shoes on slick surfaces with a bad leg, he was lucky not to hit his head on anything. Although, once indoors again, he was somewhat displeased to note his wet hair was something of a hindrance now. Before, he never had to swipe the swipe the hair out of his eyes for anything.

...How long has it been since I've had a haircut?

Ruffling some of the water from the top of his head, he started walking toward the support department, only occasionally faltering on his bad leg. Some rest, a little practice limping and he was already managing, surprisingly. His healing factor... After everything he'd been through over the last three years, Izuku thought there might have been some limit he was close to breaking with himself. With another bad step almost toppling him, there was fresh evidence to support his little theory.

Sighing, frowning and grabbing his own lapels he shook the excess rain from his shirt, bringing it more snugly over his shoulders. It wasn't long before he found the support department, surprisingly with some lights flickering around inside.

I wonder what the chances are that it's the same girl as always.

After knocking on the door, he wasn't surprised to find non other than 'the same girl' answering the door. If only she hadn't had the headlamp on full blast. After yelping and flailing his arm about for some support, his slippery shoes betrayed him to the treacherous, traitorous linoleum floor.

"Whoa!" He felt a pair of gloved, strong hands gripping his wrist, yanking him back to his feet. "Easy there, sailor." Hatsume -or so he thought her name was- grinned as she pulled him back to his feet. "Had a few to drink, have ya?"

Sheepishly, wincing the function back into his all too sensitives eyes as spots waltzed about in front of everything, he looked a little awkward. "No."

She shrugged, "anyhoo, what can I help ya with? Something go wrong with your costume again?"

Then she rubbed the back of her head, and Izuku could see the oil smudged on her cheeks now as she lopsidedly frowned. "I don't even have it in the shop."

Izuku nodded. "Well, you wouldn't. I think my friend has it, long story." As gave him the most skeptical look her face probably could, he chuckled nervously. "I uh... just need something temporary, until I get it back."

Eyes to the ceiling, Hatsune ponderously rubbed her chin as she hummed. "Well..." you could practically see the lightbulb above her head when she snapped her fingers, thoughtful expression immediately replaced with a wild grin. "Oh! Wait a sec!" She flew back into the room for a moment before snapping back out. "Wait, your hero name's 'Guren' right? You're the guy that got bit by the black widow before tangling with that purple monster thing?"

He blinked, "Yes?" Already dreading where this might have been heading.

Hearing her rummage aggressively around in the lab stirred up some memories, things she'd already mentioned no less. Hard to believe it had been two years, over that even, since the USJ incident. There were times where he almost believed it had been one year, maybe, but... hell, with everything that had happened already, maybe it wasn't that much of a stretch.

"Ta-da~!"

Izuku looked up, apparently he'd been staring at the floor. Hey, I remember that jacket. It was indeed the same armored jacket he'd worn at the USJ, mercifully spared from the Nomu's wrath.
When he noticed the design, the emblem on its back he gulped, tensing up a little as he smiled. A rendition of a scarlet lotus, its stem made of spiderwebs trailing from a seven legged black widow, its eyes staring straight ahead.

Hatsume grinned at him, proud and hopeful. "Eh? Ehh? What do ya think?"

Another quiet gulp and he gave a nod. "L-looks great..."

He gave a thumbs up, reaching out and slipping it over his shoulders as Hatume handed him a few things more. "Here, it's no replacement for the old armor but these gloves and gauntlets oughtta keep your hands attached and knuckles from splitting." Nodding as she spoke, he slipped and fastened them onto his person. "Don't have anything for your legs though, sorry."

He just nodded, smiling appreciatively as he put on his sunglasses. "It's okay. I should have the other one back soon anyways. Thank you, Hatsume."

She gave a thumbs up, turning her headlamp back on before spinning back around into the lab and continuing whatever it was she was doing. There were far too many bits of circuitry, loose hunks of metal and wiring to tell, but it looked like some improved version of that spider-legged backpack she'd had during the tournament.

Back when the only truly traumatizing thing he'd lived through was Bakugo's temper, being turned into a vampire and the death of Shigaraki.

Before mom died.

*I miss those days...*

The door to the outside world swung open and he started walking through the rain, letting it soak his body. Turning his face to the sky, he reveled in the feeling of the water rinsing down his face. Three years without a shower, without swimming in a river, his only submergence into water had been baths and they hardly relaxed him. Letting the rain wash over him was as close to any of that as he would get anymore. It was lucky he didn't get cold anymore, lest this entire experience be unpleasant.

As he walked by the dorms, he saw the front door open and Eri running toward him under a little umbrella. Aizawa was behind her, carrying his own and looking markedly less tired than usual. Izuku chalked that one up to him having similar problems with his alarm clock as everyone else had today.

"Izuku!" Eri chirped happily as she trotted over to him.

To him, her smile was infectious. "Hey, Eri." When she stopped just shy of him, making sure not to hit him with her umbrella, he couldn't help but return the smile.

Aizawa was not so affected. "Good, you're ready." Izuku turned to his teach and nodded, catching the former hunter giving his still bad leg a once over. "Sure you're up for patrols just yet? Recovery Girl could at least fix that leg."

After a moment's thought, Izuku shook his head. "No, better that she doesn't. I don't want to be tired before I even get to the field."

The teacher frowned. "Doesn't sound like you're up for this then."

Turning a worried, shocked look to Aizawa, Eri's voice was very small. "Huh?"
Laughing nervously, Izuku waved both his hands a little frantically, as if this would somehow dissipate her worries on its own. "It's nothing, really! Nothing to worry about!"

Aizawa was not so reassuring. "He's hurt." And Izuku winced, feeling a little betrayed and letting his face show it.

Eri didn't notice this, her little fingers twisting at her umbrella, and looking at him with a soft, scolding worry in her eyes. "You should see Recovery Girl."

Izuku deflated a slight fraction. "I'm fine, really. I'll grab some breakfast soon and that should help more than Recovery Girl anyways."

Blinking once or twice, Eri gave Aizawa a questioning look, waiting patiently for an answer. Aizawa sighed. "Okay, kiddo." Reaching into one of his pockets, he threw him a thermos. "Be careful out there. Just keep your phone on, alright? I want to keep closer tabs than usual on everyone today."

Judging from his face, this was not a lightly made command. Izuku nodded, "yes, sir." Before unscrewing the lid to the thermos and draining it in one go. Thinking of one thing more, he turned to Eri? "What are you doing today?"

Now she was smiling again, looking quietly excited. "I'm going to be following Recovery Girl today. Mister Aizawa said it would be a valuable learning experience." It was only then, looking at her smile so nervous as she was, that he noticed something familiar in her: that same, unpracticed awkwardness he noticed in Kyoka's smiles, in his own.

It was too easy to forget the things she'd been through at Overhaul's hands, too easy to think she was just another little girl running around without a care. Then again, if someone grows up in hell, how do they react to a seemingly normal life? Is it paradise? Do they flinch at everything expecting pain? Is there really a universal reaction to it all? Looking at Eri, he wasn't sure.

"I can't look after her myself, not today." Aizawa's voice pulled Izuku from his thoughts. "Unfortunately... she's the only one who can look after her right now."

Something about that didn't seem right. "Wait... what about that woman at Tartarus? The hero you know?"

The teacher's expression soured, saddened and he looked a little guilty. "She's... still recovering."

Izuku didn't like the sound of that. "I see. Well, I hope she gets well soon."

Aizawa allowed himself a slight smile. "She will. Mandalay's always been a fast healer." Then he started flicking his wrist at him, shooing him away. "Now go, you've got work to do."

Smiling again, Izuku nodded, waving bye to Eri as he started wandering away in the rain. It hadn't been much in the way of blood, but the contents in that thermos had already helped his leg along. Even though he was still limping a little, it was enough to no longer about running and slipping. With a quiet breath, he slid his mask over his face then his hands in his pockets.

"More coffee?"

Twist looked up at Stendhal, momentary surprise quick to vanish. "Oh, no I'm okay. Thanks."

Stendhal shrugged, drinking it down himself and turning back to the police terminal he'd been
allowed to go combing through. Hand on his radio he whispered to the man on the other end. "What am I looking for here, Sparky?"

The man on the other end clicked his tongue. "Any kind of correlation between the decline in Yakuza activity and missing children. Not cases with the same thing, necessarily, just anything like that happening around the same time."

Twist groaned, shoving a palm against her eye. "That's what we've been doing for hours now. You don't have any other ideas?"

Through the static of the transmission, Sparky hummed ponderously. "Well... it's a long shot but any filed complaints Philanthropy employees might have made. Not that I'm expecting much on that front. I'm not sure if you'll find anything like that, nothing I saw listed the occupations of anyone who phones things in."

Pouring himself another cup of coffee, Stendhal grumbled and Twist took a turn sighing. "We knew this was a needle in a haystack search when we started." Drained in seconds flat. "Might as well just stick with it."

The door to the room swung open, quietly at that. A very, very tired looking Kaminari was about to wave to Stendhal when Sparky started speaking again. "Well, that's the best I've got for you. I'm still digging Philanthropy's servers, tell ya if I find anything."

As the feed cut out, Kaminari gave a very amusing looking frown. He seemed to be somewhere between confused, shocked and frightened of what he'd just heard. "What?"

The sound of his voice made the other two jump. "Chargebolt." Stendhal said, standing up, suddenly a little paler than usual. "Um... when did you come in?"

Kaminari blinked, eyeing the two nervous looking people in the room with him. Slowly, he entered the room and shut the door behind himself. "Interesting company you're keeping..." he gave an awkward wave to Twist, who sheepishly reciprocated with a similar return of the gesture. "I'm guessing that wasn't an employee of Philanthropy you were just talking to."

Twist's eyes fluttered, her mind racing to come up with some sort of reply. The result left something to be desired. "Ah- well, that, er..."

"Smooth." Kaminari remarked. "You have any idea the trouble you could get into for that? Corporate espionage, dude."

Stendhal growled, wide eyes to the door. "Wanna say that louder? I don't think the whole station quite heard you."

Kaminari sighed, shaking his head, running a hand over his scalp as he turned to glance back at the door. "I uh... could actually use his help."

Twist's eyes narrowed. "If you think blackmailing us will land you anything but trouble, little man..." She stood up, fingertips glowing as she cracked her knuckles. "you've in for a rude awakening."

Hands in the air, Kaminari almost balked at the threat. "Hey, easy! I hadn't even said anything yet, lady!" Eyeing her warily, swallowing as he gave Stendhal a look, he exhaled a little sharply. "I just have something I need to... get into."

Now the dhampire was curious. "And what might that be?"
Lowering his hands, eyeing the door again, Kaminari kept his voice low. "A hard drive. I pulled it out of a computer, couple weeks back, thinking I'd find something... incriminating on it but it's encrypted." Then he sighed, shaking his head at himself. "Weird thing is, it wasn't before I removed it from the computer. It encrypted itself after it was removed."

Twist nodded, crossing her arms. "So you want us to crack it open." She gave him a once over. "Where'd you get it?"

Kaminari bit his upper lip, looking to Stendhal who simply nodded. "A uh... not sure what you'd call it. It was basically every nightmare you could have about an insane asylum in one. Like everything there was... designed to make people crazy."

Stendhal sighed, squeezing the ridge of his nose. "Specifics, Chargebolt."

Thinking for a moment, Kaminari fumbled into his jacket pockets. "It was some kinda secret underground facility." Pulling something from his pocket, he handed what looked like a business card to Stendhal. "Masquerading as an antique shop, they uh..." Suddenly, alarmingly, Kaminari appeared as though he might be sick. "The things I saw in there? I've been doing my best to just... compartmentalize it, but I don't think anyone can unsee something like that."

Giving his friend a look, Stendhal examined the card now in his possession. "Who's 'they'?"

The electric hero shrugged. "If I knew that, I wouldn't be fishing around the hard drive."

Slowly, Twist nodded. "Okay. I'll take it to my husband, have him sift through it, if you can get it to me."

Looking a little relieved, Kamniri smiled. "Thank you, ma'am. I'll just ah..." he pointed to the door, turning and running through it.

Twist laughed. "He doesn't look like he has enough energy to be running like that."

Stendhal shrugged, sitting back down at his terminal. "He probably doesn't. The man's been running around from emergency service to emergency service making sure they all have power."

"What is he? A living battery?"

The dhampire grinned. "Yes, just don't ever let him hear you say that." His fingers started typing at the keyboard again, report after report blinked in and out of being on the screen before him. He'd entered into a kind of trance, Twist talking in the background, as he combed through the sea of information. Then, as if by some diving providence, he saw it. "Eureka..."

Twist blinked, looking up from her terminal. "Huh?"

"A statement made by a fellow who lives inside the city." Stendhal's grin grew wild, unhinged. "It doesn't list any names, but the description he gives of the 'child in possession of the bird-masked man' sounds familiar." He turned his gaze to his old friend, and she looked a little unsettled by his unrestrained enthusiasm. "Shall we? I have his full name."

Nodding, albeit hesitantly, she turned off her terminal. "Do you know you're smiling like that?"

Blinking, the smile vanishing as confusion took over his face, looked at her skeptically. "Smiling like what?"

An awkward silence hung in the air between them, him waiting for an answer and her waiting for
him to say he was just kidding.

He didn't.

With a sigh, shaking her head she started for the door. "Let's... go find the guy, okay?"

Wordlessly, making sure he had his sword secured on his back, he followed after her. Two weeks, after years by now, spent off this case had only let the trail go colder and he wasn't sure just how much further it would go. The only bright side to any of it was that Eri was, for now at least, safe and sound.

Thunder. Depending on your state of mind, it's either a lullaby or the sound that keeps you up at night, weather depending. In this instance, it was just another noise over the city. Something to drown out the sounds of cars, yelling and all the rest. Or, on this particular afternoon, it drowned out all of that plus the sound of gunfire. Leave it to a bunch of goons with enough money for firearms to ruin a perfectly good evening. They'd stolen a car, not their objective but it was their only option for escape. Police, and several lower ranking heroes, in hot pursuit. Civilians lay on the sidewalk, bleeding. Gripping at the gaping wounds where bullets had gone through them or bent and bloody limbs from colliding with the car. Too much collateral damage and wounded bystanders for one bank robbery. Cars drove off the road, either narrowly avoiding a crash or because they already had. Backup had been dialed in several times, but it was a busy afternoon. With a final gunshot, the last police car careened off the road. Home free.

Several of them high-fived. One just lit a cigarette, keeping his eyes on the road. Scores like this never came easy. They'd gotten lucky. Whatever the pro-heroes were dealing with tonight, it had bought them the time they needed to get away. Lucky. That was one helluva word for it.

When the roof of the car dented in, the windows shattered, all sense of relief evaporated. An arm pushed its way through the roof and pulled the emergency brake. The car spun out, its wheels sliding along the rain-slicked street. It crashed into a brick wall, knocking one of them soundly unconscious. The other four stumbled out of the wreck, money drifting in the rain saturated air. Too dark. They'd crashed into the middle of an alley, no light sources around. A thunderclap followed a stroke of lightning, the blinking light draped a silhouette over the alleyway. By the next clap of thunder, it was gone. Guns aimed up at the roofs around the alley. Where had that come from? What kind of nut-job was after them? A pro hero maybe, that wouldn't have been much of a surprise. Their leader being knocked out with one punch, no warning issued, was. Lightning flashes, gunshots, both sources of illumination. Neither helped. In seconds they'd all been knocked out. One clocked in the face, another kneed in the sternum and the last two were slammed into each other mid air.

In a few minutes they were all deposited neatly on the sidewalk. Tied up, weapons broken and the duffel bags of cash not too far away. The do-gooder was turning to leave, to find someone else in need, when headlights shone on him. He hadn't heard the approaching police cars over the weather.

From behind the still forming line line of policemen an armored hero stepped forward, "Ah, Midoriya!" With a smile, Tenya Iida removed his helmet. "I should've known it was you."

Even under his mask, it was easy to see the bashful smile. "H-how would you have? It's not like my fighting style is all that unique or anything."

"No," Said another voice he was familiar with: Ingenium. "But you've become rather capable these past few years. You've been garnering quite the reputation for handling situations like this."
With that bit of pleasantries disposed of, Izuku feeling a little embarrassed and flattered, quickly searched for something else to focus on. Unfortunately, that wasn't difficult. "Um, h-how are the bystanders? Quite a few of people were seriously hurt..." He looked down the road, seeing a few ambulances gathering up wounded, soon filled to capacity and calling in backup.

Iida sighed tensely, expression glum. "How many incidents like this today?"

Taking off his own helmet, Ingenium surveyed the grisly scene. "Hard to say, with power out across quite a bit of the city I wouldn't be surprised if quite a few of the more opportunistic criminals came out of the woodworks."

A frown crossed Izuku's face, a winding feeling in his chest. This hadn't been the first incident like this he'd dealt with today, and from the looks of things, how obviously law enforcement was already struggling, the trend wouldn't be changing anytime soon. Could this really be the rate that things were escalating? News of All Might's condition had of course spread like wildfire on an oil field, but still, this was troubling. It made one wonder how many people had been waiting for a 'safer climate' in which to start doing horrible things.

A feeling he couldn't name, some tension on the wind had his hackles standing on end. Like the moment after lightning strikes, leaving a faint ionization lingering in the air, his skin was tingling, a nervous pit in his belly. He stayed long enough to help apply triage, not that he knew much about such things, and see the situation brought under control. Police gathered themselves up, Ingenium and Iida ran off to find some other disaster to contend with. That he and the others were already seemingly planning for things to get worse, it did not sit well with him.

It's gotten colder too, hasn't it?

One disadvantage to his temperature immunity, being the world's worst thermometer. All the same, he couldn't shake this feeling. Like seeing a dark cloud on the horizon, in the visage of an angry beast staring you down from the world's edge. Ominous and oppressive, overriding the logical part of his mind.

It felt something like this, just before All For One...

Desperate times, desperate measures. He'd overheard more than a few conversations of that ilk while bound in bowels of that tomb.

Chains rattling...

Scraping of a metal chair against the floor, his body thrown against it by hands with strength he no longer possessed...

Icy fingers touched his skin, the world exploded in a firework of agony, his body bursting, his every seam tearing asunder at the man's touch...

A slight cough, echoing under the leather and metal plague mask...

Skin unraveled like a shattering stone, blood cascading like the raining sparks of a faulty power line as his tissue hurled itself back into the proper place...

Izuku shuddered, his arms hugging himself as his shoulders drew in, tense and trembling for a moment. When he looked up, he saw he was no longer near UA and very near the police station. Some time had gone by, with those memories running through his head. Walking along the streets, nary a soul about because of the rain, he saw signs of battles ended. Corners of buildings with bits of brick smashed away, pock marks in the street, a man hiding from the rain in a cardboard box.
secluded in an alleyway. There were bloodied bandages on his shoulder and upper arm.

He wasn't breathing.

Izuku ran to his side, fingers to his throat searching for a pulse he wouldn't find. Twinges in his chest, fingers gripping the man's shirt for a moment before he patted his shoulder. He was slow to stand up and call the police, to report the man dead. As he stood there waiting, his back leaning against the brick wall, he wondered how many people had seen the man and thought nothing of him.

welcome to the city...

Speaking to the police officers and paramedics who arrived on scene was draining affair, leaving him yearning for a drink and a nap. When the body was taken away, his statement taken, he watched as the ambulance drove away, officers in another direction. His feet felt like iron as he dragged them along, splashing in the puddles along the way.

You'd almost think this was new, the kind of thing you wouldn't see with All Might around, but you'd be wrong.

This kind of thing happens every day...

He didn't know who he was talking to inside his head, all he knew was that he needed to say it, think it. As he strolled along, he passed by a woman with the bushiest, curliest mane of pink hair he'd ever seen. Behind her large, round reading glasses she seemed to be studying him as they walked passed each other. He thought she might have looked vaguely familiar, but he didn't have time to think about that. Once again, the city surprised him and he heard a familiar voice singing a song he almost recognized.

"As I walk along these streets,
I see a man that walks alone...
Distant echo of people's feet,
He has no place to call his own...
A shot rings out from a roof overhead,
A crackhead asks for change nearby...
An old man lies in an alleyway dead,
A little girl lost just stands there and cries..."

It was Stendhal, and Izuku faintly smiled. "Hey."

His friend had been sitting on the steps of a little noodle place, now he was standing, coughing into a clenched hand. "Good to see you, Guren." Stendhal was smiling, despite the obvious fatigue on his features. "Patrol as usual?" With those bags under his eyes, the lines forming in the skin of his face, Izuku thought he might have been twice as old as he was.

He didn't answer right away, opting instead to step forward and hug the guy. A gesture he was slow to return. "Something like that. You?"

Stendhal nodded, stepping back and giving Izuku a knowing look. "Something like that." He gestured to the door of the little eatery. "Just waiting for my friend, she's indisposed at the moment."

With what, Izuku surmised he didn't need to know. "Still looking into Eri's case?" Stendhal nodded. "Anything new?"
What there was to tell was quickly told, the details were not so numerous as either would have hoped. It was a grim little tale, mostly speculation at this juncture with little hard evidence.

All the same, what Izuku now knew made that feeling of uneasiness weigh a little heavier. "Philanthropy..." He rubbed at his chin through his mask. "Why does that sound familiar?"

They were soon joined by their awaited third party. "Probably because they're the largest amalgamation of hero associations the world over." Twist shrugged, stepping through the doors and into the rain. "Last I heard, their overseas operations were looking to branch out to more than just Europe and America."

Stendhal blinked. "I hadn't realized their reach was so... vast."

Twist shrugged. "Why shouldn't it be? All the largest associations are a part of it."

"News to us." Izuku murmured, suddenly feeling as though he really ought to remember why that sounded so familiar.

Again, she shrugged. "Anyways, we've learned all we can here. Turns out our guy moved across town some time ago, we're in for a bit more of a walk."

Stendhal sighed. "I'm not even surprised, this entire thing has been one slim lead to the next. Why not walk across the entire city while we're at it?"

As Twist rolled her eyes, the trio fell into silence. Izuku was a bit nervous of this mysterious person joining them, but he didn't say anything. If Stendhal trusted her, that was enough for him.

They'd barely made it three blocks when Stendhal's hand clapped onto Izuku's shoulder. "Do you hear that?"

Listening closely, straining his ears almost, Izuku thought he might hear what his friend was referring to. "It... kinda sounds like someone sliding around on the ground?"

They all exchanged a look, then ventured off in that direction. Meeting their eyes, after a few moments, was a rather... peculiar sight. A young man, dressed in an All Might hoodie -adorned with the ridiculous hair antennae- was sipping from a person. Stopping to take a group photo for some gathered friends, giving someone directions who didn't have their phone charged, even collecting and organizing litter. At one point he went up into a tree and pulled a cat down to its crying owner, a little girl. It seemed no good deed was too small for this guy...

"No way that guy's a hero." Twist smirked, crossing her arms. "None I've ever heard of would waste their time with stuff that minor."

Stendhal hummed ponderously. "I wonder..."

Izuku, on the other hand, thought there might have been something familiar about him. Sure, he had that same hoodie at one point, but that wasn't it. Something about him stopping and giving directions...

"The door to their home closed quietly, and Inko laughed as she locked it. "Hey Izuku, you won't believe how your mother got home tonight."

Looking up from his studies, Deku blinked, holding up mom's phone. "You left your phone behind so a nearby hero gave you directions?"
She laughed, somewhat abashedly. "Almost... see, it wasn't a hero exactly who gave your old mother directions..."

Izuku's jaw dropped a little, the pieces falling together.

"It was just some gentleman in an All Might hoodie. Awkward boy, but a bit of a sweetie."

Now he was almost excited. "That's The Gentleman!"

The other two turned to him and blinked. "Who?" They said in unison.

Really, it wasn't surprising they hadn't met him, so Izuku reached for his phone. Searching the web rather hurriedly, he found a message board talking about him. "He's just some guy that goes around doing small favors for people in the city." As he spoke, Twist took notice of a small crowd forming some distance away. "He doesn't do anything beyond that, as far as anyone knows... just some helpful guy.

Stendhal gave the guy in question an uneasy look. "Uh huh... sounds... suspicious."

"Yeah..." Twist said, squinting at the crowd. "Mild serial killer vibes there..." She took a few steps closer, trying to make something out in the distance.

Izuku was shocked and made no attempt to hide it. "What? No, he's not like that!"

"Who's not like what?" As the vampire yelped, leaping away like a startled cat, Stendhal drew his sword like lightning and aimed it Gentleman's neck. "I surrender!" His hands were in the air almost as fast as Stendhal had drawn his weapon, eyes wide as saucers. "I didn't mean anything, honest!"

The non humans exchanged a look, Stendhal slowly sheathing the blade as Izuku chuckled nervously. "Sorry about that. You just startled us, Mister Gentlemen."

"Oh no no, I'm sorry!" He said, waving his hands about frantically. "You guys were just hanging out and then I overheard you and interrupted!"

Stendhal groaned, dragging a hand down his face.

"No really, I should be apologizing! We were talking about you behind your back, even said some kind of rude things while we were at it!"

A palm was now digging into the space between Stendhal's eyes, a vein distending on his temple.

"Oh, my apologies! I kind have that rep so it's understandable, really! I probably made you guys feel at all weirded out by my behavior!"

Now Stendhal was growling under his breath, shoulder trembling.

"Oh not at all! We know you're just doing good for the public in whatever way you can! I'm sorry if we made you feel bad about that!"

"Oh man, no it's okay! I sorry that made you apologize so many-"

A pair of very, very strong hands clasped down on both Izuku's and Gentleman's shoulders. "STOP IT!" Stendhal roared. "YOU'RE BOTH EQUALLY PENITENT AND EVERYTHING'S FINE, SO STOP!" A few harsh breaths later and Stendhal released them both, drawing in the deepest breath of his life. "I... Realize that was uncalled for. But there's been enough apologies
Both Izuku and Gentleman bowed their heads. "Oh... sorry about-

"NONONONO!" Stendhal's turn to wave his hands frantically about, wincing his eyes shut tight. "Enough of that..." Both Izuku and Gentleman exchanged worried looks, neither quiet knowing what to do now. "Gentleman, it was nice meeting you." Stendhal bowed politely, his palms together as he did. "But we really must be going now."

Smiling under his mask, the good samaritan bowed in turn. "The feeling is mutual, mister hero. If you come by again, I'll make you tea or something." Then he turned to Izuku. "The same goes for you, obviously. It's not every day I meet such a nice guy, especially a hero."

Izuku laughed, returning the gesture. "I think that's my line. Well, partially anyways. I mean you're not a hero- not that that's a bad thing or anything! I just-" Stendhal quietly put a hand on his shoulder, squeezing gently and Izuku took a deep breath before taking out his phone. "Friends?"

Gentleman's smile was practically glowing. "Sure! Here, I'll give you my number!"

Shaking his head, Stendhal left the pair of apologists to their own devices, instead going to see what Twist was up to.
AN: the ultimate MHA drinking game: take a shot every time something is sexual, a woman needs to be nearly naked to use her powers or otherwise, or someone does something awkward as hell or so far over the top it's silly or things get excessively violent and/or flashbacky. Speaking of, some of that happens in this chapter. Y'all have played "Clash! Heroes Battle", right?

Weight removed from the rubble, it soon floated harmlessly away. Activating a flashlight affixed to her head, Ochako released the bits of destroyed building from her quirk. Wiping some sweat and soot from her forehead, she looked over toward another part of the wreckage. It almost put a smile on her face, watching Tsu carry those people to safety. Not far from her, Backdraft -a men dressed like some sort of armored fire fighter- was blasting jets of water from his hands, dousing what was left of what little fire there had been. His friend Kamui Woods was busy making sure the building didn't collapse. His oaken limbs growing, sprawling out and weaving into the crumbling ruin's shattered supports while others collected wounded civilians.

Close by, just a few feet away really, Jiro had her earlobes to the ground, her eyes shut. Idle fingers reached for a map, a pen in her other hand. "Hey, Mina!"

Ears perking up, handing a burned civilian off to an EMT, she trotted over. "Heya, wassup?"

Jiro circled a few sections of the map, blueprints really. "There's a few groups of people trapped here and here... from the sound of it, they're all unconscious, and the acoustics are way off down there." Earlobes retracted, she peered at the building's plans more closely, a hand rubbing at her chin. "There's gonna be a lot of rubble down there... getting them out won't be easy."

Mina frowned. "Well wudda ya want me to do? If go around melting stuff willy nilly I might cause the whole place to cave in!"

Ochako sensed where this was going long before Jiro said it out loud. "That's where you come in, Uravity." She pointed her pen at her, and Ochako nodded. "It's not going to be a light load..."

Steeling herself, Ochako clenched her fists bringing them up and making a determined face. "Leave it to me!" Mina almost 'awed at the way her cheeks puffed up.

Landing beside Ochako, Tsuyu croaked. "What about me? I can help."

Jiro nodded. "Well, there's two groups of folks that need to get carried out there in short order, about five people in total." Jiro turned and looked right at her. "How many people can you carry at one time?"

Tsu croaked again, brow furrowing slightly as she ran some numbers through her head. "If they're of average build? Maybe three."

Earlobes back to the ground, Jiro nodded. "Okay... Mina, that leaves you for the other two. Can you handle it?" Quickly, Mina nodded and Jiro patted the radio on her hip. "I'll walk you all through it once you're inside. Keep your ears open for the slightest noise, in case things start collapsing down there."

Confident that they had it handled, the trio set off for the underground. As they ventured below, tasks before them, Ochako silently wondered what had started the fire to begin with.
It was always some dingy alleyway. Peering down at the prospective team members from above, Dabi did not feel as though he liked these people. Not one bit. Just a bunch of thugs who'd blown up an entire building, dozens of people inside, just for the contents of one safe. "Really, sir?"

The first was a truly massive individual. A man towering at a height of six foot eight, broad shoulders and build with a body almost entirely made up of thick muscle. Armor plates and gauntlets made out of orange stone covered his shoulders and much of his lower arms. Even his bulky boots were of the same make. His hair was neon orange, styled up like flames and he wore a gas mask strapped to his shoulder pads.

Laughing as he cracked open the sage, the second individual was considerably less imposing. He had long, block-like fingers branching from large palmed hands. Amusingly, his face was like that of a duck. A broad bill lined with large, square teeth made him look either like some cartoon character or some nonthreatening eldritch horror. He was tall, lanky and while he was certainly fit, he did appear rather frail.

Third in their company was a woman making an... interesting fashion statement. Tall, voluptuous with wavy, white hair tied into a flared pony tail she wore a simple, cat-eyed mask. Clad in a black, low cut sports bra, a utility belt with garters, heeled boots that only rose to her ankles and the purple bottom half of a bikini. That aside, a large, vented, metal respirator hung round her neck. How on earth the woman wasn't shivering violently in this cold, rainy weather was a fact whose comprehension thoroughly eluded Dabi.

The exiled Todoroki sighed. "Surely we can do better than this lot, sir."

By his side Overhaul scowled. "All that power at their disposal, and this is what they use it for..." He shook his head. "This world truly is sick, Dabi. If we aim to heal it, we must not ignore symptoms such as these."

Sighing, arms folded and tongue clicking, somewhere behind them was Seether. "And exactly what do you think we can offer those accursed souls, so overcome with greed?"

Overhaul chuckled, turning a crazed eye to his subordinate. "Purpose." And with a set of fingers at the side of the building, a quick application of his quirk, and he was gliding harmlessly to the street below. Dabi and Seether just looked at each other before reluctantly following.

They'd only just made it to the street when the woman barked at them. "And just who the hell are you?"

As she and the others dropped into combat stances, Overhaul extended his arms wide. "Someone who's looking to hire a little help." Both Dabi and Seether kept quiet, watching the trio wearily. "I need capable hands such as yours, people with exceptional abilities."

"Yeah?" Said the duck billed man. "How good's the pay?"

The woman, splayed an arm out in front of him, effectively barring him from the negotiating table. "More importantly: who are you, and what would you need us for?"

Overhaul chuckled again. "Straight to the point, I see. Good, I like that." One arm back by his side, he held up one finger. "First, my name is Overhaul, and these are two of my men: Dabi and Seether."

Seether merely grunted noncommittally, Dabi nodded. "A pleasure."

"Second," Overhaul raised another finger, "we need your help on a few heists we have planned,
something well within the capabilities of... The Volcano Thieves, was it?"

She quirked an eyebrow at them, taking a moment to size them up. "You've heard of us?"

Overhaul shrugged, crossing his arms. "Not until today. I had another man do some digging on
you, after we saw you pull off that little caper. Impressive that you managed to completely elude
the heroes in the area so completely."

Seether guffawed. "Really? If they'd gone any more overboard with their diversion they might have
destroyed that entire neighborhood." Overhaul cast a glaring eye Seether's way. "There isn't a hero
alive who wouldn't have let them slip away in favor of saving the innocent lives tangled up in that
disaster."

As Overhaul was about to say something, Dabi cut in. "He does a point, sir. These guys's methods
are hardly subtle. Extreme even by our standards."

The hulking, orange haired brute grunted angrily. "We are not usually so... explosive in our
escapes, whelp." Dabi almost looked amused, being called that.

With a glare of her own, the woman addressed the large man behind her. "No, we're not, and we
won't ever be again, if I have my say in things." The brute growled, crossing his arms and looking
away from her. Then she turned back to Overhaul's group. "Though I'm surprised you would care.
Not like the local Yakuza to give a damn about those they consider beneath their boots."

That made the Yakuza Boss smile. "Don't mind my men," he waved a dismissive hand to one side,
"unlike them I am not so civically minded so as to be distracted from my goals." Dabi rolled his
eyes, Seether shook his head. "Actually, I could use some more muscle on my side as well. One of
our heavy hitters, well, recently he was cut down a peg or two, if you catch my meaning."

For a moment Dabi was disgusted that Overhaul had made such a joke about a man under his
command. Of course, then he realized it was Muscular they were talking about: a man who
viscerally enjoyed killing and only killing other human beings. That, and this was from the mouth
of a man who saw no problems with torturing a small child for years if meant getting what he
wanted.

His disgust lingered as he scowled, looking away from the conversation altogether.

Considering all she'd heard, and her own men's apparent eagerness, she just needed to Know one
thing more. "What's our first heist?"

As it would turn out, Twist had been drawn in by a large crowd. Over thirty people just gathered in
the middle of the street, staring up at someone who was dancing above their heads and singing
loudly. Her arms were crossed and she looked almost impressed, despite the lackluster
performance of the woman dancing in the air. She had long, pink, frilly hair tied into pig tails, a
black stripe of makeup across her face and eyebrows, like some sort of mask.

Her costume was... somewhat minimal, in a place or two. It was a succubus themed one-piece
black leotard with a heart-shaped opening in the center of the chest and a smaller one in the back,
located just below two bat wings. In addition, she was also wearing a reddish-pink bow tie, a pair
of silver pearl earrings, black elbow length gloves, a black super-miniskirt with three hearts on the
belt, and black knee-high boots.

It turned out, she had absolutely no trouble showing off her posterior as she leaped around above
the crowd. The volume of the catcalls almost rivaled the cheering, chanting of her name. "Anyone
who can run around, wearing that in weather like this and not have their makeup streaming down their face as they shiver to death?" She said, "I'm not sure if there's another word for it other than 'impressive'."

Stendhal scoffed. "Crazy?"

"um... exhibitionist?" Izuku mumbled, trying not to look directly at her. He wasn't very successful.

Gentleman raised a single finger. "Silly?"

Twist sighed, eyes closed and shaking her head at them. "Credit where it's due: she puts some effort into this, and she seems to have a decent enough following for all her efforts." She gestured to the crowd, all those adoring fans cheering her on. "Although, sadly, I can't say they're here for the music."

With a little smile, Gentleman shrugged. "That's just Pop Step, the local street idol." He looked up at as she leaped about, landing and drifting in the wind like a feather caught in the breeze. "She's always like this, come whatever kind of weather." Giving them a rather laid back shrug, his arms splayed out and palms upturned, he smiled. "But hey, to each their own, right? She's not hurting anybody."

Shaking his head, Stendhal sounded a little impatient. "I have no issue with vigilantes, or people who harmlessly break the law but... can we find a way around this crowd? We have places to be."

"I dunno..." Twist said, "I'm kinda tempted to wait till the performance ends, honestly."

The dhampire groaned. "Yes... oggle her with your 'husband' sitting at home, working tirelessly on the investigation we were in the middle of until you got distracted."

Twist gave him a profoundly irritated look, quirking an eyebrow almost comically high. Then, relenting, she let out a short breath. "Hey, Gentleman?" The young man she'd addressed blinked a few times, meeting her gaze silently. "you know this area pretty well, right?" He nodded. "Take us around the crowd the fastest way you know?"

His face lit up. "Sure thing. HEY POP!" He cupped his hands around his mouth, and she looked at him with wide, blinking eyes. "THESE GUYS NEED TO GET THROUGH, IS THAT OKAY?"

She smiled at him. "SURE THING!" Landing on top of a streetlight, she put her microphone to her mouth, curtsying and giggling sweetly before she addressed the crowd. "Would every mind letting these heroes through? I'm sure they have import business somewhere." Sticking out her tongue as she smiled, she gave Gentleman a little thumbs up as the crowd parted.

"THANKS A BUNCH!" Then, bowing his head, Gentleman beckoned them on. "Good luck, guys. Stay safe out there."

Izuku gave a beaming smile. "You too, mister Gentleman." He had to jog a little to catch up to the others, already walking away. When he caught Pop Step waving at him, he meekly returned the gesture.

"BOY!"

Gentleman blinked. "Huh? Master, wh-" Whirling around just in time to end up with his head in an arm lock.

A much larger, burlier man in a long coat and a simple, black cowl and long coat was... noogieing
him? "I told ya to meet me for patrol ten minutes ago, you slacker!" At this musclebound fellow's appearance several people in the crowd fled the scene, and a few flinched in fear.

You know... Izuku really should have noticed the bruises on their faces before now. "Owowowowowowowowowowowow!" Gentleman's eyes shut tight as he squirmed about, helpless in the man's grasp.

"HEY!" The trio turned toward Pop Step, who'd leaped down beside them, pointing an accusatory, scolding finger at the newcomer. "You can't just do that to him whenever you please, you brute!"

The masked man grinned a wicked grin. "But I'm not. This is discipline for missing for patrol!" Gentleman was actively flailing about in his efforts to escape. Really it was a miracle his head wasn't bleeding by this point.

Pop Step stamped impetuously, baring her teeth and growling at him as her shoulder bunched up, fists clenched. "That's not the point and you know it!" By this point the crowd had lost interest, fleeing the scene and dispersing as quietly as possible, leaving Izuku wondering what they were so afraid of. "You can't just going around acting violent whenever it suits you! People are scared because of it!" Ah. So that was what it was. "See!?" She pointed where the crowd used to be.

The newcomer didn't seem to care, but he released Gentleman. "Ey... you can't get information without hitting a few people."

Twist's jaw nearly dropped. "Y-... yes, you can."

"Semantics." Said the masked man, dismissing that notion with a wave of his fingers. He turned to say something to his 'ward', who's head Pop Step was busy examining for any sign of injury and fussing over him with an angry, worried pout, but he fell silent.

His and the tallest in their company's eyes met, the dhampire quirking an eyebrow. "Yes?" Stendhal deadpanned.

The masked man's expression went soft, vulnerable for a second, his voice quiet when he eventually spoke. "...Stendhal?" Everyone present turned and stared at him now, curiously. "Little Sten?" He was smiling now, and Stendal was only confused.

"Um..." He crossed his arms, giving a look that was almost amused. "Know me from somewhere, old timer-" then it clicked, and his features shifted, everything realigning and screaming of shock. "...Knuckleduster?!" he breathed in awe.

The masked man's face lit up like christmas had come early. And was celebrated in Japan, which it's not. "It is you!" His arms splayed wide, obviously wanting a hug. "How've ya been, ya little-"

Whatever he was about to say never left his mouth, as Stendhal had soared forward and slugged him across the face. Izuku and Pop both yelped in surprise, Gentleman actually shouted something. His 'Master's' given name, most likely, but Stendhal ignored it all, bellowing out in rage. "WHAT THE HELL ARE YOU DOING IN MUSUAFU, YOU PSYCHOPATH!?" As the much larger man staggered, collecting his wits and spitting out some blood, the dhampire kept right on screaming. "I THOUGHT YOU DIED THE NIGHT THE GANG FELL APART!"

Rather than simply retort, Knuckleduster opted to punch his former partner in the stomach. Then he retorted. "I COULD SAY THE SAME TO YOU, BOY! WHY DIDN'T YOU CALL ME!?"

"YOU KNOW DAMN WELL WHY, YOU DAMN LUNATIC!"
The exchange devolved into a furious brawl, the movements of which were too fast for anyone but Izuku to see. The affair was exceedingly more... unrestrained than he would have hoped. One of them looked furious enough to burst a dozen capillaries while the other looked disturbingly overjoyed. Whoever this Knuckleduster was, he enjoyed violence to an unsettling degree.

*So that's where Stendhal's smile came from... Maybe even that love of violence...*

"Uh..." Twist gestured a little awkwardly between her old team members and the two who, evidently, now knew one of them. "You guys know each other?"

Pop Step grumbled something, fuming as she folded her arms and watched the fight. Gentleman laughed, rubbing the back of his head. "Yeah... he's the third member of our team. We go around and deal with criminals that heroes are too busy to handle, most days. He's teaching me how to fight."

"As if!" Pop screamed indignantly, "he just beats you up and says 'get better at dodging', like that's actually supposed to help!"

Gentleman shrugged, still smiling. "Maybe, but I am getting better at it!" Rolling her eyes, Pop went back to watching the fight as she fumed silently.

Izuku, on the other hand, was getting worried. "Shouldn't we stop them? Before someone gets hurt?"

Twist shook her head, regarding the display tiredly as could be. "Nah. They'll get sick of it in a minute or two." *Or when Sten breaks a few of his teeth...*

True to the former vigilante's prediction, silent or otherwise, Stendhal sent the man sprawling backwards with a rather savage uppercut to his jaw. As Knuckleduster crashed to the ground, stars spinning in his eyes, his former pupil panted for breath, exhaling raspy and gurgly every time. "Pretenders..." he spat, wiping the blood off one corner of his lips, "heroes or not, you all sicken me, you old-" Erupting from his chest, almost like a bomb going off, Stendhal's lungs started violently trying to eject the built up blood and other fluids within.

It was a feat of his willpower alone that he managed to remain standing, as his knees threatened to buckle; standing coughing as he was, blood spewing from his mouth. Izuku almost went to his side, but Twist stopped him with a gentle hand on his shoulder, shaking her head with a knowing look in her eyes. Reluctantly, Izuku obeyed, ready to leap to his friend's aid if the need arose.

Growling, righting himself with some difficulty, Knuckleduster bared his teeth at the younger man. "What the hell are you talking about? Don't lump me in with those savages from back in the day!" He stood up on shaky legs, thrusting a thumb at himself and snarling. "I'm nothing like those bastards and you know it!"

Pop suddenly looked a little worried. "Wait, what are they talking about?"

Twist cleared her throat, stepping toward the pair of angry men. "Boys!" Her voice snapped both their glaring faces toward her, and she stared them down resolutely. "Maybe we shouldn't be having this discussion here?" Beguilingly, giving each other flaming stink eyes, the pair of them nodded huffily in agreement. "Good," she chanced a look around, finding an empty enough restaurant nearby. "It's getting late... maybe we should break for some food, take a breath before we go on, alright Sten?"

Realizing this would not be a meal had without the others present, Stendhal growled, deflating as
he relented. "As you say."

"Eh, I could eat." Knuckleduster shrugged.

Both Pop and Gentleman exchanged a quiet glance before nodding in unison. Izuku didn't say anything, he just followed them all inside as they found their seats.

Inside the squallled diner, next to no one moved about. Just one woman behind the counter, a waitress and the cooks in the kitchen. The six of them had found two separate booths at opposite ends of the diner. Twist was sitting with Gentleman, Pop and Izuku. Sitting by themselves, Stendhal glaring daggers with hunched shoulders and crossed arms while wearing a scowl, said nothing.

That left it to Knuckleduster to break the silence. "You've seen better days."

"And you haven't changed at all." The dhampire snarled. "Still roping kids into your little wars?"

Knuckleduster sneered. "Hey, he's older than you are even now. Don't go acting like you're some kind of grown up here."

Stendhal gave a dark chuckle. "You don't survive the things I've lived through without growing up very, very quickly."

The old man took a turn laughing, condescendingly. "Living on the streets? Growing up alone, friendless and screwed? No one to keep you safe or hold you up but the man in the mirror?" He pointed at his own face with his thumb, eyes going a little narrow. "Why do you think I took you in, boy? Why do you think I taught you all I know? I wrote that book you're busy quoting at me."

The future hero's scowl stretched a little further, staring at the vigilante with increasingly narrow eyes. "That isn't the half of it, pretender."

Knuckleduster sighed, gesturing a hand toward the younger, smaller man as he took off his mask. "Enlighten me then. Tell me what chapters I forgot to add."

For a moment, Stendhal considered lying. This murdering pretender didn't deserve the truth, hadn't been honest about who he was at all back then himself. "You first." He decided. "Why did you kill those cops?"

Knuckleduster was taken aback, his confusion, how offended he felt broadcast openly on his face. "What the hell are you talking about? I didn't kill anyone!"

A fist slammed on the table, and Stendhal bit back a snarl. "Bullshit!"

"Those idiots died of gunshot wounds, kid! Since when do I ever stoop so low as to use a gun?!" Stendhal went to say something, but the words died in his throat, leaving a sour taste on his tongue.

When they'd stumbled across the bodies at their hideout, seen the terrible carnage and Knuckleduster nowhere to be seen, they'd all assumed the worst. Days later and he gave no word as to where he was. Weeks later, even as the remaining members of the team had sent him an SOS, begging for help, and he was nowhere. He'd abandoned the team, left them to the law's mercy and not said word. It was only after Seether had been arrested, their hideouts all given up, that Stendhal hatched a plan.

He staged a kidnapping, dressed as knuckleduster himself, and locked the surviving members of
his team in the basement of their last remaining safe house. Days later, he was a ghost in the breeze and they'd all been 'rescued'. Of course, the police had kept watchful eyes on them ever since, their every movement cataloged and filed, but they were free. Witness protection, as it turned out, could be a double edged sword under the right circumstances.

It was only thanks to never having been named that he'd made it out of that mess freer than any of them.

Now, staring him in the face, was his old mentor. The sound of his voice, the look on his face, he found himself incapable of arguing with him any further. "Come on, Sten." He had to look away from him. "It's me."

A long, heavy breath escaped him, slow as could be, and he swiveled his back back around to look at him. Brutish and intimidating as the man looked, that smile he gave was somehow disarming. "Why didn't you answer when we called for help?" Now Knuckleduster looked guilty. "We screamed, begged for you to come save us from that mess, but you just left us. Left me."

At the wounded waiver in the young man's voice, the old vigilante winced, giving the boy he'd partially raised a mournful look.

But the younger man had more to say. "I begged you to come back and help, but you left me to save our people! Left me to shepherd them to safety, clean it all up! The cops almost gunned me down!" Undoing part of his costume, Stendhal exposed some of his upper body.

Lining his left shoulder and upper arm, a scar across his neck, were obvious bullet holes that had healed up. Judging from the discolored, veiny look to the skin, it was obvious the wounds had been infected and left to recover without aid. The old man's jaw dropped, his mournful stare accentuating even more.

"They declared you dead..." With red cheeks, feeling as though he'd just undressed in front of his father, he quickly replaced the armor where it belonged. "I washed up on a river bank outside Kyoto, managed to live off the land until I could travel." Glaring, his face pointed down but eyes up, he spoke with an accusatory tone. "The only reason you and any of them made it out, was because I stepped up. I threw myself deliberately into the line of fire while you cowered and abandoned us." Slumping back into his seat, Stendhal turned his eyes out the window. "Killer of the righteous or not, you are nothing but a lying pretender, old man."

For a long, long time they just sat there. Sounds of the diner, people cleaning up various things as the cooks made a ruckus with their equipment, colored the air. The waitress dropped off the orders of the other table before stepping outside to smoke. The other four chatted about inane things neither of them cared to listen to the details of. Then, above it all, came the soft melody of an old song.

"DIJURIDO devahn kihnam a cahtina fem
Shi feh ehg falta
DIJURIDO devahn tih mahn krohni weik
Heh hoogahn fahmfia...

Ahanohnay keh a'kohz me nu nah
Zah ih kroi beh dih hun dih na fehn

DIJURIDO devahn kihnam a cahtina fem
Shi feh ehg falta..."
As the gentle melody played above the other noise, Knuckleduster gave a tired smile. "Heh... you wanna know something?" Not bothering to turn his head, Stendhal gave him a sidelong look, waiting patiently. "This song..." it was all he could do not to roll his eyes. "It came out with a film, best damn movie ever, over two hundred years ago." He leaned back in his seat, staring at the ceiling with eyes that looked nearly as lifeless and tired as the boy's, sitting across from him. "To this day, no one knows a damn word of it. It's just made up words stung into something that sounds like a foreign language, as far as anyone can tell." He gave a little, quiet chuckle. "I think... I think it's better that way. Knowing what the words are, what they mean? It'd just take the magic out of the music. Giving it all meaning, would make it mean less."

Stendhal's eye stayed fixed on the man in the opposite seat, his disapproval and contempt obvious as the red glow in his eyes. This? This was the answer he got, after all this time?

"Point is..." Knuckleduster sighed, meeting the angry teenager's gaze, "The truth isn't something I wanna give. There's no scenario here where I don't come out without some kind of shame." Putting his mask back on, he almost looked sad as he smiled. "So, I ain't tellin ya. I'll let you decide what the truth is on your own."

If he wasn't done looking at him, done listening to him, he was now. "A true creature of habit."

As Knuckleduster stood up, going to venture away, he reached for the lad's shoulder. "Kid... I'm sorry I-"

"Don't touch me, pretender." The words came out like a lion's warning, guttural and savage. "Leave me be, leave us all be. We've all been just fine without you."

Knuckleduster respected his wish, hand back by his side as he turned to look at Twist. "Okay... one last thing?" Stendhal snarled, but it didn't dissuade the other man. "When I left... I thought I was leaving you all in safety. Figured it'd keep you out of the mess I'd be getting into." He looked at Twist, that young girl he remembered, from afar with a weight behind his eyes. "Whatever it is you're doing... don't drag the rest of em into it." Stendhal froze where he sat, overcome with rage as his eyes went wide. "If it's anything like the mess I got myself into? You'll regret it, when all is said and done."

He didn't bother to dignify what the man had said. As Knuckleduster walked away with a heavy step, he sat there wordless, just waiting for him to leave forever.

When he was gone, a hole in Stendhal's chest started stirring around, making his entire body feel heavy. When his eggs and bacon arrived, he almost ignored them until his stomach started growling. He just sighed bitterly and grabbed his chopsticks.

*To hell with it...*

Life, as Kyoka had found, was a bitch. First year into her hero career she found she absolutely loathed the media. Journalists and their unending thirst for stories. No matter how fresh the injuries they just shoved the cameras and microphones right at them. Victims, perpetrators, bystanders, anyone was fair game. Demanding answers, sensational news. Fame. It wasn't about saying
anything informative. Just making headlines and making money killing other people's dignity and privacy. At one point -fresh after a particularly harrowing fight with a drunken sludge villain- one such journalist had approached her. Asking her 'how she'd kept herself still looking fresh during such an icky fight'. At that one question alone her fists had clenched.

When the journalist finally asked how she hadn't ruined her make up it was the final straw. She snatched the microphone and, on live tv, said, "by not fucking wearing any." Her media presence dwindled after that.

So today, a year and some change later, when the reporters came to interview her friends about what happened she quietly slipped away. Squirreling herself from view in a quiet cafe, she put the paperwork she'd have to file for incident in front of her. Aizawa would be tearing his hair out about her dodging the media again, saying how important it was to keep up appearances, but that would happen later. Right now she was doing paperwork, the sun presumably setting behind those thunderous clouds, and she could listen to music in peace.

Music. It was about that only thing that told you more about her than the woman's words or actions. Not the music she'd written, mind you. No, she never spoke of the lyrics she'd scrawled down. Sang them aloud. But here and there, If you listened, there were hints. Hints about the kind of woman she was, in what she listened to on her phone. You can only learn so much about a person by the art they create. Without words or inflection straight from them, it's difficult not to project one's own feelings to fill the unspoken voids. Spaces between the words, as it were.

Then again, anyone listening to music is projecting a little. Not much point in listening to music if it doesn't resonate with you. Louder than what she'd ever played, ever put to paper, was what she listened to. Old music. Artists time had now erased. Their names more obscure now than she'd prefer. It wasn't like the kind of thing you'd hear on the radio nowadays. How she hated pop music. All frivolous, pointless self indulgence, no real meaning to the words. Just catchy tunes played to repetitive beats, choruses that played after a several verses too few. Choruses that never changed. Cheep feelings. The junk food of the soul and ear. Give her rock. Old fashioned and sung with conviction, talking about something that mattered. That still mattered. Poetry put to music, sung as emotionally as the day it was written. The only way to sing.

She didn't know how much time had gone past, when the work was finally done. All she knew was that it was getting late. The darkness outside had thickened, becoming more difficult to pierce with even the strongest lights. In parts of the city the streetlights were still out, making visibility even more of an issue.

Great...

Kyoka stuffed the paperwork into her jacket's inner pocket, stepping out the door to brave the rain again. She shivered at the sudden wave of cold, coating her face and hair but kept walking anyways. At this point in time patrols would likely be stopping for the day. All the same, she wanted to at least check in with the others. Between all the various happenings, tragic as they were, she hadn't gotten to see how many of them were faring. Better than her, she hoped. Phone from her pocket, she checked it for new messages but found noting.

Better than bad news.

Something flickered, off in the distance. Ignoring it, she assumed it to be some sort of light someone had either broken or switched off. When it flickered again, een brighter, she suspected otherwise. Then it didn't stop flickering and she knew something was amiss.

Fire.
She broke into a run, phone from her pocket and dialing emergency services as she sprinted toward the disturbance in the distance. No rest for the wicked or those that seek to oppose them and every other danger out there.

By the time they'd all left the diner, the sun was starting to set. Stendhal was lurking ahead of them, sulking in the rain as Izuku and Twist tried to bid their new acquaintances farewell.

"Thanks for trying to get us through that crowd earlier." Twist offered, somewhat apologetically.

Pop just shrugged with a little smile. "Hey, least we can do for the professionals, right?"

Gentleman nodded, smiling like an idiot. "Always a pleasure!"

Izuku smiled, feeling a bit drained if he was being honest, leaving the talking to Twist. "Stay safe out there." Then the pair of them turned to follow Stendhal.

He didn't even turn around to check, he heard their footsteps and started walking.

This left Izuku in the uncomfortable position of having to evaluate what his friend might have really needed. If distance was best, then he'd give it but something was making him want to speak to the man walking ahead of him. Whoever that Knuckleduster guy was, he knew the old man had something to do with Stendhal's days as a vigilante. Those nights where he'd gone out crippling 'false heroes', ruining people's lives without a second thought. Of course, he only knew all of this because he'd overheard every word they'd spoken. His hearing was too sharp not to have practically been at the table himself.

Somewhat surprisingly, before they'd reached their destination, Stendhal burst into fit of explosive, violent coughing. The gurgling in his lungs... Izuku was almost too stricken with worry to catch him, when the taller man's knees buckled.

Twist was quick to catch up with them. "Damn it..." she hissed, practically hauling him back to his feet. "Take your medicine. Now." Numbly, wordlessly, Stendhal nodded and inhaled what he could before he started coughing up his lungs again. "Well, just... fuck every plan we have then." She exchanged a look with Izuku, a nod, before they carried him back toward the diner.

They didn't even make it inside before the man's coughing had him lurching toward the ground.

"Sten!" Twist yelped, even as her friend shoved her away.

Izuku practically carried Stendhal to the ground, until the dhampire decided he'd had enough and shoved him away too. Izuku winced when his leg took a bad step, biting back a scream as his friend stumbled off his feet and his palms and knees crashed to the ground. His violent, wet, ragged coughing filled the street, echoing down alleyways as he sputtered blood, phlegm and pus onto the street.

There were times when Izuku truly hated having his keen ears. This was one of them, listening to obvious agony in Stendhal's lungs as he fought with his every ounce of strength to breathe. "Sten..." As the dhampire's breathing slowly settled, clearing, he tried to think of what to say. In the end, it was the same question as all the rest. "...How long do you have?"

Bitterly, the former vigilante laughed, forcing himself to stand. "The original prognosis was between a whole to half a year..." A sliver, some sharp pain lanced Izuku's chest and he felt another piece of his world start to crumble. "Considering our line of work? I don't imagine it will even be the more pessimistic option."
Before he could even turn around, Izuku had bolted for him. He'd only just swiveled to face him when the smaller boy's arms clasped tight around him. Even with the rain drenching them where they stood, he felt the vampire's tears through the cloth of his costume. It was warmer water, after all. Sighing, forgoing all else, he put his arms around his little brother and squeezed.

Painful memories flooded his mind until they were all he could see. Visions of his mother's wound, the light fading from her eyes, how he'd sat there and did nothing.

And then...

"Tell me..." another long exhalation of dark, arid vapor. "Why didn't you save your mother?"

Shocked, speechless, Aizawa's face spun to look at Nighteye, mouth agape. The question had shaken Deku to his very core, so much so that he'd unconsciously taken a step back in retreat from the hero. "I- there was- I couldn't! I didn't even see or hear-"

"You could have brought her back."

His heart stopped. Face gone pale and cold he felt his world slip away. "...I..."

Nighteye sighed. "You didn't even think of it..." His palm dug into the space between his eyes. "I'd hoped you'd made a choice, that it was something you'd decided was against everyone's best interests."

"It... it was my fault..."

"But in the end, you hadn't learned the lesson at all."

"She's dead because I-"

"Rather than understanding what complications that would bring, how that would inevitably end, you merely thought solely with your heart; just like you did the day you were turned."

His grip on Stendhal's shoulders tightened. "Let me turn you..." Stendhal was, to put it mildly, shocked that Izuku had even suggested such a thing. They stepped away from each other, and through the tears, Izuku looked absolutely determined. "You don't have to die, not like this!"

It was a sweeter sentiment than any that had been sent his way before, and despite everything, Stendhal gave a little smile he couldn't keep back. "Guren..." he squeezed his eyes shut, doing something he was not at all accustomed to doing: choosing his words carefully. "Brother, all that would do is kill two more people."

Izuku shook his head, a hand slashing at the air. "Stop talking nonsense!" He demanded, on the verge of further tears he fought to keep back, not caring that the rain would disguise them. Then his expression lost some of its fire, turned softer. "You- you can't just-" no good after all, he shoved his palms over his eyes, the last desperate and futile attempt to keep the damn from bursting. "Not you too..." His shoulders started shaking, voice inflected with obvious, wrenching sorrow. "Not you too..."

Stendhal sighed, closing the distance between and drawing Izuku into his strong arms. "If you did that... The Nameless one would kill you, my aunt, and then me." Izuku froze, blinking rapidly as he looked up at his big brother's face. That he was smiling so calmly only made the pain in his heart so much worse. "I... might have overheard you talking to Aizawa during the festival two years ago. Once or twice after that even..." Izuku's face scrunched up and Sten just brought it to his shoulder. "Think about the big picture, little brother..." Izuku's entire body went rigid. "Think about all the
good you wouldn't be able to do, about the pain you'd put Jack through losing you and everyone else too. Even discounting that, that's two more people dead."

The smaller one was trembling again, this time for a very different reason. "What... did you just say?" Surprised at Izuku's sudden sharpness of tone, Stendhal stepped back, and what he saw alarmed him. Izuku, still trembling, had gotten so angry that he was now laughing, cackling. "Fuck. The big picture." The dhampire's jaw dropped. "You know... someone once said something about that to me. I've hated it ever since." With a shaking hand, he wiped the tears from his face. "All the good I'd do? Saving Eri, keeping her from those people who were chasing her, could have cost us all our hero licenses! If those Yakuza had played it smart, they could have screwed us!"

"Don't remind me." Stendhal suddenly felt dirty. That he'd even consider not helping a child in that situation... "I'd rather not regret that decision even in the slightest."

Izuku looked at his brother as though the man had lost his mind. "Are you serious?"

The dhampire gave him a look, quirking an eyebrow. "You know I'm always serious." Then he lost the softer tone. "Look... I know it's uncomfortable, painful even, but sometimes doing a bad thing can stop something even worse from happening. As heroes... we need to be able to make that kind of decision."

Clenching his teeth, Izuku fought back the urge to mention that was exactly what Knuckleduster had done. Abandoning him, Twist and the others to keep them safer than they wound up. Still, this was not a point he was willing to let go. "People across the world have done unspeakable things according to that logic." Stendhal sighed. "When you let arithmetic make that kind of decision, where does it stop? How terrible are you willing to be in order to see that 'the right thing' is done?"

Now the dhampire was growling. "Sometimes that's what it takes!" Izuku balked, taking a step away from the man. "How do you think All For One wound up the way he was? You think All Might was just 'trying to stop him'? No," Stendhal started coughing again, and Izuku almost went to help him when his brother held up a hand. "Because it was All Might..." his breathing equalized, shaky as it was. "All Might tried to kill that bastard, as he should have. I'd bet my swords All Might's only regret was that he failed to kill him. Imagine the horror's that monster would have committed if he hadn't been reduced to what he was for so long."

It was perhaps the most uncomfortable thought of his life, but it still went through his head. Stendhal had a point. A man like All For One, someone truly unrepentant who cared little for collateral damage so long as his goals were met. People like that... "He could have sent him to Tartarus."

Stendhal's head reared back in laughter. "Right! And such a facility would never see dangerous criminals set loose, certainly none such as Muscular, for example." Izuku flinched, gaze at the ground off to one side. "Anyone determined enough, willing to do enough wrong, can free their allies locked in that fortress. Is it really a public service that we let them live?" all traces of a smile had vanished from Stendhal's face, a frightful, angry look burned with wild eyes. "At what point does not killing those people become enabling them? Letting them live long enough to commit more heinous acts is an atrocity in and of itself."

"So, what then?" Izuku demanded, his gaze finally returning Stendhal's. "Be like them in order to stop them? Where does that end? How long until we're the exact thing we aim to stop?"

"It's the only viable, permanent solution!" Stendhal roared. "Sometimes we simply do what has to be done and damn the rest!"
"You mean like Knuckleduster?" Both boys swiveled their heads around to look at Twist, who stood there, entirely fed up with this conversation. "That's what he did, you know, the day he abandoned us."

Stendhal could only blink, his mouth agape. "H-how did you-?"

"He's been in the city for years." Twist elaborated, posture and expression only slightly shifting, softening. "I ran into him... caught him on the bottle, he told me everything while crying his eyes out." She sighed, trying not to visualize it. "It was... an awful night. I half considered killing him, but... a drunk man's words are about as reliable as those of one who is about die."

Stendhal almost fell over. "Wh- why didn't you mention this before!?"

Twist gave him a weary, knowing look. "Because I know you. Because I was afraid you might kill him even after I told you everything."

He knew immediately what she was referring to. That night, the one night he'd taken the wheel on their crusade, the night he'd broken Shogun. In that moment, staring the man down and boring a hole in the man's soul through his eyes, Stendhal had almost felt the same. He was just a hair's breadth from slitting the man's throat and letting him bleed to death, but by the grace of his and that murderer's good sense, he hadn't been pushed that far. Although, that meant he could be brought to the point where such an action was inevitable.

That thought, that he might surrender to that urge to harm others in such a feral way... it should have scared him. "Like the others we fought back then, Knuckleduster is a pretender. A hypocrite." He spat through clenched teeth. "One who ruined Seether's life, very nearly yours and your husband's." Drawing in a very, very deep and slow breath, he forced himself to calm. "But I wouldn't go that far."

"Wouldn't you?" She put forward. "You were just advocating it."

He flinched, face lowered with shame. "I... spoke, perhaps out of turn." He turned to Izuku. "I'm... sorry. I didn't mean to get so... impassioned, during this dispute."

Slowly, hesitantly Izuku nodded. "Me too... I shouldn't have lost it when you mentioned the-" Nope, he had to bite his lip to keep himself calm. "well, when you mentioned what you did."

When he turned his wounded eyes back to his big brother, Izuku was disappointed not to hear that he'd changed his mind. "Truce?"

He'd held out his hand, and Izuku reluctantly reached out and shook that hand. "Truce."

In the end... maybe there was something to what Knuckleduster had said, back there in the diner. Sometimes, most times, saying a thing really didn't do much good. As things stood, both Izuku and Stendhal were on the same side, working and fighting to uphold some level of peace. So long as they operated within the rules of their profession, did as best they could together, what did it matter that their ideologies were so different? That didn't matter at all, so long as they kept the world around them stable.

Knowing the motivations, the meaning behind their actions didn't matter, so long as the end result and actions taken were all well and good.

DIJURIDO devahn kihnam a cahtina fem...

Of course, as the world would have it, things didn't stay calm and peaceful for long. Not even two
hundred feet away, a building exploded into flame, a thunderous boom knocking them flat.

Stendhal let out a tired, frustrated howl. "It hasn't even been a week yet... HOW THE HELL CAN THINGS BE GOING THIS BADLY ALREADY!?" Immediately breaking into a full sprint, he charged toward the flaming building.

Izuku leapt to his feet, nearly falling over as he did -damnable injured leg- and gave twist a searching look. "You alright!?"

She nodded, frantically gesturing toward the burning building. "Go!"

Not another second was wasted, and he ran as fast as his still screaming leg would allow. The night was barely even begun, and it looked as though things would remain so tumultuous if not worse for the considerable future. All the same, he'd have to set such thoughts aside, hero work needed to be done: so he, and other's who'd seen the initial and later bursts of light would see through, to the end if need be.
Running until your feet hurt and lungs burn is something of acquired taste. While the runner's high might feel a bit like euphoria, it's not really all that great if you're panicking or stressed out of your head while you have it. That being said, Kyoka was neither of these things. In fact, she was feeling a sense of stubborn determination more than anything else at that particular moment. It was very difficult to see where she was going, but her sense of hearing was as inhumanly strong as ever. As was said some time ago: what good was 20-20 vision when your ears showed you a clearer picture of the world than eyes ever could?

Still, she would have killed for a car or a bike about now.

Her silent prayer was answered in the form of a fire truck, racing by her. "Jack!" When she looked over her shoulder, Kyoka saw Uraraka on the side of the truck, arm reaching toward her while Mina waved frantically at her.

With a smirk, she thrust her hand out and clasped Uraraka's, feeling her weight vanish as she was hauled onto the vehicle. "Thanks for the lift."

Uraraka smiled at the accidental pun. "Things just won't calm down today, huh?" She turned back toward the burning building, her expression turning grim.

It wasn't long before Kyoka was following suit. "I get the feeling that's how it's gonna be for a while..."

Mina let out an exasperated groan. "Come on... don't be like that, Kyoka."

The purrplette winced. "Sorry." It was easy to forget that the others did not share her bleaker view of the world sometimes, Mina in particular. "Anyone else on this thing?"

"Just Yaomomo. Tsu's on her way though." Uraraka added, trying to get a hold of someone on her phone.

She just frowned. "I hope this truck and the few of us are enough to deal with whatever caused this one."

Why oh why was he always being thrown into burning, dusty buildings? Had his life gone past some karmic limit imposed by some higher power? No, he was just unlucky, but Stendhal would sooner loose his entire face than submit to forces such as 'luck' without a fight. Holding his breath, he kicked the door so hard it exploded into splinterly sawdust before charging inside.

Before the rise of quirks, the world record for holding one's breath belonged to Tom Sietas at 22 minutes and 22 seconds. Of course, he'd been inhaling pure oxygen for some time before performing this feat, leaving the average, air breathing person with about half that at most.

Stendhal didn't have the average person's lungs anymore.

At most, he clocked his time limit at maybe six minutes before he'd need to start breathing again. Six minutes was enough time to save someone, if he could find them. Working methodically, as people charged outside around him, he started kicking down doors and hoping he wasn't needed. He'd made his way to the third floor when, on the floor above, a window shattered, either someone jumping for the street or Guren flinging himself inside. It left the dhampire wondering if he either...
trusted him to know his current limits or simply didn't know they'd changed.

Of course, that was irrelevant while work had to be done.

Tearing through a small, overly decorated apartment, he heard a small whimper. Stopping for a moment, he searched about the room. That sound had definitely been close by, it was too weak to have come from anywhere else. As luck - or a lack of it - would have it, it came from a small child trapped under a collapsed bit of ceiling. He was odd looking, green and scaly, with pink hair, the lizard boy even had a tail. All the same, he was a little boy trapped in a burning building. Blood on the little boy's face... it- it looked...

"Mom, we have to go! Get up!"

The building shook again, and she was shaken just enough to roll down the rubble. Chizome grabbed on and was dragged along with her, battering against the smoldering rubble before being pinned beneath her. She- she was cold. Why was she cold?! When he saw her face, his eyes went wide. Open, lifeless, dry, those familiar warm eyes, those loving things she'd always looked at him with... something wet was spilling onto his chest, an object digging into his side. When he looked down, what he saw would be etched into his eyes forever.

A knife, jutting right out of her heart.

Stendhal punched himself in the face, forcing the memory to go back where it belonged.

That's not today. Not for him, nor anyone in my sight if I have anything to say in the matter.

Moving the rubble was easy as ever, his strength hadn't started leaving him yet. Scooping up the boy was, well, child's play, running for the exit even simpler than that. He could almost feel the rushing air from the outside kissing his skin, all the way up on the third floor, before the ceiling cracked, falling down in front of the stairs. Falling down on top of him.

"NO!" He screamed, throwing himself over the unconscious child.

The air was pushed from his lungs and he hissed in pain, from the impact, from something scraping his shoulder, from the smoldering feeling chewing his neck. The hissing and the subsequent breath that followed were completely involuntary, same as the coughing that followed.

Her body was so heavy... why didn't he have the strength to move her?

Why didn't he have the strength to do anything but run?

Why did she have to die?

Why... why was it getting hard to breathe?

Something crashed through the wall, walking through it like it hadn't even existed to begin with.

"Never fear, for I am... here..."

Heavy footsteps stopped short of him and his mother, his weak little hand reached toward him.

"H-... help..." he barely managed to breathe. How long had he been in the smoke? How long had he been struggling to breathe? "Mom needs..."

The footsteps were replaced by gentle hands, scooping him up and shielding his face.
"Little one... I'm so sorry..."

Heh... back then... it always comes back to that night. I was so weak then, couldn't do anything but wait for rescue.

Forcing the air from his lungs, Stendhal's face went hard as steel.

That's not today. I promised myself I'd never let that happen again, that I'd be stronger than all of it for every instance of it I was there to.

Reaching for his inhaler, he forced the remaining air from his lungs and did not breathe in again.

The world can make as many monsters that resist my quirk as it likes. My... my strength of will remains resolute, unshaken.

Inhaler to his lips, he made sure only to inhale the medicine before hurling himself up, through the burning prison that had fallen upon him. Lungs closed, he cradled the child to his chest. Examining the area in front of the stairs found him feeling trapped. Even if he could get past the rubble, he had no idea how much of the stairs remained. For all he knew the rubble was the only - theoretically- stable thing still in front of him.

Great... where the hell do I-

A window shattered upstairs, and he almost started laughing.

The obvious answer.

Funny, the things you don't think of in a moment of desperation. Things you really should think of. So, wasting no time, he ran for the nearest open door, turned his back to a window and threw himself. Glass shattered against his back, and the giddy feeling of free fall, vertigo as he finally flew into clean air. Releasing the breath he'd been holding in made his head spin, the world went fuzzy but his arms stayed around the boy. He wasn't able to brace himself for the fall, only he never hit the street.

Another pair of arms caught him in the air, then another just as they all hit the ground. "What the heck were you thinking!?!" Pop shrieked. "You could have broken your back doing that!" All the same she was fussing over him, before she noticed the unconscious boy in his arms.

Stendhal didn't say anything, just passing the boy off to her and breathing in long, heavy breaths. He'd let the medicine linger too long, he could barely see straight. Actually... was it just him or... were colors prettier? Shinier? Wavier?

Oh fuck me... am I high?

A new experience, not one he necessarily wanted to miss out on but the timing wasn't er... good? Dammit, thinking sucked like this. It felt sluggish and dim, no eloquence at all.

Hee hee hee, ah... eloquence is a nice word.

Gentleman stood over him, taking off his glove to feel his forehead as Stendhal smiled like an idiot. "Uhh... is he okay? He's kinda warm."

Pop growled. "He was just inside a burning building, genius, duh!" Passing the boy off to one of the fire fighters as several others started hooking up a hose.
Looking a bit embarrassed, sheepish Gentleman and ran towards the building. Again, presumably. Wincing, trying to regain his faculties, he shook his head, squeezing at his temples. Shaky legs and a spinning, shifting sense of balance did not help his lungs. "Damn it." He didn't start coughing, not exactly, it was more like wheezing aggressively.

His legs started carrying him toward the building, stumbling back over as he saw Izuku- no, Guren throw himself back inside. He winced again at the sound of shattering glass fighting back more memories of that night.

**The building exploded.**

*Glass flew everywhere, peppering his clothes and skin, smoke filled the air and his lungs.*

*Bits of concrete pebbled the ground, flecks of burning wood all around him, burning in his hair.*

*Breathing got difficult, mom was so heavy...*

"HEY!"

Alert and breathing heavily, a firm hand spun him around. In the background, somewhere, he thought he saw Jack guiding someone outside, telling the firefighters something, but she didn't have his attention. The woman holding his shoulder did. She had a curvy figure hugged by a black jumpsuit, pronounced and luscious lips, long and wavy blond hair that suited her nicely.

She also had a very, toothy grin, almost like a crocodile.

"Easy there, fam." Chirped the changeling, 'Camie', guiding him from the burning building as he blinked at her. "Ya weren't handling the smoke too well." Some sense of clarity came back, but confusion soon replaced it as she led him away from the flames. "Can't have ya overdoing it and steppin outta the game now, eh?"

He could only blink at her, wondering what she was doing here. "Changeli- Toga?" Her eyes went wide, all movement halted as she was suddenly overwhelmed with fear. "What are you...?" Over her shoulder he saw 'that wind guy' from the sports festival, along with the redhead who could move the earth on a whim. He also saw Jack, and then Stendhal started laughing.

Slowly, Toga removed her hand from his shoulder, backing away slowly. "Y- how'd ya-?!"

Stendhal laughed again. "Careful, the..." it took a moment to fish for the right word. "dialect is slipping." He tilted his chin toward their mutual friend. "I'd be care-...ful." He squeezed his temples again, trying to keep himself standing.

Sadly, it was rather fruitless and Toga wound up catching him again. "Easy, love." Why? Why was it so hard to stay awake? "You've done good, m'kay?" She cooed, easing him down onto the ground, then she leaned next to his ear and whispered. "Not now, talk later, about Eri and the Overhaul I have to kill." He had just enough to give her a very confused look before she ran to join the others.

*Well, she's consistent...*

Blearily, he looked up at the burning apartment building.

*Looks like I didn't manage much...*

He started getting very sleepy, but not before he noticed the boy he'd saved. He was looking up,
right at him, some dawning realization on his face. The flame flickered on his green scales, reflecting off them and his red eyes.

*Heh... but I guess he won't care about that. Not really... since he's alive...*

It was a strange feeling, falling asleep while sitting up, but he didn't dislike it.

The difficult part wasn't getting everyone out of the building. No, that was managing to do so without dying of heat stroke.

*So much for temperature immunity.*

Once he was on the ground again, the people in his arms passed off, he shrugged out of his jacket and let it slam against the street. Ridiculously over-weighted thing that it was. He shook his head vigorously, and sweat rained off of him as he swallowed though a throat gummed up thick. He turned back toward the building, his bad leg made things tricky for a moment, but he was going back in. There were still people in there, so he was going back in.

God, he wanted water... if he could still drink it.

Three more trips, back in, back out, it was hell every time but he still did it. His attempt at a fourth was interrupted by two sets of hands on him.

Both belonged to two of the people he was closest to, at one point or another. "Easy, Green." At the sound of Kyoka's voice, he calmed a little. "Everybody's out now, you can rest."

Panting, he turned to Uraraka who just nodded. "Let the others put out the fire oka-" The sight that befell them halted any and all conversation in the area: the building was, rather suddenly, encased in a thin layer of ice.

Wiping the ice from his arm, Shoto waved at them. "Sorry I'm late." When he saw Izuku, he smiled a little, barely perceptible. "Everyone alright?"

Uraraka smiled, nodding. "Glad you could make it."

Kyoka, on the other hand, had questions. "Where's Yaomomo and the others?"

Shoto thought about this for a moment or two. "Yaoyorozu's answering a summons, last I heard Kaminari was going with her. As for Kirishima and Bakugo? Uncertain." Hands to his pockets, he surveyed the area silently, his level, blank expression not shifting in the least.

Although the answer just gave rise to further questions. "What summons were they answering?"

Shoto blinked. "Have you not checked your phones?"

Worldless, Izuku did just that. "No." Kyoka answered plainly, following suit with Uraraka. Sure enough, three missed call's from Aizawa.

Izuku was the first to dial his number, and he didn't have to wait long for an answer. "I'm assuming you're busy with work." Said his teacher's gravely voice.

The vampire smiled when he heard him. "I think we're in the clear now, sir."

He put the phone on speaker, and Kyoka chimed in next. "Why've you been trying to call us? Did something happen?"
On the other end, they could hear Aizawa hesitate. "Not quite. I'm not sure of the details yet but something regarding Eri is being decided." Everyone's collective hearts went still, waiting for the rest. "I thought some of you would want to know."

Uraraka, bless her heart, was the first one brave enough to speak. "What do you know, then?"

There was a hesitant, grumbling hum. "Endeavor's putting together a team of some kind. Nameless has him out here on special orders."

"Where are you?" Izuku, Kyoka and Shoto all spoke at the same time. In the moment, it felt absolutely natural that they had.

Aizawa almost sounded pleased. "It's one of the hero associations he owns. Run by someone named 'Hawker'."

Shoto blinked. "Hawks?"

"No, Hawker." Aizawa corrected. "That's not important, just get here when you can. Be safe out there." and the line closed.

Both Uraraka and Shoto deflated, Izuku felt like he'd lost more of his strength hearing Endeavor was involved than he had in the rescue efforts. Kyoka rubbed at her face, mostly her eyes with one hand. "Fan-fucking-tastic." She threw her arms to the sides, letting them clap against her hips as she shook her head. "He's exactly who you want near a traumatized child... wonderful decision making, Nameless." Then her fingers were back at her eyes.

Shoto looked a little confused, before he puzzled out that she was being sarcastic. Uraraka looked almost as lost as she felt. "Well what do we do?"

Kyoka laughed humorlessly. "We answer and go in. If nothing else we should be there for Eri, if she's even remotely involved in what's about to go down."

Pulling his jacket back onto his shoulders, Izuku pondered over what could have been going on. "If my father's involved, it can't be anything minor." Shoto stated, the color in his eyes almost entirely dulled out. "We'd best be prepared for things to be... unpleasant."

Somewhat defeated, Kyoka shrugged. "When are things ever not unpleasant lately?"

One point he couldn't dispute. "More than usual."

She winced, nodding slowly. "Lets gather the troops..." She went to go find Mina, not knowing she'd left in an ambulance with that one reptilian child. He had no family present, someone had to be there for him.

The other in their company was easier to find, as he was sleeping -sitting up, somehow- in the middle of the street. Kneeling beside him, Izuku gently shook him awake. "Hey, Sten?"

Groggily, his big brother lifted his head, eyes glued shut by sleep and thus slow to open. "Hmm?" Eyes aflutter, he looked around them. "Ah... everything is handled then." The two of them stood together, off to one side Uraraka and Shoto were talking to two of the three Shiketsu students who'd appeared Camie nowhere in sight. "Quite the odd collection of souls here." Stendhal smirked, somewhat bemused.

Izuku shrugged. "It's more people to help us out, I'm not complaining."
Rubbing the sleep from his eyes, Stendhal started staggering away. "Precisely my thoughts. Now... if it's all the same to you, I have an appointment to keep with Twist."

The full blooded vampire looked a little awkward. "She's already gone. I uh... might've suggested she go on ahead without you, seeing how she's not a licensed hero."

The visible amount of restraint Stendhal had to exercise not to scream was somewhat alarming. When he turned around, his eyes were bulging. "Guren... she was the only one who knew the address." He could swear that bulging vein on the side of his temple was about to explode.

Izuku wasn't worried though, he just stepped forward and squeezed his big brother's shoulder. "Hey, she'll call if she needs you right?" In spite of himself, the former vigilante's anger started fading as he sighed. "Besides... you might wanna come with us."

Stendhal blinked, brow furrowed. "Your tone makes me nervous."

He just nodded in reply. When he explained everything, it put Stendhal on the warpath as he started striding away. "Where are you going?" When he unslung the sword from over his shoulder, Izuku bolted after him.

The expression he was wearing, when he caught up to him, was scary. "Endeavor is the last man on earth I'd trust with any child."

Izuku balked, taking a moment to find his words through his exasperated worry. "So you're going there prepared to fight?"

Stendhal flashed his signature, wild grin. "I almost hope so."

"Sten, he's the number one hero!"

When his big brother whirled about, his hand flew to Izuku's shoulder and his grip was tight enough to hurt him. "BY NAME ONLY!" When his little brother flinched, in a way he used to do with Bakugo, Stendhal gulped, overcome with shame as he withdrew his hand. "...I'm sorry."

His face had turned away, held low as Izuku slowly nodded. "It's okay..."

"Wrong." Slowly, Stendhal took a few deep breaths, the put the sword back where it usual rested on his back. "You go, tell me what happens when I arrive later."

Somehow, the way that his surrogate big brother looked almost totally lost just then, worried Izuku more than anything. "Sten, really, it's okay." He reached out, but Chizome- no, Stendhal, that's he wanted to be called, flinched away. "I'm fine, you can come with us."

He just shook his head, not even looking him in the eyes. "I need to calm down first. Clear my head." When he looked Izuku in the eyes and smiled, he somehow looked even older than all the fatigue and illness had made him. He almost looked like a totally different person. "Go on, little brother. I'll catch up."

Izuku gave a little laugh. "You know I'm older than you."

Stendhal's smile regained some life. "That changes nothing." Then he shooed him away. "There's someone here I should talk to anyways."

The little brother nodded. "Keep your phone on." As the two of them parted ways Kyoka and Uraraka made their way over to him. One was confused, the other had heard everything. "Shoto
and the others?"

He asked, Uraraka answered. "Shoto's on his way already, Yorashi and, I think her name was 'Chikyu', are still patrolling. Energy to spare, they said." She was smiling, it was enough to cheer Izuku up a little.

Kyoka was not so cheery. "Unlike us." She remarked, signs of fatigue plain on her face. "We should get going though, I want to make sure Eri's gonna be okay."

Izuku nodded, his eyelids feeling a bit heavy and sticky. "Anyone know the way?"

Uraraka raised her hand gladly and trotted ahead of them, leaving Kyoka to whisper in his ear. "I'll never know how she keeps that enthusiasm."

"Her and Mina both, you mean."

She smirked at him, shrugging as they followed after their friend. "Mina's a... different case."

A fact he was sad to be some familiar with. "Yeah..."

Noticing his glum demeanor, Kyoka reached out and took his hand, giving him a squeeze. When he reciprocated, she stepped a little closer, taking note of his still present limp, keeping her other hand at the ready in case he took a bad step. The rest of their journey would be made in comfortable, if not tense, silence. They almost didn't want to know what Endeavor was involved with.

The atmosphere around the destroyed building had become morose rather than panicked. Stendhal didn't care. There were more pressing matters to contend with and he knew it. "Changeling?" He called out, looking around as the fire fighters slowly started calm down, investigating the cause. "We should be relatively alone now."

His calls were not answered, at least not vocally. Something clattered, brick against pavement from the sound, and Stendhal slowly ventured over to the source. Surprisingly, it had come from the building across from the burned apartments, from the opposite side of it to the once roaring fire. Hand on the hilt of his sword, he went around the building to see an entire wall had been smashed in. Intrepid as he was, something felt wrong about this.

Inside was an array of equipment, providing some hint as to what was normally done in this place. Syringes, blood bags, beakers, centrifuges, computers, most destroyed now. Obviously a laboratory, an important one at that. The corpses, wearing lab coats and riot gear. Some had been incinerated, some melted, almost as if... Stendhal knelt to examine one of the bodies more closely. It had no head or neck, the torso hollowed out down to the bottom of the ribcage as smoke and steam billowed out. A sort of hissing, bubbling came from within, like the fluids, organs and fat inside were boiling still. Upon closer inspection he found that something molten had been poured onto the corpse, eating away from the top down, into the chest cavity. Something that had surely brought the former man a grisly, slow death.

"Must have hated this guy..."

Others had simply been engulfed in flame, torched unceremoniously. Although, there was one body in the building that yet lived. "There ya are." Stendhal regarded Toga the same way one regards a sleeping lion. From a good, safe distance and with one hand on a weapon. "How's yer nap, puddin'"
He halfheartedly shrugged, quirking an eyebrow at the nickname. "Fine."

Toga just smiled at him, her eyes narrow. "Not in the friendliest of moods, Stenny-poo?"

Now he was rolling his eyes. "Must you?"

She shrugged, strolling about the carnage with an air of nonchalance that would have unsettled anyone else. Casually swaying her arms about, twisting her hips as she spun around slowly, taking in the sight of everything around her. "Yep. Can't take life too serious, not if ya wanna keep your noodle unbaked." She turned around wearing an obviously fake, pouty frown, index finger poking gently at her lower lip. "Why so serious, puddin?"

His expression was the ever so comical definition of 'not amused' as he answered. "Because I'm always serious."

Rolling her eyes with a smile, she threw her arms and shoulders up in an exaggerated shrug. "Ah well, to each their own." She twirled one finger about in the air, gesturing about the room with her other hand. "Betcha yer wondering what this place is, though, and yer girl's got the answer."

Something about the casual way in which she spoke, that mockingly almost flirty nature of hers, was disarming. Stendhal knew better than to trust it for one second. Of course, one thing she'd suggested had left him slightly uncomfortable, an interesting feat. "No one is nor ever will be 'my girl', Toga." She cackled, for reasons that escaped him, "but go on."

In reply, she walked over and handed him a slip of paper. Reading it over told him exactly what she spoke next. "S'a genetics lab."

He rolled his eyes again. "I can read."

She blew a raspberry at him. "Ya got no sense of flair, ya know that?"

"Forgive me," he smiled with forced patience, "but I never cared for theatrics." Toga reared back her head and laughed. "...what?"

She almost looked surprised. "What? Ya don't remember that lil kamikaze run ya pulled with Zappy boy, back at the sport's festival?" Toga clapped her hands together, grinning that crocodile grin. "I sure do. That and the whole dramatic speech ya gave." She giggled. "Yer so funny, sayin ya got no love for showmanship."

Frowning lopsidedly, he felt... embarrassed? "I've been known to be dramatic."

Toga reached forward and pinched his cheek. "Same thing, sugar-tongue." He swatted her hand away, regarding her with wide, very confused eyes. What was this woman's angle? "Anyways," she shrugged, in a noncommittal sort of way as she spun lazily around, "place was doin some shcmancy quirk research before the brute squad came through and made off with somethin important."

His hand slowly lowered from the hilt of his sword. "What makes you think they stole something?"

She hummed, eyes to the ceiling as she shrugged again. "Mm... I dunno, somethin about them torching that apartment building as an obvious distraction?"

A decidedly fair point. "So what'd they take?"

Picking up some broken electronic, Toga mulled it over. "Hard ta say, sugah. I don't know a darn
thing about any of this stuff." She tossed the bit of broken equipment over her shoulder, looking for something else that grabbed her attention as she reached for her pocket. His body tensed and he almost lounged at her when she just drew out a couple of sweets, plopping on in her mouth. She turned and offered to him, a little smile on her lips. "Wanna loli?"

That almost amused him, but not enough not to roll his eyes. "In no sense of the phrase."

Once again, Toga was overcome by a fit of cackling laughter. "I didn't even think of that!" She sighed, shaking her head at herself. "I think I like ya, puddin."

He sighed, a palm at his forehead. Definitely getting a headache, but he was starting to feel like she wasn't a threat. "You said something Eri and Overhaul before?"

She pointed right at his face, her memory jogged and clicking into place. "Righty roo, Stenny-poo." She clapped her hands, rubbing them together. "What if I told ya, I might have a way of takin em down and savin our favorite Yakuza survivor?"

Rubbing at his eye with his palm, he looked at her with his other eye. "I'd ask you to ditch the Harley Quinn impersonation."

That time she just blinked. "...who now?"

Somehow, he felt even more tired than before. "Nevermind... just go on."

She shrugged, filing that name away for later. "Turns out, one'a his boys ain't too keen on lettin 'im get away with hurtin poor Eri for so long. Wants him dead, but there's a catch." She pulled her lolipop from her mouth with a pop. "He wants im to finish his research first."

Stendhal didn't like where this was headed. "The quirk eraser serum?"

Clapping her hands together, she nodded with a toothy grin. "Yep! Wants it done and but good!"

This didn't add up. "Who in his organization would want that but protect Eri?"

Toga gave him a look, one hand on her hip. "Prolly someone who's been on the bad end of child abuse himself, and don't get on my case about assumin genders. That gang is total sausage fest."

There was only one person Stendhal could think of, and he felt rather dim for not thinking of him sooner. "You mean Toya."

She turned her palms up toward the ceiling. "Ya keep mentionin weird names, puddin."

_I might kill for an aspirin right now... "You'd know him as Dabi."

"Ah! Yeah, that's him."

At least that made some kind of sense. "I'm guessing he helped you free Eri in the first place."

Toga nodded, clearly happy with herself. "Ya shoulda been there. Wait no, you'd be dead... never mind." She said sweetly, trotting toward the exit. "Can we leave now? This place is all morbid and junk." He reached out and grabbed her arm, stopping her from leaving. In response Toga turned very slowly to look him in the eyes. "Ya gettin all handsy for a reason there? ...Puddin?"

_I would pay actual money for her stop calling me that. "What's your motive?" Her threatening gaze shifted only slightly as she quirked an eyebrow. "Why are you involved in any of this?"
For a moment, she actually considered her answer. "Ya really wanna know?"

"Yes."

Looking a little bored, she tilted her head to one side as her eyebrows shrugged. "I don't like the world like it is. I wanna make it better for the one friend I got who ain't dead yet, even if I gotta make her hate me for it." Something about that stung, somewhere in Stendhal's chest. He... thought he might have understood that motive. "As for gettin involved with Eri, I don't like bullies. Overhaul is just a big, dumb, murderin bully." She looked him in the eye, suddenly no longer appearing to be an enigma to Stendhal. In fact, he felt an odd sort of kinship with her now. "That satisfied ya?"

Slowly, he nodded. "It has."

They stood like that for a little while longer, until Toga broke the silence. "So... ya like havin yer hands on me, or are ya lettin go of me?"

His fingers unclasped instantly, expression awkward. "Sorry..."

Why does my face feel warm? What is that feeling?

She shrugged, rotating her shoulder a few times. "Eh, I've been manhandled by worse. But next time? Yer buyin dinner first."

Now he just growled, scratching at the top of his head. "There. Won't. Be. A next time for that."

Only Toga was no longer listening to anything about that. Her mind seemed to shift gears rather quickly. "Anyways, ya in, or ya need time to mull it over? Cuz, I gotta go talk to Dabi, if I can even get near im."

Stendhal just shrugged. "I shouldn't even be talking to you. You're on record for wanting at least Overhaul dead, I should be arresting you."

At that, Toga turned around slowly and grinned. "And yet, yer not. Makes ya wonder what ya really want, deep down, down it?"

If she had a point, Stendhal didn't want to know. "...I'll call you."

Her smile shifted slightly, appearing ever so slightly more playful. "I'm sure." All the same, she handed him a slip of paper with her contact info on it. She had planned on keeping in touch, after all.

God. Damnit, woman. "I meant if I decided to -"

She flicked her wrist about dismissively. "I knew whatcha meant." Her body quickly shifted back into the shape of Camie and she started away. "Later, fam!" Much to the dhampire's ever growing confusion, she blew a kiss as she leaped an inhuman distance into the air, landing on a roof and running away.

Finally feeling some sense of relief, calm, he took his phone from his pocket and called the police, reporting what he'd found in the lab. He surprised himself by not mentioning Toga at all as he made his way outside. When he slumped down on a bench, thumb and fingers massaging at his eyes, he let out a long, tired groan.

What a day...
He'd almost resigned to going after the others in peace when his phone rang. Eyes slowly closing, his composure nearly slipping away as the one peaceful moment he'd had that day exploded with his ringtone. He just brought the phone to his ear and answered it. "Hello, Twist..."

"Hey," she sounded almost pleased, "they eyewitness didn't have much, but he did give up one interesting thing."

He started rubbing at his eyes again, just hoping they had something to work with at long last. "What did he say?"

The way her voice changed, he could tell she was smiling. "Get this: you know that police Sergeant? The one who followed you to my bar, seemed like a bit of a pain?"

Stendhal shrugged, even though she wasn't there to see. "Ken Nakamura. What about him, Twist?"

"He's the one who was originally investigating Eri's case, along with his partner."

Something about that, struck that same chord that just felt out of place. "Sergeant Nakamura doesn't have a partner."

"Not any more." She said, her tone suddenly quieting down. "Witness said he retired, says he knew the guys father."

A tired nod, a weary look to the sky and Stendhal felt some hope again. "We have a name?"

"And Address, partner, already texted em to you. Thank my hubby later, he found the address."

Stendhal chuckled. "I'll buy you and him dinner. And Twist?"

"...Yeah?"

He smiled, warmly at that. "I'm glad we're working together again."

"Me too, Sten. Meet you there?"

Crap, he couldn't. "Might have to do that tomorrow. I have to go meet Endeavor," he practically snarled out the name, "at one of his agencies to discuss... I don't even want to know but I'm going."

"I'll meet you there then. Still have to grab that hard drive from your friend. Anyways, later."

"Later..."

When he hung up, Stendhal felt the weight of the entire day creep up on him. Too much had happened to process at any reasonable rate and he just wanted to sleep. The strain on his body, if his emotions hadn't been toyed with enough, had him sluggish, moving like molten lead as he stood. Rubbing at his eyes, he started walking away, leaving the police arriving on scene to deal with the lab on their own. There wasn't anything but death and destruction inside anyways, the paperwork he'd have to file could wait until he'd found out what was going on with Eri.
All I Can Do

01010011 01000101 01000011 01001110 01000100 00100000 01010000 01000001
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Of all the times she'd ridden in ambulances, Mina couldn't think of a single one where the silence had been this awkward and unsettling. The paramedics seemed disquieted by the young man's appearance, his reptilian form, hesitant to speak to him or approach.

As if they were walking through a sea of glass.

She'd seen the same sort of quiet, knowing fear from zookeepers, those who'd wander into the enclosures for whatever reason. The weary treading upon ground where those who were not human held dominion. "Name?" said the one not driving.

Green scales shifted, bristling as if in response to the unspoken fear of the attending. "Shuichi Iguchi..." Glassy, wide eyes as fingers pinched at his own pantleg, fussing and tugging in some nervous tic. Young as that face was, it had come to recognize this sort of behavior for what it was.

"Age?"

Quiet fear, the invisible, impenetrable wall between those who are different and understanding, recognition of that same, ever beating human heart. "13..."

Mina was quite surprised by this, perhaps the little one hadn't yet hit that first real growth spurt. "Where are your parents?"

At that, Shuichi looked a little awkward. "Um... I dunno." he shifted about on the gurney, not quiet able to look her in the eye. "Business trip, overseas. Back next week."

As the rest of the attending's questions were asked, the air became slightly easier, but the silence reigned over all with icy fists. Once the necessary conversation was done with Mina was left alone with the little guy. Apparently that lizard-like appearance wasn't just for show, the autumn air left the poor lad shivering and she reached past him for the blankets.

The little smile he gave as she wrapped him up was warmly disarming. "Thank you."

Her returning the gesture was involuntary. "Sure."

Arriving at the hospital was... different, this time around. Things didn't seem 'business as usual', breaking the status quo in a rudely obtrusive way. Activity could be seen and heard about their heads, so many arriving and almost as many leaving at once. A steady line of pedestrians and cars, wordlessly, but not silently, filing to and fro. It didn't matter what faces you looked at, all carried the same, sullen look.

As Shuichi was ferried inside, Mina waving goodbye, the silent understanding that she could accompany him no further finally made manifest. Now she didn't know what she was doing here.

Glancing to her left, arbitrarily, she saw a face she hadn't wanted to recognize. The metal collar on his neck wasn't the plated, vented thing she'd seen back at the USJ, but his narrow, yellow eyes and
long neck gave away immediately who he was. Though the bloodied bandages on his chest, beneath the hospital gown, were no small indication of his identity. Beneath the bandages, his skin had been corroded, stripped down to nothing but a paper thin, translucent membrane oozing pus and blood. Hairless, lanky and fragile, Kurogiri seemed not to notice she was there. He was quietly, almost mournfully, eating away at a packet of jell-o. Old, glossy, dried out streaks ran down from his eyes, puffy and a little red, a discarded, crumpled newspaper lay thrown across the room: 'GONE: The Symbols of Fear and Peace'.

*I guess even All For One had people who loved him... and those he loved too.*

She didn't have the stomach to enter the room, to even continue facing him, so she walked numbly away. She tore herself away from the glass window, hands to the -admittedly small- pockets of her costume as she sulked away. Down and through the corridors of the hospital, staff around her moving about like worker bees, paying her little mind as she started wandering away from Kurogiri.

She sighed, the air tasting foul, bitter over her tongue as she navigated through the halls. So far as she knew, no one from their class had been to visit All Might yet, make sure he was comfortable. Coma patients, so she'd heard, could still hear and feel everything going on around them. All Might didn't deserve to be left alone in such a state.

Two different rooms, two different patients, the same sense of guilt and failure. One man she'd wronged and scarred in a moment of fear, panic and desperation; she hadn't anticipated the full effect of her abilities, and two years later it was now plain to see.

Another man had been a victim of her fear, inaction and hesitance prolonging a conflict that had too many lives on the line. If she'd been willing to use her abilities to their fullest extent, or some approximation, maybe the initial skirmish would not have been so draining, maybe then All Might wouldn't be...

*...*

*Damned if I do, damned if I don't...*

Slowly she opened the door to his room, gulping as she ventured in. Her fingers adjusted his blankets, fluffing his pillows what little she could. When a faint flicker of a smile touched his lips, she mirrored it.

*Hurting people... I never really stopped to consider what that really meant, did I?*

*It's just the reality of being a hero, having to harm others in order to save their victims.*

*There was always that chance, the slight window where things might go too far and I'd end up going well past that thin line between protection and something darker.*

*Heh, not the kinda thing you think about, watching the pros, right?*

*It all just looks so easy...*

*I wonder how many times he and others made mistakes like me. I wonder how they dealt with it...*

Outside the room was a bustle of activity, most of it unpleasant. Those that weren't staff or dangerously ill were either injured criminals or law enforcement. Some were grisly construction or automotive accident victims, people hurt from sporting events, but they were the minority. Voices were clear, only mildly strung up with tension, whiteboards detail to-do lists remained relatively
empty as tasks would be completed and replaced at about an even pace.

As bad as things were, it was still manageable with available resources.

---

I want you to remember something.

You haven't been alone, in all this time, but it was you.

You are the one who made it this far.

There may have been times where I had to teach you, help you, but that doesn't matter.

You are responsible for how far you've come, and I am so proud of you.

You're going to do amazing things.

You're going to make them so proud, just like you always have.

I'm proud of you, Denki.

You're going to be just fine.

I believe in you.

I love you.

Goodbye.

Contenders for the worst week of his life came down to two. Either the week his parents had been killed, or the week where his grandfather had passed just six days after one of his closest friends had been taken captive. Nine entire days he'd spent grieving, trying to keep himself together, to help the others find their missing friend. He'd barely made it through. When All For One hadn't killed him and he'd woken up with a mild concussion, he hadn't known how to feel. Looking back on it, how he'd just burst out crying, maybe 'helpless' would make the most sense.

He knew he wasn't alone, that much was clear. Keeping that fact in his mind was no simple task, however. It was a funny thing, realizing how alone you could be, even surrounded by other human beings, even ones you loved. 'The loneliest face is the one lost in the crowd', something his mother had said once. Remembering those words, it had brought on another rather odd realization, that isolation is second nature to human beings.

Social animals that we are, it is only natural to seek out others of our kind, engage in conversation and keep each other's company. Safety in numbers, so the old instinct says. But the thing is, how well can you truly say you know another, even knowing them all their life? How many times could that person say something, and you'd think they meant one thing, when it was really something totally different? For as advanced as human communication is, it has a great many flaws. Words have meaning, but only so much as we give to them. In the 1930's, the word 'genius' was derogatory, meaning 'idiot'.

Now the word 'genius' means precisely the opposite. If this example or train of thought sounds like nonsense, perhaps another would not. How often has one been speaking, then stopped abruptly, needing to search for that one, perfect word to end their thought? How often has that eventually chosen word felt wrong, at the end? Human communication is, unfortunately, still a work in progress, even after millions of years. Communicating feelings is almost an impossibility, when
trying to do so precisely, eloquently. Even if such precise words existed, would they be sufficient?

Trying to convey emotions through words, music, sounds, movement has been the human goal since the birth of our sentience. Even to this day, it is a thing we strive to do like no other. Like a vast ocean, the emotional spectrum is tumultuous and of greater depth than most would dare to fathom in their lifetime. To truly convey all that a person feels, in one moment, is a monumental undertaking. After all, what is the goal of poetry, but putting this emotional spectrum to words?

How did he feel then? How did he feel now? There was no answer he could really, simply give. His heart was a twisted mess with daggers piercing through, never in his life had he appreciated his friends more and hated the cold, uncaring world with greater passion. Alive, exhilarated, furious, agonized, grief stricken, madly and thoughtlessly taken with his woman whenever possible. All true, in all moments.

Does that answer the question, or could it perhaps be further elaborated?

Either way, he wasn't sure that he really cared.

When he heard his friends approaching from down the hall, he almost thought he might have been listening to what the other's had been saying.

Really though, he hadn't. Most of that conversation had been painfully difficult to stomach...

Prestidigitation, arguably the most useful and underappreciated quirk out of the entire roster. Not for hero work mind you, but for simply doing little things here and there. For example, instantly cleaning someone of all dirt, sweat and grime clinging to them and their clothes. This rather remarkable and understated service was provided at the doorstep of the preordained Hero Agency Endeavor's meeting was taking place at.

As soon as the smell of his earlier exertions left his nostrils, Izuku sighed in relief. After thanking the man at the door, he started walking further into the building. Tiled floors and walls alike, painted white and kept pristine as they day they were new. Look anywhere you like, for all the foot traffic at all hours -even now as heroes scurried about- not one ounce of dirt could be found.

*How ironic...*

The trio reached the largest office, top floor, and Izuku knocked.

"Enter." Commanded Endeavor's voice, and, behind himself, the vampire could sense Shoto's spiking fear and discomfort.

After putting a hand on his shoulder, assuring him that he wasn't alone, the group did as Endeavor had ordered.

They entered into the middle of conversation, Aizawa's gaze simmering with anger as he'd quirked a brow at the much larger hero. "Since when do you have the authority to order so many heroes around? To reallocate students to suit your whims?" His arms were crossed, fingers drumming with impatience.

Endeavor smirked, giving a short chuckle. "I do own quite a few agencies."

"Not UA, and not Ingenium's agency." Aizawa declared, almost demanded really. "Involving a child in your mad schemes! You have no right to-"
The much larger man jutted a finger at the former hunter's nose. "I have as much authority as The Nameless One says. Or did you forget he owns all but a few of Japan's hero agencies?"

Aizawa pushed Endeavor's hand aside. "I didn't, I also haven't forgotten how much those agencies are struggling, dwindling without Nameless's ownership of them. Something about the competition being too overwhelming."

By Izuku's side, Kyoka gave him an irritated look. "I love these kinds of conversations, they always end with the world being a better, less angry place."

Some day, some where, Izuku was certain she'd manage to doll out a lethal dose of sarcasm, if she hadn't already. "Yeah..." he meekly agreed, waiting for said conversation to end as she crossed her arms, impatiently waiting for the two fully licensed heroes to notice them.

Joining them by the door, Yaoyorozu had gone to Uraraka's side. As the two of them exchanged a hug, the gravity girl voiced the question on all their minds. "What's going on?"

To which the creation girl nervously answered. "Endeavor's been hatching a plan to lure out the leader of the Yakuza..."

"Indeed I have." Said the flame hero. "It's very nearly guaranteed to yield favorable results."

Noticing his son, partially hiding behind Izuku, he gave a nearly not menacing smile. "Son." He said

Shoto was rather defiant in his reply. "Endeavor." Said he, and all noted his choice of words.

Endeavor sighed, shaking his head. "One day, boy... one day." Taking a seat, he gestured to the chairs lining the walls of the room, and one by one they all did the same as he. "You'll all be happy to know that Eri is safe and sound, playing in the office of an... unpresent employee of mine."

Izuku felt some relief wash over him, Kyoka was not so moved, crossing her arms again, eyes narrowing. "So what's the decision, regarding her?"

Rather than answer, Endeavor turned to look at Aizawa with almost sadistic amusement. Realizing that the other hero was not going to speak first, he sighed and spoke through clenched teeth. "She's... bait." All eyes but Kyoka's, Kaminari's, Yaoyorozu's and Shoto's snapped to him, stunned. "We know the Yakuza are after her, don't know why, but we know they're trying to get their hands on her again."

Slowly, the eyes of the students turned to Endeavor, Kyoka and Shoto glared quietly while the others gawked in shock. "You- you can't!" Uraraka stood up, clearly upset. "She's just a kid! Using her to draw out such dangerous people is... is..."

"Despicable." Kyoka finished for her.

"Unethical..." Yaoyorozu said more quietly, but with a stern tone.

Tsuyu gulped. "It's almost diabolical."

Standing up along with Uraraka, Izuku spoke without hesitation. "It's unacceptable!" At this outburst, Endeavor looked partially amused. "My friends put their lives on the line making sure she was safe from them and now you want you just dangle her in front of the same people they saved her from!?" The flame hero laughed. "How can you justify that?"

A curious looking Stendhal emerged from the hallway, though his curiosity was colored with
anger, directed at the flame hero. Whether he'd heard everything as he'd approached or was nursing a sizable grudge was anyone's guess.

In truth, it was both.

Rising to his feet, his boots clunking at the floor as he approach the defiant vampire, Endeavor smiled the smile of tyrant. "Results." His answer was simple, as were the corresponding emotional responses. Disgust, horror and mainly anger.

Izuku met Endeavor's eyes, fists clenched by his sides. "I wont let you."

Surprising most, Endeavor just started laughing. "And how do you plan to stop me this time, boy? I've done nothing illegal, and law enforcement and heroes alike have been directed to aid in this..." he grinned, letting the unspoken, obvious choice of words rattle in their heads. Sometimes, he really enjoyed having the hero name he'd chosen. "Undertaking." Then, calmly, holding up a palm wreathed in the flames of his quirk, he let Izuku look at the fire he commanded. "Be warned boy: if you, of all individuals, decide to go against me, decide to walk the path of criminal or vigilante at best, it would not be considered murder to end you."

Uttering such a threat did not go unanswered. In less than a second, Shoto had risen with his right hand extended and wreathed in ice, the cold air swirling and blue in his palm. Stendhal had unsheathed his sword, aiming it right at Endeavor's carotid artery. Kyoka had simply leapt to, dragging Izuku behind her with her earlobes hovering just next to Endeavor's sternum.

Slowly, his chest shaking and quietly at first, Endeavor let out a series of chuckles that gradually evolved into boisterous laughter. Yaoyorozu and Kaminari, both now standing, exchanged a worried look and slowly dropped into combat stances. Out of the corner of their eyes, they might have thought that glint poking from Aizawa's sleeve was the tip of a blade.

In mock surrender, clearly amused, Endeavor held up his hands. "Impressive, the level of loyalty you've inspired, Guren."

Kyoka scoffed, sneering at the beast of a man. "Yeah, amazing what people will do for someone they care about." Eyes narrowing, she added, "rather than someone they fear."

Endeavor gave derisive, single laugh. "Sarcasm is unbecoming of you, young lady."

"It wasn't sarcasm."

The hero growled. "If you're quite finished?" Slowly, they all lowered their guards, stepping back and taking Izuku with them, and Yaoyorozu and Kaminari sighed in relief.

That is, everyone except for Stendhal, who kept his blade hovering at Endeavor's throat.

Curiously, Endeavor quirked an eyebrow at the half human. "Planning on using that weapon, boy? Or just posturing threateningly?"

From his tone, Stendhal spoke the truth. "Uncertain. Will you threaten my brother like that again?"

With a smile, Endeavor raised a single finger, the tip of it producing a flickering flame as he crossed his heart. "I won't threaten again."

Watching the 'hero' closely, Stendhal lowered his blade, but did not sheathe it. "I don't care who you are, pretender." The dhampire challenged. "No one harms those I care about, not ever."
"My," Endeavor chuckled, "the way you all go on you'd almost think I were the villain after that child." Then, he raised the flame to his lips, "remember your roots, boy, they define your limits." He blew it out and a thick trailing cloud of smoke flew into Stendhal's face.

Almost immediately he'd started coughing, his lungs violently forcing the tainted air away. "Sten!" Izuku leapt to him, catching him as he'd started to fall.

"Knowing your limits, as always, is the key to victory." Paying them no mind, Endeavor started walking out of the room. "You continue to impress, Guren. You're not merely the defiant rebel I saw in that sports arena, at least not any longer." He left the door open as he wandered away. "We move Eri to a less secure location tomorrow, I think you all need a chance to rest before you no doubt volunteer to be the girl's guardians." and his stomping footsteps faded away as he went ever further into the distance.

As Izuku helped Stendhal find a chair, Aizawa adjusted something in his sleeve that made an audible clicking noise. Kyoka just glared daggers down the hall. "How the hell is a man like that the country's number one hero?"

Still gagging on his own blood, Stendhal answered. "By default." Before he started retching up blood, lunging for a nearby trashcan.

While the others looked on in very, very worried concern, Kyoka gave a little frown. "It's getting worse, isn't it?"

As his breathing settled, Stendhal nodded. "Have I ever mentioned how much I hate smoke?"

Producing something from the skin of her palm, Yaoyorozu knelt by his side. "I believe you have..." she offered him the vial of pills, and he quirked an eyebrow at her. "Cough suppressants, painkillers. I'm afraid it's the best I can do."

Gratefully, he accepted them, opening the bottle and throwing a few back. "Could I talk you into making me new lungs?"

A possibility she was shocked to have not already considered. "I... I'd need to know your exact genetic makeup and understand how you uh... fit together on that level, but it's not impossible." She rubbed the back of her neck, eyes to one side, doing some calculations in her head. "It might take some time to figure all that out."

Breathing deeply, he nodded, coughing a few times. "I'd appreciate it..." Pushing the trash can aside, he shakily got to his feet and saw Aizawa looking at him, some bleak understanding on his face. "...why are you looking at me like that?"

His eyes seemed to linger on the boy's snarly, messily bedraggled hair. "How did you develop this condition?"

Stendhal wasn't sure he liked the look of recognition in his teacher's eyes and was slow to answer. "I... was in a burning building as a child. There was a lot of concrete dust in the air, I breathed it in for a long time. My 'condition' is called silicosis. No cure."

The recognition flicked, solidified, then vanished. "...how long do-"

Stendhal flinched, holding up a hand. "Don't say it! I'm so tired of people asking me that... like it's all that matters." Shaking his head, the dhampire looked out the door. "Where's Eri, exactly? I haven't seen her in a while."
Izuku looked between the two of them, having put the rather obvious clues together. His worried eyes went to his teacher, who did not acknowledge him right away. "Down the stairs one floor and at the end of the hall. The office without a nameplate."

Nodding, he started heading that way and after some hesitation, Uraraka followed him. For a brief second, the brother's eyes met and Izuku thought he might have seen some mournful regret in them. In truth, that glassy look was from tears he'd almost failed to fight back. The vampire sniffed, rubbing a palm at his eyes, and Kyoka squeezed his shoulder.

Izuku felt almost wrong accepting her sympathies like that. "I'm fine." he lied. "Worry about him instead?" Slow to nod as she was, she understood how he felt. Squeezing him one more time, she did as he'd asked and followed after them.

Sighing, feeling a weight settle over him that was both too familiar and alien to ignore, Shoto went for the door. "I'll be on the roof. Call me if you need me." He and Izuku exchanged a nod, then the dual quirk user walked away.

With a frown, Yaoyorozu shook her head. "I guess I'll be making some calls, I'm sure the others will want to know what's going on." Ashido, Kirishima, Iida and Bakugo she likely meant. Not long later she and Tsuyu left the room together.

Face in his palm, Kaminari slumped back into his seat, eyes scrunched up tight. "What the hell have these last couple of weeks been? Are we in hell? Is that what's going on?"

Shakily, a hand on the wall guiding him to his seat, Aizawa practically collapsed. "Perhaps it is."

Hearing the obvious weakness, tiredness, the scratching of time in the teacher's voice, Izuku stood up and walked toward him as Kaminari scoffed. "Cool. Great pep talk, cap. Same time next week?" Hand flopping to his knee, he swiveled his head around to look at Aizawa and then his mood rapidly shifted to match Izuku's concern. "Uh... hey, you okay?"

Fingers pulling at the skin of his tired eyelids, Aizawa nodded. "Sudden case of fatigue." with his other hand, he motioned for the door. "Would you mind calling Musutafu General Hospital for me? A patient named Shino Sosaki... I'd just like to know if she's awake yet."

With a hesitant nod, Kaminari got up. "Sure, boss. I'm on it." Phone from his pocket, he left the room, thumb dialing. He even closed the door behind him as he left, leaving Izuku and he alone.

Unsure how to approach this, Izuku sat beside him, hesitating at putting ah hand on his shoulder. "...Sir?"

Aizawa's finger and thumb massaged at his eyes. "Fifty two... fifty two lives by my hands, boy... why couldn't it have stayed there?" Blinking, Izuku felt his jaw drop, something wrenching in his heart as Aizawa's voice quietly breathed along. "Why does it have to be fifty three? One of my own students..."

He hesitated no longer at putting a hand on the man's shoulder. "Sir, you..." he bit his lip. There really wasn't much he could say to comfort him, not for this. "You couldn't have predicted this would happen."

Aizawa's smile was little more than a ghost of the expression, his eyes still singing of sorrow. "Kiddo... My last act as a hero, before I became a teacher, was making that boy an orphan." Izuku tilted his head to one side, still listening, still gripping his shoulder. "I should have realized it was him, the second I saw that tangled mop of hair on his head... should have recognized the little boy
Valentine's family was willing to die to keep from me."

Another obvious thing Izuku hadn't realized. "Wait, Vanessa is-

The former hunter nodded. "His aunt..."

Slowly, Izuku felt his hand slide and fall away from Aizawa's shoulder. "...Oh my god." Did... did she know? Know that he was still here? If she did... "When he dies, she's going to lose her family all over again." He'd lose his brother and one of his best friends, she lose her nephew, the world would lose one of the most dedicated heroes he'd ever seen or had the pleasure of meeting. All because The Nameless One feared what may happen if more vampires came into being.

Aizawa buried his face into his hands. "You should talk to him, see if he's found her yet..."

He just sat there like that, elbows on his knees, while Izuku slowly stood up and started walking. It had only been an hour, maybe slightly more, since he'd heard the news. So little time to process it all, and somehow the awfulness of it just kept compounding. Another death on the conscience of his- ...his teacher, the obvious pain and grief the others would be feeling before much longer.

His feet had numbly been carrying him down the hall, Kaminari patting his shoulder as they passed each other, then he reached the stairs.

...Is Stendhal singing?

Rounding the bend, he saw that the office door was open, and didn't see anyone outside it.

"Nothing more I say...
Nothing changed my words...
Nothing changes anyway...
Only time passes...
That's just the way, how it is,
Someone must be thinking so...

I cannot do anything for you,
High ho,
Talking... is not in my line...
If I can meet you somewhere,
I'll be there at your side with a smile...
Can't do anything else oh, Nothing...
Nothing...
Nothing else...

Sure enough, walking through the door, he saw Eri curled up with her cheek smushed up against Stendhal's arm. That smile she wore with closed eyes was enough to warm his heart.

There are things I can't forgive...
There are things I cannot allow...
There are things I want to though,
Oh how time flies by...
You always have to choose a side,
Everyone is trying to convince...

They were sitting on the couch against the wall, Kyoka at the other end of the couch and draping a blanket over Eri. When the two others not yet sleepy noticed him, Kyoka gave him a look that
made him smile. Stendhal just kept singing, lulling Eri to sleep.

_I cannot change who I am,
High ho,
Don't wanna make you cry...
If I know how make you happy,
I'll be there at your side with a smile...

He motioned Izuku over to him, taking his hand and softly shifting Eri aside with the other. Eri blinked, stirring slightly from consciousness as Stendhal stood up, maneuvering Izuku into the spot he'd been occupying. When the vampire claimed that spot, Eri's smile widened with a little hum, her hand reaching up and grabbing his sleeve while Stendhal knelt by the couch, petting Eri's cheek.

_I cannot do anything for you,
High ho!
Talking... is not in my line...
If I can meet you somewhere,
I'll be there at your side with a smile...
Can't do anything else about Nothing...
Nothing
Nothing else...
Nothing
Nothing
Nothing else...
Nothing...
Nothing else..."

Without opening her eyes, Eri whispered a few words that made the half human smile. "Thank you, sword guy."

Tucking the blankets over he shoulder, he replied. "You're welcome, little one."

She opened her eyes, just a little bit. "Do you know any other songs?"

Smiling wider, he nodded, squeezing her little shoulder. "I'll have to sing them later. For now? Just sleep and dream of things that make you happy." Eri closed her eyes again, and Stendhal shakily, yet quietly, got to his feet. "If anything happens, call me."

Izuku nodded, making himself comfortable. "Where ever you're going, call if you need help. I want to be there."

Stendhal pointed to Eri. "Be here." Adjusting the sword on his back, he cleared his throat. "You're... better at the touchy feely stuff. I've gotta go do I do best..."

Wincing, the vampire hoped this wouldn't entail anything too illegal. "Be careful."

He smirked. "Aren't I always?" Then he left the room.

As the door quietly shut, Izuku felt his body sink. "What a day..."

Kyoka sighed, running fingers over her scalp. "You can say that again." she deflated into her seat, leaning back and head tilted up, staring at the ceiling. "Think things will calm down at all tomorrow?" Izuku shook his head and she stuck out her bottom lip, brow angling down. "Yeah, I
didn't think so either..." she sighed, standing up, stretching a little, then eyeing the other end of the couch. "Think there's enough room for me over there?"

Looking to his right, Izuku figured the answer was yes. "If you don't mind being squished a bit."

His shy smile made he smirk. "Not at all." With some careful maneuvering, she wiggled into her new spot and rested her head on his shoulder. "...you holding up okay?"

Not a question he knew how to answer. "I... I'll let you know when I am."

Her hand reached up, petting at the back of his neck and he let out an approving hum. "You only just found out today, didn't you?"

A nod, at first, was his only reply. "We wouldn't let me turn him..."

She sighed. "Yeah... sounds like Crow."

Eri's ear perked up. "His name is Crow?"

Izuku smiled, "no, that's just what Kyoka calls him."

Kyoka shrugged. "I'm the nickname giver of the group."

Eri angled her head a little. "Can I have one too?"

The purple haired girl smiled. "Hmm... I dunno. You really think you'll be hanging out with us that long?"

She'd made the teasing obvious, Eri just grinned, snuggling even closer to Izuku. "Uh huh!"

Putting a finger to her lip, Kyoka thought about it for a moment, pretending it was more difficult than it was. "Well... how about... Uni? Like a Unicorn?"

Eri's smile faded, and she quietly looked at the floor. "Oh... okay..."

The couple exchanged a look. "Don't like that one?" Izuku queried, tucking her hair behind her ear with the hand she wasn't clinging to.

She shook her head. "No... it reminds me of my horn, my quirk..."

Kyoka's face shifted, making her look sad. "What's wrong with your quirk?"

Eri hid her face against Izuku's arm. "It hurts people..."

They exchanged another look, quietly deciding not to push on that matter and try something else. "Well..." Kyoka mulled aloud. "How about Grey?"

Izuku smiled at that one. "You mean like my hair?" Eri perked up.

Kyoka nodded, smiling again. "Why not? Green got his nickname because of his-" She stopped, glancing awkwardly at Izuku. "...Eyes. So, you'll fit right in that way."

That idea had her smiling and nodding. "Okay! I like it." she nestled in, closing her eyes once again. "...hey, Izuku?"

He stammered, thinking he should correct her, but then realized they all called her by her first
name anyways. At least, that was the assumption. "Yes?"

"Will you sing me another lullaby?"

"I'm..." he started, "not the best singer." Eri frowned, settling in anyways, and Izuku decided he couldn't really leave it at that. "but I can tell stories."

So her smile came back, and Kyoka smiled too. "What kind of stories?"

Damn it... Okay, what stories did he actually know? Tales about All Might, certainly but that seemed kinda... lame. "Oh." He grinned, "How about... one that a lady once told me? It's about a mother vampire who protects her people from a dragon. "I'll just tone down the stuff about the monsters..."

Eri looked up at him, genuinely curious. "I thought vampires were bad. Monsters that just killed and ate people."

Looking a little awkward, Izuku was slow to answer and so Kyoka did for him. "Nope, at least not all of them." She put her arm around her man, squeezing him reassuringly. "Some are good guys, doing good guy things."

I love you, Kyoka.

Thinking she understood, Eri closed her eyes. "Like people?"

Kyoka smiled, and Izuku leaned his cheek against the top of her head. "Just like people." Silently, he reached for her hand and she for his.

While Izuku mulled over the wording, trying to make the tale into more of a bedtime story, Eri thought up another question. "Hey... what if Overhaul shows up while we're asleep?"

Ah, of course. "Well... he wont."

She peered up at him. "How do you know?"

He gave her a smile. "Because I'll be awake."

Eri looked so amazed at that declaration. "All Night?"

He nodded, and Kyoka frowned. "All night..."

Her frown widened. "We could sleep in shifts." Sheepishly, her boyfriend nodded, squeezing her hand.

"Or that..."

As the night rolled along, Izuku told his story and lulled the child into slumber, the woman at his other side reluctantly following suit. As he resolved to stay awake, mulling over the various happenings of the day, a persistent thought kept chipping at him. It was a doubt, lingering and pungent. Endeavor... the kind of man who'd turned Shoto into a shy, anti-social and silently anxious mess. The kind of Hero who'd put a small child willingly into harm's way if it meant he would succeed.

A man like him, sitting at the top as the nations now number one hero and The Nameless One's new right hand man.
With people like them as their leaders... What direction was their world headed?
Boiling Point

The towering, literally horse-faced giant roared something unintelligible, trying once again to stomp Ingenium into paste. Of course, with that overwhelming size came a rather significant speed handicap. The professional had no trouble evading the attack, signalling for his brother to go for the length of rope that was hanging out the window of a broken truck.

With a scream of another string of expletives that would make a catholic blush, the giant swung his fist down toward Kirishima. The redhead just grinned, his body instantly hardening and becoming jagged like stone. While the attack connected, it wasn't he who felt his body cry out from it. The villain howled, clutching his bleeding hand and screaming about how he'd rip the future hero in half.

Of course, someone else had something to say to that. "NOT IF YOU DIE FIRST!" Bakugo was soaring through the air on the wings of his own explosions, propelling him upwards and spinning his body about like an airborne corkscrew.

Using his momentum to add extra force, his other palm unleashed an explosion that dwarfed even the closest flash of lightning that night. The villain didn't even scream as he went limp, falling to the ground and shrinking to his normal size.

Somewhat timidly, Iida just walked forward and tied up the now much smaller villain. "Was... was that according to plan?"

Sagging with fatigue, taking a seat on the crushed hood of a nearby car, Ingenium took of his helmet. "No, but I'll take it." Reaching up, he massaged at his eyes with his thumb and forefinger. "Are things any quieter now?"

Kirishima turned his ear to the sky. "Kinda? I mean I think I still hear something going down that way." He pointed off in a direction Ingenium didn't look up to see, he just groaned. "But at least this guy's down for the count."

Taking in a slow deep breath, Ingenium stood up, feeling his legs protest at every second he was still moving them. "Alright people. Lets move..."

Of course, that would be the exact moment where their phones all went off. The conversation was brief, but not light. "Eri's being used as bait...?" Kirishima looked horrified, his voice barely more than breath.

"WHAT THE FUCK!?" Bakugo demanded. "What moron put Endeavor in charge?!"

"Language!" Iida and Ingenium both shouted before sighing in unison.

The two brothers exchanged equally weary, equally drained looks. "Want me to stay?" Said the younger one.

Ingenium shook his head. "I'll meet up with you once I've taken care of it." Helmet back on, he straightened up. "Go, watch over her. I've got this."

Hesitantly, Iida nodded, putting his own helmet back on. "Alright... just don't overdo it. Remember, you are just a man."

Ingenium gave a breathless laugh. "Remind me to get a memento mori on my costume." then he shooed them off. "Go." And raced away into the night.
"They piss 'n' moan and push 'n' shove,
So below as it is above,
From every mouth words blare,
Off every surface words glare,
Till there's nowhere to look except to stare...

At reflections in the subway glass,
Fluorescent lit skin looks harsh,
So best pretend to be asleep,
In case you have to give up your seat,
To anyone less fortunate than...

But the train stops beneath the streets,
Shift your legs tap your feet,
Open an eye, start to speak,
But the words get stuck between your teeth..."

He was wiping away at the corners of his eyes as he tromped up the steps. Dealing with Endeavor without Toya around... he was no substitute for his older brother, but Shoto likely needed someone right about. If he could comfort him somehow, he would. Opening the door to the roof, he saw three of his friends lounging about, staring up at the stars. Kaminari, Yayorozu and Shoto.

From the sounds of things, they were talking about the past, their childhoods specifically. "It was just me and grandfather after that," Kaminari's voice, hand outstretched toward the stars. "He was the funniest old bastard... if there was a joke to tell, and the mood wouldn't be thrown into the dumpster for it, he'd probably tell it." His smile was warm, fond and achingly empty. "...I miss him."

Heh... guess I'm not needed here after all.

"We see you." Stendhal froze, hearing Shoto's voice. "You might as well join us."

Growling under his breath, he awkwardly padded over, his boots clunking against the roof. Sitting down, cross legged, he couldn't quite bring himself to look at them.

"What about you?" Kaminari asked Momo, unable to help but smile. "What was your childhood like?"

Shifting a little where she sat, the creative hero thought about her answer. "I grew up away from most other kids." That earned a noticeably sympathetic look from Shoto. "My mom was... a little strict, you could say. She was dedicated to teaching me how to be a hero, like everyone else in our family. It got kind of lonely at times, but it worked out at least," She leaned her side against the nearby lip of the roof, suppressing a yawn. "I always wanted to be a hero." with another smile she added, "It's been quite the journey getting there, but so far it's all been worth it."

"You earned it." Shoto leaned back, lying down on the floor, mulling over whether he should tell his story. It wasn't exactly lighthearted. Not the sort of thing people wanted to hear about. To his surprise, Momo sprawled out on her side. Lying not too far away from him.

"Are you going to tell us your story?" Momo was just happy to be thinking about something other than Overhaul. Today had been rather taxing, on all fronts. No end of disasters or criminal activity for all of them to deal with.
Then there was Endeavor.

With that in mind... "It's not a very happy story," Shoto admitted, "we've all had a rough enough time of it." Seeing her smile almost turn to a frown prompted something further. "If... if you want I could tell you once this is over."

She was surprised. Whenever she'd usually let her guard down around him he hadn't really reacted. Always choosing to let her be, knowing that she'd ask if she needed something. That was the way they'd always operated. "If that's what you want." she turned over, resting her chin in the nooks of her elbows. "It's not that I'm disappointed in not knowing. That its 'not a happy story' is what I was reacting to."

Now he just felt stupid."...Oh."

Kaminari and Momo both had the same thought. Did... did he think we were just disappointed he wasn't telling us?

Momo offered him a sad smile. "You're a silly man, Todoroki."

Inwardly chastising himself, he replied. "So I'm starting to gather..." Shifting a little bit, on his spine against the cold, hard surface, he turned to Stendhal. "There was something I wanted to ask you." Quirking an eyebrow, Stendhal waited for him speak. "My... my brother. How do you know him, exactly?"

Stendhal bit his lip, squirming a fair bit. "He... found me, after one the worst times of my life." The others turned to him, looking him over. "When I was small, maybe nine, I'd just run away from home. Decided living on the street was better than where I was... only I couldn't really feed and clothe myself on my own. No one wants to hire a kid for anything that pays enough to survive." He draped an arm over his knee, staring at the surface they all sat upon. "Wound up ferrying packages for a local gang. Looking back, it was probably drug smuggling. Who'd suspect a nine year old with a shoddy, paper bag of delivering drugs to folks?"

He gave a bitter little laugh, shaking his head and picking his thumb at the inside of his index finger.

"Anyways," the dhampire went on, "they didn't pay me very much. Just enough to eat, buy new clothes if I really had to. They didn't want me saving up, getting myself into a better situation I guess. I was a resource, and they wanted me in reach..." he sighed, smiling with one corner of his mouth. "During about the worst rainstorm ever, I crawled into a dumpster, found a bottle of what looked like water. Turned out to be vodka, but I just thought it had something weird in it. Drank it down... wound up bawling my eyes out, wandering aimlessly until I stumbled on this older kid. Reached into my pocket, gave him everything I had and said 'kill me'."

The trio of faces just looked at him shocked, jaws hanging open. Even Shoto had his emotions seemingly on display.

Stendhal, unperturbed, continued. "He didn't, obviously. He gave me the money back and asked why he'd ever do such a thing. I just... kinda said 'because I'm paying you too.' He laughed and just scooped me up, saying that he couldn't. I was too much like him to kill."

Sitting up little, Shoto gulped. "How were like him?"

Stendhal smiled. "Being the only person I could count on. Having to stay strong all on my own. He said that meant we had to stick together, so we both had someone else watching out for us."
Sullenly, Shoto lay back down. "Sounds like Toya..."

"Heh," Kaminari half smiled, "hopefully it's like Dabi too."

"Amen." Yaoyorozu said, placing her palms together. "I'd like to think he's not beyond helping, but..."

Shoto sighed. "All those people he killed in Tartarus."

"Not to mention what else he's had to have been up to with Overhaul." Kaminari frowned, cracking one of his knuckles with his thumb.

Lying back down, Shoto shrugged. "All the same, I don't want to give up on him."

Yaoyorozu smiled. "Family is family?"

To which he nodded. "Family is family."

"Guess we'll have to come up with something then, before anyone finds him." Rolling onto her back, right beside him, she just tilted her head and looked at him. Neither of them said anything. It was one of those conversations where neither person said a word. Somewhere in his head, Kaminari hated that their lives had trodden down similar paths. At least now, despite that, they had a friend who knew what that kind of life was like. Though, from the look in their eyes, that wasn't likely what they were 'talking' about.

Ever uncertain whether or not they were flirting, Kaminari took his leave at that point. Quietly slinking back down the stairs, he just gave them space. When he reached the bottom step he realized he wasn't as alone as he'd thought. "Do you have to be so quiet all the time?"

Taking a sizable dose of medicine, pocketing the inhaler, the dhampire gave a nod in acknowledgement. "There are benefits to not being seen or heard. Many benefits."

The electric blond looked a little awkward. "You uh, coulda just joined in without us asking. We'd like that, or at least I would. Kinda feels like you never say more than two words to us, ya know?"

Stendhal shrugged, shaking his head. "I'd rather focus on doing things than talking." He extended his hand, palm upturned. "Besides, I didn't want to interrupt."

Realizing what he was after, Kaminari procured the hard drive from his pocket. "Sometimes it helps to just... talk, you know."

The dhampire scoffed. "Not for me..." Pocketing the device he quickly started mapping out his route to Twist and Sparky's home in his head. "Call me if anything happens."

Kaminari nodded. "I'll text you the address, where she's being moved to."

"Appreciated."

He wandered away, leaving Kaminari to do as he pleased, and wandered into the main lobby. Sleeping on a couch, Uravity and Froppy were snuggled up and snoring. If he was at all sentimental, he might have taken a picture. With a smile, he quietly exited the building and started off toward his partner's home.

Toga skipped along the road, humming quietly and merrily to herself. One step closer to killing an Overhaul, if Stenny-poo decided he wanted to help anyways. Not something she was keen on
gambling, and that's where this next conversation came into play. She was skipping along, checking one possible hideout off the list after another. Overhaul's stockpile of emergency savehouses seemed to have been abandoned, left to the rats and strays of the city. It wasn't difficult to guess why, only an idiot would go hiding out in a known location after someone had infiltrated your organization.

Whether Overhaul knew that she knew their every hideout was anyone's guess, but the suspicion alone seemed enough to scare him away from using them. Oh well, for scum like him there weren't many places he could hide for long without someone noticing. All she had to do was keep asking questions, keep following their trail and the rumors she heard and it was only a matter of time.

As she trotted along a particularly rundown neighborhood, she noticed smoke billowing into the sky. It wasn't much, practically invisible unless you looked right at it, but she saw it. Toga grinned. She'd either just found their hideout or a bunch of homeless folks to feed. Either way, happy day for someone. Shifting back into her own skin, she felt her black body suit loosen up a little, then zipped it up while whistling innocently with red cheeks. Shushing herself up, she drew her knife and started slinking toward the old, abandoned construction site.

*Definitely operatin off the ol' books.*

Hoping from foot to foot, readying herself for a featherlight landing, she leapt into the air to land on the roof of the place. Silent as Overhaul's immanent grave. Stepping into the darkness, inside the hideout she heard remarkably little. No one inside was awake at least, and that just made her grin wider.

*Tip toe, tip toe, into the dark we go... tip toe, tip toe, into hell you go!*

Room after room saw no one was home. The gang was still out and about, up to mischief no doubt. Tearing the city apart, digging up whatever they deemed necessary for their little science project. Sighing, Toga crossed her arms and pouted. "Well ain't that just the way."

"What way?" She shrieked, spinning around and leaping away from the voice. Knife pointed in its direction, in a low, low, combat stance she bared her teeth.

The purple beast lowered itself similarly on all fours, glaring daggers at her.

She blinked, lowering her weapon and standing up. "Mooney-Nomu?"

Mooney blinked, pivoting his head to one side and standing up a little, no longer so guarded. "Me?"

Toga laughed, pocketing the knife. "Who else?" With a smile she approached. "Want some scritches? You still like those, right?"

Again, Mooney blinked. "I am not a dog-" only her fingers had reached up, nails lightly working at his chin and Mooney's eyes closed, humming with enjoyment.

"Aww!" Toga cooed. "Yes you are! You're a big puppy." Mooney flopped onto his back, and Toga obliged by scratching he exposed belly. "And good puppies get all the belly rubs." Like putty in her hands, Mooney had inherited at least that much from Nomu. "Now... you gonna be a good boy and tell me where big, mean Overhaul is?"

Mooney nodded, clearly not thinking very clearly. "Mhmm..." he spoke slowly. "Out with new recruits... back before long now..."

Toga amped up her efforts at scratching Mooney's belly. "How long? How many?"
"Not sure... just three... but they're strong."

Great... "How strong, pupperono?"

Mooney batted her hands away, rolling onto his front with closed, happily dopey eyes. "Well... compared to most heroes they are a considerable threat. There's more info on my computer, if you like."

She nodded. "I like, now lemme see, puppy."

Stretching, Mooney clambered to his feet and led her off to his room. It was probably the largest and darkest of the bunch, but the space wasn't utilized almost at all. Just one cot lay in the corner, a laptop not far away from it. As they entered the room, Toga noted with some relief that the room didn't stink. Taking a seat on his bed and grabbing the lap, she let Mooney curl up behind her and idly started petting his head as she went through the machine.

Floor plans of the genetics lab, details about an underground vault beneath one of the city's larger banks, the-

She blinked.

The quirk registry? How the hell did they gain access to this?

"Ey, doggo." Mooney, opened his eyes. "Why're you lookin at this stuff?"

Mooney turned his eyes to the screen, blinking once or twice. "Hmm? Oh, the boss wanted to make sure of something. He wanted to know if Eri was in there anywhere."

"...Is she?"

Mooney shook his head. "Nope." Then closed his eyes and went back to relaxing.

Well... ain't that interesting? No criminal she'd every heard of had ever managed to delete an entry from the database. Just to confirm the theory, she tried to delete a random entry. Something about a woman who could turn into a dragon, not that it mattered. Her attempt was immediately met with a message saying 'ALERT! Necessary clearance required to execute this action.'

Casually, Toga closed the window.

Okay... I'm jus' spit ballin here, but what're the chances you have to be someone real important to edit that list?

A quick google search confirmed that suspicion. Doctors and those who studied quirks could submit forms to edit particular entries, but the final word on that went somewhere higher in the chain. Someone official. Another quick search told her who owned the registry in its entirety: while it was all public information, it was owned by none other than 'Philanthropy'.

Gettin creepy how much of a monopoly those buggers have.

Petting Mooney's head, she opened the files on Overhaul's newest stooges. One who could make lava, one who could make dust clouds, another that could create wind but not control it.

Bottom of one'a the lower barrels, eh?

Setting the laptop she stood up. "Thank you puppy, I'll be back later."
"Will you now?"

Toga froze. The voice, venomous and familiar had come from the doorway, her only way out.

*That was one mother of a blonde moment there, Himi-chan...*

Drawing her knife, she faced down Overhaul with steely determination. "Or I could just kill ya now. Sound fair, ya fuckin child abuser?"

Overhaul rolled his eyes. "Please... I was hardly doing anything to harm her. We needed her genetic material to perfect the formula."

Toga just laughed. "Oh, Overdope. If it didn't work the first thirty billion times, why should it oughta work the next billionth?" Overhaul's eyes narrowed, studying her closely while the others behind him watched with some vague interest.

Crossing his arms, Overhaul pondered her words a moment. "And how would you know anything about that? You know what her quirk is?"

With a shrug, Toga lazily looked about the room. "Eh, I dunno. But it ain't what you think it is if your lil formula ain't workin."

Overhaul smiled. "You wont find another exit to this room." Slowly eyes narrowed, Toga's gaze burned into Overhaul's face. "You're not so difficult to read, little girl. Your personality might as well be one, elaborate shell game, keeping people guessing as to your true intentions, which is what makes you such an adept infiltrator." Flourishing his hand into the air, Toga's gaze followed it. "I, on the other hand..."

A section of the floor rocketed into her gut, sending her flying into the concrete wall, slamming her skull back against it.

"Hmm... or was it 'eye', as in 'eyeball', on the other hand?" Overhaul quietly mused, withdrawing his other hand from the wall as the floor resumed its usual shape. "Oh well, phonetically it makes no difference."

Limply, jaw trembling, Toga slid to the floor. Her belly had been split open, blood gushing from the wound and her mouth. How the hell did one attack do that much damage to her? No matter, there wasn't time for that! Her shaky hand went to her pocket, and her thumb furiously started typing.

**Yergirl- Antique shop. follow notes. Stash under "butterfly".**

She barely had enough time to hit send before Overhaul was over her, and before he could grasp it, she crushed her phone in her hand. The Yakuza boss chuckled. "No matter, we can easily relocate." He reached for her face, and she thrust her knife at his throat.

That he dodged the attack so easily just made her angry.

"Easy, little girl." He grabbed her face, and Toga prepared for the worst. "I'll give you a chance to earn your life..." Toga's breath went still, eyes wide and scrambling to pull her arm back. Overhaul slammed her skull against the wall before she could stab him, and the last thing she heard was Mooney screaming for them not to hurt her.

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The rain had only started coming down harder as he made his way to Twist's and Sparky's.
Dragging his leadened feet, he tried not to think about the last time he'd slept. When he reached the top of the steps, he was greeted by Sparky, looking somehow worse than either of them felt. "Didja bring coffee?" He asked with a hopeful smile.

Stendhal chuckled. "As a matter of fact..." he held up the cups and gave them both to Sparky.

"YES!" Sparky pumped his fist in the air, hugging Stendhal before grabbing them away. "Thanks buddy."

With a shrug, the half human lumbered inside. "Least I could do..." before shambling over to the couch. "Find anything new while the radios have been quiet?"

Rubbing at one of his eyes, Sparky chugged down an entire cup of coffee before answering. "Ah... well, yes and no." He dropped down into his seat, clicking through a few different windows. "According to an old email of Tobo's, Eri's not actually Eri's name. It's short for Erica." He said pointing at the screen with a grin. "Guess her folks her fans of 'Godzilla vs Biolante' or something."

Sluggishly, Stendhal nodded. "Amazing..." he halfheartedly droned. "How does that help?"

Sparky gave him a look, gathering his patience. "It helps because now we're not looking for the wrong name!" He threw his arms into the air. "We've got something tangible, captain!"

Stendhal gave what he could of a smile. "So... where're we lookin nex...?" His eyelids were so heavy...

Spinning back around to his screen, Sparky set to typing. "Well... I figure there's only so many birth certificates out there with that name on em. And if that fails, there's class lists from public schools, and..." As Sparky kept talking, Stendhal numbly nodded along feeling his head grow heavier and heavier, until he sank off to the side with his eyes shut tight.

...  

Everyone wears masks... all the time.

Only for normal people it's just their 'customer service' persona, or something like that...

For us? It's literal. We don't really get to stop wearing our masks.

Other people, if their 'persona' gets too ugly, can just cast it aside. Wear a new one.

"...Seether?"

Remember, little Sten...

Remember what your real face is.

"But... I... I don't want to be someone who only wants to hurt people."

Heh... but it's part of you, little one.

Sensation, a gloved hand patting my head... feels nice...

No one expects you to be an angel, no human alive ever is. We've all got darkness in us, 'shadows', some call them.

"Can't I just hide it away? Can't I just... not hurt people? Maybe if I stop myself enough... I wont
want to kill them anymore."

I wish that were so, little Sten.

**More sensation, the hand on my shoulder.**

**Makes me feel like I'm not alone...**

*I think Carl Jung said it best...*

*Unfortunately there can be no doubt that man is, on the whole, less good than he imagines himself or wants to be. Everyone carries a shadow, and the less it is embodied in the individual's conscious life, the blacker and denser it is.*

"...I'm not my shadow."

*Heh heh... no, you're not. But it is a part of you.*

...  

Light, a burst of it from yet another clap of thunder hit his eyes before the smells hit his nose. Groggily, with some forced effort, Stendhal sat up, rubbing the sleep from his eyes.

"Morning, sleepy!" Sparky chirped, draining what must have been his hundredth, maybe two hundredth cup of coffee. "Midnight oil got us some sexy results!"

**Tuesday, August 14th, 2255...**

Seeing the sandwich he'd been smelling was on the couch next to him, Stendhal grabbed it and started chewing. "Like what?"

Grabbing a piece of paper, Sparky set to furiously scribbling down what he'd found. "Narrowed it down to handful. A handful!" He spun around his glee not even slightly contained. "Birth certificates that match her age! Now all we gotta do, is confirm if any of these people are also missing and we have Eri's family name!"

Joining them, entering from the doorway that led to exterior stairs, was a rather dejected looking twist.

Her expression told them everything, and Sparky deflated. "Noooooo..." he groaned.

Twist just looked at him apologetically. "I'm sorry hon, but everyone I called didn't know anything about her. None of those certificates matched."

Sparky went limp, falling back in his chair, letting his head hang behind himself. "Well, just... fuck all my energy being spent instead of wasted then..." he dragged his palms down his face, stretching the fatigue away from his eyes ever temporarily. "What do we do now?"

Twist just pointed to the hard drive. "Take a break and do some good old fashioned cracking and decoding?"

With a sigh, and a very exaggerated shrug, Sparky plugged the hard drive into his computer. "Yeah... may as well."

Sandwich eaten, Stendhal took his medicine before digging into the pills Yaoyorozu had given
him. The resulting coughing was not very encouraging, but at least he wasn't spitting up blood again. Not yet.

Giving him a concerned look, Twist motioned for the door. "Ready to go see about Nakamura's partner?"

Quelling his respiratory fit, Stendhal nodded. "Let's do this."

Migraines were nothing new to Toga, she'd had a fair number of them in middle school. To say that she'd ever had a skull splitting headache though? No, she'd never had one of those. Not until today, where she woke up encased in concrete up to her chin. Strong as she was, she wasn't strong enough to break out of that. Wincing, groaning at the clap of thunder that waked her, she hoped her voice wouldn't also hurt her brain.

She wasn't so lucky. "Hope ya patched up my tum-tum, otherwise this'll be the shortest conversation in history."

Opening her eyes, she saw Overhaul sitting in a chair at the other end of the room, mask off and chewing on an apple. Dabi stood behind him, arms crossed as he stared at her and Mooney, guiltily, cowered behind him. "Oh, I did. Couldn't have you bleeding into the foundation. That would be unsanitary."

Another clap of thunder sent her jaw slamming shut as she winced in pain, her brain filled to the brim with sharp ringing and a sensation of buzzing. "NNg... how comfortin to know my captors are so concerned with cleanliness..." she remarked, opening her eyes again. At least someone was amused by all this. "What time is it?"

Dabi glanced at his watch. "Nearly one in the afternoon."

Toga grinned, and immediately regretted it for the pain that followed. "Damn, so much beauty sleep I gotta be super model by now."

Overhaul sighed, taking another bite of the apple. "Why are you stalling? If anyone was coming to rescue you they'd have been here hours ago." That comment hurt more than Toga had been prepared for... "You're just alone with us, little girl. So..." he stomped his boot against the floor, making Toga's head scream again. "Just tell me how I can perfect my formula, and it's all good. Forgiven forgotten."

Toga's eyes went wide, fluttering and blinking. "Ya want me ta...?"

Overhaul smiled, propping his cheek against his palm. "Well you seem to know so much about it, what I'm doing wrong at least." His other hand gestured to the air, motioning for her to say something helpful. "I figured since you know so much, why not make use of that?"

Her heart was practically hammering. That had just been some random bluff to stall for time!

"So tell me... what is Eri's quirk? Do you know? If knowing that is so important, just tell me and I'll let you live. If that's not the key, then tell me how to perfect my formula and I wont kill you if your suggestion works."

She was sweating, visibly she was sure, as her mind raced for anything to throw out there. Some crazy bluff, some random idea to stall for time. It didn't have to work, it just had to be convincing enough to get them to leave her alone, or at the very least leave her with Mooney.
Overhaul stood up, lazily walking to the wall as he tossed the apple into a trashcan. "I'm waiting..." his fingers reached for the wall, as he drew ever closer to it, dragging out every step for as long as he could.

Swallowing, she clawed at her aching brain for anything, anything she could say. There had to be something!

Overhaul let out a bored little sigh, putting his mask back on. "Time's up."

His fingers touched the wall, and her mouth opened. "WAIT!" She was panting, her eyes pupils as small as could be, Overhaul just lazily turned toward her, fingers falling back to his side. She gulped. "I uh... I know what ya gotta do..."

Behind Overhaul, Dabi lowered his outstretched hand, the flicker of blue that had been there fading away. The yakuza boss chuckled, heedless to how he'd almost been turned to cinders. "Well?"

Toga gulped, then delved into her insane, little idea. By the time she was done talking Overhaul was cackling wildly, so wildly it echoed throughout the concrete lair.

Thermos partially drained, set aside on his belt, he rubbed at his eyes with the back of his wrist. Maybe he should have let Kyoka take watch for longer than he had, but he wanted her to sleep, keep her focus sharp for today. By this point Izuku was long since adjusted to functioning with little to no sleep, even with his sleep bank adding up that debt at a steady pace. Sniffing, he walked from the office the three of them had spent the night in with heavier steps than yesterday.

On his way to the stairs he ran into Aizawa, looking worse than usual. "Feeling any better?" Izuku's tone was hopeful, as he chanced a nervous attempt at a smile. His optimism was met with his Teacher immediately reaching for his hip flask and taking a long, long swig. Frowning, Izuku decided to leave it at that.

Down in the main lobby his friends were getting ready. Kyoka was mounting her amplifiers onto her hands, Uraraka was securing the various do-dads that gripped her pressure points and the others were merely straightening out their costumes. More than a few cups of coffee were being passed around, guzzled like water after a drought, and whatever form of food that could be eaten on the go was nibbled at. There was an uneasy feeling in the air, tense and grim as they all slowly began to brace themselves for what was likely going to happen.

A hand gripped Izuku's shoulder, prompting him to turn around. To his surprise, Vanessa was there as well. She just smiled and pulled him into a hug. "Good afternoon, little one."

With a smile of his own, he returned the embrace. "Hey, Vanessa."

When she pulled away, her eyes flitted about the room, searching for someone. "Is this everyone?"

Izuku nodded. "Looking for someone else?"

Her turn to nod, awkwardly rubbing at her elbow. "My um... my nephew is in your class. We only recently reconnected. I was hoping to at least see him before fulfilling my role here as one of Eri's protectors."

So she had already found him. "Stendhal isn't here," Izuku offered, "he's been away since last night."

She gave a polite smile, clearly unhappy with this turn of events. "Ah... I see." Seeing his mutual
disappointment, she reached up and ruffled his eternally messy, cow-lick ridden hair. "Well, running into you should be enough to keep me chipper until I do see him again."

His smile was more involuntary than hers had been. "Glad I could help."

Aizawa took another, hearty swig from his flask, eyes anywhere but on her and he didn't say anything. Less than a few minutes later, their convoy of heroes was outside and filing into various, obviously civilian, cars. Traffic was, on the whole, not awful. With the power still out across half the city and the resulting chaos, more and more people were just staying home.

Moving along through the city proved to be simple enough, passing by little more than law enforcement or construction crews as they went. In a way, seeing the city that was usually such a bustle of activity so silent was disheartening.

Of course, their collective, silent wishes for the city to become more lively would only be granted in a less than optimistic fashion. "ATTENTION ALL!" Someone was screaming into a megaphone. "BEAR WITNESS TO THE PURIFICATION OF A FOUL SINNER!" Several of them started exiting their various vehicles, wending their way to the source of the yelling. It was only a few of them, the majority of their troop staying with Eri and the rest.

Once arrived, they saw a crowd of men and women dressed in black robes, masks like human skulls on their faces. They had amassed around a large, wooden spire, a postal worker whose body was immensely hairy tied to it. His face was identical to a spider's, the fuzzy kind with large, forward facing, glossy, black eyes. At his feet, and all around the wooden pillar, was kindling and the leader of this group -dressed in white and matching robes- held up a candle-tipped trident, tips blazing with fire.

"Oh no." Kyoka said, hooking her earlobes into her amplifiers. "Fuck no." Then, high into the hair, she hoisted her hero license. "HERO COURSE PROVISIONALS!" The outburst had caught them all off guard, and the group of provisional heroes set to their violent work with dark satisfaction.

Dabi fussed at his cuffs, then at the scar tissue of his arms. Try as he might, there wasn't much getting used to his skin, or the bleeding around the edges of purple, decayed scar tissue. Bandages in hand, he set to wrapping up his arms, biting at one end of the cloth and severing his bandage from the rest.

Walking up to him, mask off for once, Seether was munching on a bowl of cereal. "You're awful at that."

The former Todoroki sighed. "Step one to improvement, not caring that you suck."

To which the ex-military man smirked. "Touche." And he took another spoonful of cereal into his mouth.

Translucent skin... not something Dabi ever expect to see someone's breakfast through. "Going to restaurants must be really fun for you..." He put forward, though as politely as he could.

Seether shrugged. "If one is the sadistic sort, certainly." Gulping down his mouthful, he gave the younger man a once over. "I can eat elsewhere."

Dabi shook his head. "Stay, you're about the only sane one here I can talk to who likes wearing clothing."

His companion laughed. "Not fond of 'Dusty Ash'?"
Wrapping up his other arm now, Dabi shrugged. "She's fine, I... just don't like being distracted by skin." He tied off the bandage with a wince. "My focus is valuable, necessary for ensuring out success in our missions."

Another mouthful of cereal went into his mouth. "You could get your focus back by seeing if she's interested too. Being human isn't something folks like us aren't allowed to be, in fact I'd say being 'too human' is what put us where we are."

A line of thought Dabi couldn't help but agree with. "Being too vulnerable to and at the mercy of our own flaws... Suppose you're right."

"Suppose I am." As Seether kept on eating Dabi flicked on the TV and the former soldier laughed. "Thank god for generators..." Taking another bite, he watched the news story unfold. A group of UA students beating a mob of black-robed people into the pavement. "Are those the...?"

Dabi nodded. "They are."

Again, Seether laughed. "Glad to see justice isn't totally aimless after all." Dabi shrugged, seeing his brother in the crowd -fighting the crowd- had soured his interest in TV. "Where you goin?"

"To check on Toga..." As Dabi left, Seether called over his shoulder. "Don't let the boss man get whiff of how cozy you two are. Wont end well." For a short while, he ate in silence, just watching the violence on the news unfold. He was almost done eating when he became aware of a presence in the room with him. "Hey, Overhaul."

"Seether." Said the Yakuza boss, peering at the TV. He watched with confused silence for a time, until the newscaster mentioned the robed group's motive. Purifying the species was something Overhaul understood, and seeing so many enthusiasts gathered for just that purpose made him grin."

Rain pelted him relentlessly, both as he moved and the moments he paused to breathe. Every punch, kick or palm-strike he made at these goons was punctuated with a loud, visible splash of water. His latest attack sent one mad skidding across the road, the water he kicked up with each impact gave the impression of a stone skipping across water. A flailing, screaming then groaning stone, but it still made him think of it. It was so clouded over he hadn't even needed his sunglasses today.

Above, on an overpass, Kyoka was busy uppercutting someone who'd been dumb enough to get within her melee range. After she'd incapacitated both him and his friend ally with her earlobes, it was a simple matter to deliver knockout strikes to them both. Not far from her, Ashido was sliding along a trail of sleek, non-corrosive acid and either tripping anyone she came across or simply punching or elbowing them in in the face. Gravity did the rest.

Speaking of gravity, Uraraka was back to back with Yaoyorozu, both of them fighting with metal quarterstaves against a fair number of robed assailants. Todoroki was busy chasing after and encasing all who'd tried to flee in ice.

"Can't even go three blocks," Kaminari said, tripping then elbowing one man in the back of the head, "Without a damned Cult trying to burn someone alive!" He got out his pocket knife and started cutting down the poor soul who was strung up to a wooden pole. "This is a nice neighborhood too... to think they'd have the gall to do this in plain view of everyone. What, do they think everything's devolved into anarchy?"
All the while, Izuku defended him, kicking another of the rioters into three other people, he picked two of them up and slammed them together. "Who are these guys?"

After ensuring one of the cultists was going to need a dentist and perhaps a new skull, Uraraka answered. "They're 'The Creature Rejection Clan', anti mutant-quirk fanatics who believe the human race should be... purified."

Mina growled. "Okay! Kid gloves are comin off!" Before she leapt into the air and smashed her heels into the nose of another assailant too stupid to run. The cartilage sundered as she sent him crashing into a row of trashcans.

With a few more flurries of violence, they'd incapacitated the remaining 'Clan Members', leaving them groaning on the ground.

Panting, wiping at his brow, Izuku sighed. "I lost count of how many we were dealing with... does anyone know?" Too early for his fatigue to be catching up with him, but it was anyways.

Kyoka dropped from the overpass, after depositing the idiots she'd dealt with alongside Mina. "I dunno... upwards of forty?"

"Forty seven." Shoto rejoined them, palm to the ground and freezing the incapacitated mob, thus completely immobilizing them.

Yaoyorozu looked disturbed. "So many... it makes one wonder how many more simply weren't brave enough to join in."

Uraraka gulped, a sinking feeling in her gut. "Yeah... lets hope it's a small number."

About half an hour later, after dealing the police arriving on scene and questioning them, they'd helped corral the cultists into lockup and made it to their destination. It was a motel that was owned by the Todoroki family, public, ritzy and poorly defended. The group exchanged worried glances before heading inside, showing their hero licenses to the doorman.

Inside, a pair of police officers greeted them, and Ochako waved to one of them. "Hello, sarge!"

Nakamura managed a smile. "Glad you all could make it. Me and the lieutenant are the only cops the MCPD could spare."

The lieutenant in question waved from afar, keeping her eyes out the windows. "Try not to be too conspicuous. We want to keep a low profile here, people."

Saluting, Shoto, Uraraka and Momo spoke in unison. "Aye aye." Mina just giggled as she saluted with them.

Kyoka approached the sergeant with a smirk. "You must be Eri's guardian angel."

Nakamura blinked. "I'm... sorry?"

Kyoka shrugged while the others did as the lieutenant suggest and dispersed throughout the building. "You're just usually involved whenever Eri pops up. Helping Stendhal in his investigation into her past, helping us at Tartarus, and now here you are again."

The cop took his turn to shrug. "Just the job ma'am."

She laughed. "We're all volunteers here, sarge. Nothing but our own choices put us where we are
right now, it's not like this job chose us." she walked away, toward the most central part of the building. If -perhaps more likely 'when'- danger reared its head, she'd be the group's ears.

Sighing, gulping, the sergeant kept his eyes on the front door. "Yeah... we chose this..."

The pair got off the train and wandered away from the station, back up onto the streets. Stendhal failed to suppress a yawn, which Twist involuntarily copied. "Must you?" She said, shaking herself back awake.

Grumbling, the dhampire answered somewhat indignantly. "I couldn't help it..."

Once back up on the main streets, they looked up at the sky-scrapers towering over them. Spires reaching for the stars, and at night, you'd almost thing they reached that far. However, another sight had Stendhal's attention: the towering, monolithic construction sight at the center of this cluster of spires. Steel girders, interlocking, connecting and branching like the veins in a body. The skeletal structure laced around the more precious spire it surrounded, a cage or perhaps a shield to the vital internal organs, if one wished to continue the previous metaphor. It resembled a massive smoke-stack, only there were secondary and tertiary ventilation ports all along its length. Intake filters, meant to siphon toxins, pollutants out of the air. A state-of-the-art air purification system to be implemented for the benefit of the city: SHROUD.

At the main entrance, a line of armed men with rifles stood proudly, their body armor as imposing as was reassuring. Their faces were hidden from view by helmets, skin completely obscured by their armor, state of the art riot gear bearing an increasingly familiar logo: "Philanthropy..." Stendhal muttered.

Twist looked quite unsettled. "And we're here to ask questions about something related to their company's inner workings, right under their noses." Crossing her arms, feeling a sudden chill, she missed her umbrella. "Lets get this over with..."

Stendhal nodded, looking toward the apartment high rise they were headed into. "What do you think the chances are the elevators are down?"

Twist just groaned.

Sure enough, they had to climb the stairs all the way to their destination. By the time they reached the apartment they were looking for, they were nearly spent for energy. "When this investigation is over?" Twist panted. "I'm forging sleep and falling into a coma."

"Agreed." Stendhal knocked on the door.

Answering the door, was a man in his forties. "Can I help you?"

"We hope so," Twist said as Stendhal help up his hero license, "we're looking for your brother, I believe. You're the only living family he has and he has no address. We were hoping you could tell us where he is?"

The man shifted awkwardly in his doorway. "...you couldn't just call?"

Stendhal sighed. "With what power to this building?"

A point the man sheepishly agreed to. "Right... well, he's not here. Why are you looking for him anyways?"
Twist was faster on the draw than her partner. "Missing person's case, he was involved in its investigation when it was first launched."

The man hesitated. "...Y'all really don't know, do you?" The pair of former vigilantes exchanged an odd look before turning inquisitive eyes back to him. "My brother is... dead. Has been for some time."

Stendhal was almost shocked to hear that. "Excuse me?"

The man crossed his arms. "Fairly self explanatory. He died. Something went wrong on the case, he got killed in the line of duty." The partners exchanged a quicker, more weary look than before. "This is about that girl, right? The little one?" They nodded. "Alright... I think I might still have my brother's case files. I'll be right back."

The door closed, leaving the two of them alone in the hallway. "Dead?" Stendhal said, turning to Twist

"Why would the eyewitness tell us he was still alive?"

With a shrug, the half human went for the first thought that popped into his head. "Someone might've lied to him."

Twist's turn to shrug. "Well yeah, but, why?"

Neither of them had an answer to that one, at least not immediately, and their interviewee had returned, a few folders in hand. "Here ya go. And guys?" They accepted the folders, waiting for him to finish his thought. "Good luck."

After the door closed the pair of them wandered to the stairwell and started the arduous climb back down. Panting and dealing with pained legs, they gave up not even halfway down. Sitting on the steps, files spread out and opened around them, they started pouring over everything, looking for even the slightest clue they'd missed.

Twist let out a groaning sigh. "Not much here, is there?"

Stendhal bumped his head against the wall. "At least nothing we don't already know." He slammed the folder shut, tossing it neatly, but huffily, aside. "What the hell is this case? How does all information on a small child just get swallowed into a black hole like this?" He rubbed at his eyes.

"You did mention a potential cover up, some time ago."

Stendhal leaned back, thumping the back of his head against a stair. "Forgive me if I don't want to think too hard on that... the implications of someone with authority helping the Yakuza abduct a little girl are not ones that instill confidence in the system."

Looking up from her papers, she gave him a scathing look. "Faith in the system? Since when? We met by having absolutely none in it, remember?"

He deflated. "People like Shogun and Endeavor aren't supposed to be the norm, Twist."

"Says a lot that they might be, doesn't it?"

"More than my nightmares can fit into one night."

A sentiment she couldn't dispute, so she turned back to her folder. "Hold on..." she said with a
furrowed brow. "This file is are wrong."

Stendhal sat up peering over her shoulder. "How so?"

"Well, look at the date." she tapped the lower right corner of the file. "2248, that's seven years ago that this investigation was apparently happening. And look," she tapped a paragraph in the middle, "by our estimates the child has to be at least three or four years old' how? That'd make her eleven now, at least."

Rubbing at his eyes, Stendhal reached for his folder. "So it's a misprint. The other files are probably..." he blinked. "...no. This one's wrong too."

Flipping through each paper, each folder, Twist shook her head, brow furrowing with her growing perplexity. "They all are! What drunk printed these up?"

This was... too alarming not to consider something far darker. "What if..." Stendhal started slowly, "they're not misfiled?"

Twist slowly lowered her folder, closing it. "Your friend did say the Overhaul's quirk let him restructure anything he touched however he liked in a couple interviews..."

Stendhal gulped. "So... what if Eri's really that old? What if Overhaul's quirk just... stopped her from aging?"

Horror settled over his friend's face, and her voice nearly disappeared. "He'd have to have used his quirk on her almost constantly."

"No," Stendhal said, "just often enough that her aging between him hurting was imperceptible, so he just... put her back together as she always was."

Twist's fingers pushed up the side of her face, tangling into her hair. "Well fuck me... that's- that's-" she shook her head, "please tell me we're just overthinking this."

Stendhal drew in a deep breath. "We'll only know for certain once we track down her birth certificate." Barely a second passed before his phone started ringing, and he sighed as he answered it. "Yes?" He blinked. "You moved her- Since when!? Why didn't you tell me sooner?" He pulled the phone away from his face and checked his notifications, eyes blinking a few times.

One text in particular was titled 'emergency', and it was from Toga.

Slowly, he put the phone back to his mouth. "I'll have to call you back."

Hanging up, he opened it, and read what she'd sent with a pit in his stomach. 'Yergirl- Antique shop. follow notes. Stash under "butterfly". '

Toga...

"Guys?" Sparky, over the radio, sounding quietly alarmed. "You alone?"

Twist answered it while Stendhal fished about his pockets for the card to the antique shop. "Yeah, actually what's up?"

"Where the hell did you get this hard drive?"

The two former vigilantes exchanged a very worried look. "What did you find?"
"This encryption... guess what it matches."

Stendhal just went with the worst possible idea. "The encryption you cracked breaking into Philanthropy's mail servers."

Bingo. "I'm almost through, but I'm not liking this at all, Sten. I don't wanna have to relocate here."

"We won't, baby." Twist said as reassuringly as he could. "Just keep at it, okay? I think we need to know now more than ever what's on it."

Sparky sighed. "I hate when you get those kinds of feelings... alright. I'll do that, just... stay safe out there." and he stopped talking.

He finally got the card out of his pocket, reading it over. *Yeah... I can find that.* Standing up, he gathered the files and folded them up, shoving them inside his costume. "Go to your husband."

Blinking, Twist looked up at him. "Not 'boyfriend'?" Slowly, she stood up with him. "Are you spooked? Don't be spooked, you never get spooked."

"If it really is Philanthropy, and my suspicions are right, I don't want him alone." He patted her shoulder, squeezing. "Just in case, okay? It might be nothing."

With a wry laugh, she pulled him into a hug. "It's us. Since when is it ever 'nothing'?"

His arms squeezed her, holding her tight, before they started down the steps, adrenaline fueling their movements.

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Four in the afternoon and Dabi was standing in a dingy, disused warehouse, looking over a crowd of figures in black clothing. Seether was by his side, thoroughly displeased and making no effort to hide it. Dusty looked a little bored, silently wishing she had her phone on hand and Dabi was trying not to look at her. She was making no such effort, stealing glances here and there.

Seether sighed, leaning in and muttering angrily to Dabi. "What the hell are we doing here?"

Overhaul stood before skull-masked crowd, his speech playing to their blatant xenophobia. "These are the exact wrong kind of people to be anywhere near."

Glancing at their boss, Dabi hoped he wasn't hearing them. "You're preaching to the converted on that one."

The ex-soldier shook his head in disgust. "I don't care if we're criminals, murderers even, but I have standards. Freaks like this lot are not people I want to associate with."

"Me neither." The pair of men jumped, Surprised that Ash had joined them. "Try to look on the bright side, maybe we'll get most of them killed trying along the way."

Seether chuckled, Dabi awkwardly looked away from her. "Look, I hate quirks more than anyone, but I can't swallow any kind of logic that makes me comfy working with these... Nazis."

Ash gave him a playful look. "Don't you mean 'KKK'?" Seether had to give her that one. "And... what do you mean 'hate quirks'?" She looked to Dabi. "What exactly is our leader's goal?"

Gulping, he resolutely forced himself to look her in the eyes. "Overhaul, supposedly, wants to erase all quirks from existence."
She looked at him like he'd grown a second head. "And then what? We're screwed if we do that. Without quirks we're defenseless against pretty much everyone with any kind of weapon. Which is, basically, everyone we're enemies with."

Seether started counting aloud. "Police, government, military..."

Dabi just gave Ash a smile. "That's just Overhaul's idea. No one says it has to go that way once he perfects the formula."

Approvingly, Ash nodded at him. "I think I like the sound of that." Their heads turned when the cult started chanting in unison, hailing their new leader. "Well... guess that's decided then."

Overhaul looked over his shoulder at Dabi, his eyes brimming with pride. "The Yakuza has an army again, old friend."

Dabi nodded, feeling dirtier than ever as he crossed his arms. By his side, Seether shook his head. "Yeah... we're never gonna look like the good guys now."

Ash just shrugged. "Who says we have to, to do what's right?"

Shaking his head, Dabi sighed. "Oh... just the world."

With another shrug, Ash put a hand on Dabi's shoulder, guiding him away from prying ears. "Hey... so, I've overheard bits and pieces of something about All For One, something he recruited you all for."

Wearily, gulping again, Dabi chanced a look back at his boss who was busy riling up the new troops. "Uh... sure, what did you want to know?"

She smiled. "What exactly is 'The Prophet System'?"

Panting, nearly spent, Stendhal came to a reluctant stop not far from his destination. His lungs were hating every molecule of water in the air, trying to eject their contents rather violently now. "Come on..." he pleaded without breath, thumping a fist against his own chest. "Come on..." He was leaning up against the corner of a building, gagging and coughing when his phone started ringing again. Begrudgingly, and with a loud growl, he answered it. "What?" He demanded.

Kaminari again. "Where the hell are you?" Stendhal rolled his eyes. "Eri keeps asking for you, this whole situation has her spooked. It's just me and Aizawa with her, Izuku's patrolling around the building's perimeter."

Stendhal groaned. "As where he would be most useful. I'm in the middle of-"

"Neat," Kaminari interrupted, making Stendha's lip quiver in annoyance, "Eri's still getting scared. I figured you'd leap at a chance to get out of the rain."

Summoning all of his remaining patience, Stendhal took a very deep breath. "...Just call me if anything happens."

Kaminari half sighed and groveled. "Dude... I just did. Fine, whatever. Hope you're making progress, I'll make an excuse for ya-"

Stendhal blinked, waiting for Kaminari to go on. "...Chargebolt?" More awkward silence. "Are you still there, is everything okay?" He took a look at his phone, swiping at the screen to see if he'd
hung up. He hadn't. The battery had died on his phone. Snarling, Stendhal shoved it back into his pocket, plugging into his portable, external power supply. "Of course..." and he just resumed stomping along.

The neighborhood he'd arrived at was far from hospitable, nary a soul in sight. Building were left to rot like old carcasses, falling into disrepair and ruin that the rain was only continuing to erode. The way his footsteps echoed, resonating in the air around him, emphasized just how alone he was now. Eventually, he arrived at his destination.

Outside the old, abandoned antique shop, Stendhal felt the air grow still even through the rain. It wasn't the kind of stillness that came before a battle, but the tension in the air that came before some terrible, unstoppable moment. Was... was he afraid? A new a giddy feeling that had him trembling. Hand on the hilt of his sword, he stepped inside and out of the rain.

Inside was the smell of old paper, books and further in he smelled the old and withered decay of corpses. The smell was of dust and putrid, desiccated meat left to rot. Nothing alive had roamed this place since or before his friends some weeks ago. Swallowing, he tiptoed down the steps and the smell, to his surprise, did not grow stronger. Scents lingered in this place, but had long since stopped emanating from their original sources.

Once at the bottom, he walked past a pile of bones in a lab coat and down a hall, either side lined with cells. Each contained something more horrid than the last, and it fed a growing and terrifying idea into his brain. Thee victims had been tortured for a reason. The more he looked at each, ruined and mutilated corpse the more he began to suspect something specific had been intended.

Then he reached the end of the hall, the T-intersection. Of course the computer had been dismantled, picked apart by his friends. A fact that had him rattled, but he didn't have time to consider why as he ventured toward a cell who's door had been destroyed. Stepping through a pile of metal shavings, his boot clattered against something metal, a small name-plate nearly crushed by someone's grip. Kneeling to pick it up, Stendhal read the name inscribed upon to himself: R.J. Mooney.

R.J. ... Tobo's friend in the photograph? The one who'd worked for...

Moonfish... They couldn't have... he'd started to put the pieces together, seeing what had been done to those poor, dead souls. The familiar looking damage, the twisted nature of their faces and bodies... the people who'd built this place, they'd made it with the sole intention of driving one man insane. Turning Mooney into a sadistic, murderous cannibal had been the idea that birthed this place.

The... the hard drive had come from this place. A hard drive encrypted with code written by Philanthropy. The organization with no known leader or CEO.

or... at least none with a known name, according to Sparky...

The Nameless One... owned Philanthropy?

...Oh god.

Eyes turned to the walls, he ventured into Moonfish's old cell and read the walls. His eyes found one passage in particular and studied it close.

**Lorenz:** In chaos theory, the **butterfly effect** is the sensitive dependence on initial conditions in which a small change in one state of a **deterministic non-linear system** can result in large
The term, closely associated with the work of Edward Fish, (is that right?) is derived from the metaphorical example of the details of a tornado (the exact time of formation, the exact path taken) being influenced by minor perturbations such as the flapping of the wings of a distant butterfly several weeks earlier. Lorenz discovered the effect when he observed that runs of his weather model with initial condition data that was rounded in a seemingly inconsequential manner would fail to reproduce the results of runs with the unrounded initial condition data. A very small change in initial conditions had created a significantly different outcome.

The idea that small causes may have large effects in general and in weather specifically was earlier recognized by French mathematician and engineer Henri Poincaré and American mathematician and philosopher Norbert Wiener. Edward Lorenz's work placed the concept of instability of the Earth's atmosphere onto a quantitative base and linked the concept of instability to the properties of large classes of dynamic systems which are undergoing nonlinear dynamics and deterministic chaos.

Prophet...

They wanted a prophet... a prophet of the end...

Prophet of the darkest day...

Stepping forward, glancing at the tile with the word 'butterfly' on it he reached out as his mind spun. Sure enough, after removed the tile, he found a small USB and a collection of folded papers. Pocketing them, he placed the tile back where it was and felt his heart pounding away at his ribs.

Moonfish was a computer genius unparalleled by his peers the world over. A computer genius who's specialty was 'deterministic chaos'. Predictions.

Prophet of the darkest day... Deterministic non-linear systems.

Prophet System.

A computer designed and coded to predict the future.

In the hands of Philanthropy, the people who'd built this place.

... They'd made Moonfish into a monster just to obscure the existence of this machine from the public's eyes?

What kind of enemy... have I made?

His hand went to his pocket and tried to turn on his phone, finding it wasn't charged enough yet. Slowly, but surely, his feet turned toward the exit and he started running. If it really was philanthropy that had made this place, if they were the ones behind what happened to Moonfish, then the things they'd do to Twist and Sparky for digging this up...

His feet started running faster, bolting as fast as he could up the stairs, out the door and into the rain.

Why did his phone have to be dead now?
"When I left... I thought I was leaving you all in safety. Figured it'd keep you out of the mess I'd be getting into..." Knuckleduster had said.

"Whatever it is you're doing... don't drag the rest of em into it..."

"If it's anything like the mess I got myself into? You'll regret it, when all is said and done..."

Knuckleduster had left it at that, trusting Stendhal to do the right thing.

No... no no no no no no no no no no no no no no no no no no no no no no no no no!

With eyes wide and mouth agape, neither Twist nor Sparky knew what horrified them most. The details of the operations laid out, purposefully trying to make someone insane or who had done it. Philanthropy. The largest, most powerful conglomerate of Hero Agencies the world over, was involved in the most horrific thing they'd ever come to know of. R.J. Mooney, Moonfish, a man victimized for reasons beyond their grasp was a former employee. What had he done? What had he known?

What kind of enemy had they and Stendhal been busy making?

"Baby..." Said he, squeezing her hand with a gulp. "What did we get ourselves into?"

"I don't know."

He gulped hared. "Can... can we win this?"

She didn't answer that.

Drawing in a very stiff, deep breath, he nodded. With the flick of a few keys he'd finished copying the decoded contents onto an EXD and popped it out of the machine. Slipping it into an envelope, he stood shakily up and squeezed his wife's hand.

"Back in a minute."

She nodded, and he just walked out the door, down the steps to the mailbox with a cluster of letters in hand. He made it to the mailbox, stuffing everything inside when he felt a presence. Someone was watching him from a distance, someone with violent intent and it made his hackles rise. Chancing a look over his shoulder, Sparky thought he saw men in advanced, heavy security uniforms, but he didn't recognize them.

Swallowing, calmly as he could he started walking back inside.

Up the steps, through the door, closed behind him, heart hammering in his ears. "Honey?"

She wasn't looking at him, wasn't listening. Her ears were busy searching for some threat not in the room with them. Slowly standing up, her hands glowing, she motioned for him to get behind her.

Then gunfire tore through the walls, flying in like a swarm of lightning fast bees and burrowing into their bodies, and sent them both to the floor.

He didn't have the strength to do much more than groan, looking weakly down at himself as he bled from so many wounds. She wasn't doing much better, but her armor had protect her at least enough to still be sitting upright when the uniformed men entered the room. Twist extended her fingers, their necks and spines collectively snapped and the uniformed men fell to floor in twitching messes, gagging and convulsing.

Outside, something metallic pinged, clicked into place, then something metallic clattered to the
floor. Before they knew it, someone had thrown a belt of grenades into the room with them.

In their condition, neither of them could move fast enough to throw them away. Their hands met for a final time, clasping as tightly as they could and in unison, they spoke to each other. "I love you!"

...

Gunfire. He'd heard fucking gunfire!

His lungs were burning, legs screaming as he almost made it to their club, their home, and he prayed he was in time to save them.

Then, blocks away, he heard something as it exploded.

A deafening, roaring cacophony of destructive noise and his heart sank.

No... NO NO NO NO!

As he closed the remaining, all too harrowing distance between himself and his destination, the world seemed to shrink away. Above his head, a news helicopter raced toward the source, wind rushing past his ears. Noise reached him less and less, his eyes focused on only what was right ahead of him and he felt only the sensations of his own body. Breathing, feet hitting the ground, swinging of his arms, gritting of his teeth, these sounds soon became the only ones that reached him.

Up ahead, he was faintly aware of the local news giving a report, something being shouted at the camera as it recorded everything.

He didn't give a shit about that.

Until he arrived at his old partner's club, and saw it engulfed entirely in flame. A roaring, blazing inferno that neither the pouring rain nor the fire department saw a chance of quelling. The sight of it filled his eyes, then the sound reached his ears and became all he could hear. Falling to his knees, a sense of total despair washed over him.

Gone... they were gone...

He'd brought them back into this and let them die.

The sounds of the fire faded away, replaced slowly by a shrill ringing in his ears, and he stood on stony legs. Dragging feet, soundless footsteps, and he wandered ever closer. Their apartment had collapsed into the bottom floor, spilling out the side and he saw seven bodies on the ground.

Two of them were holding hands...

His fists clenched and face scrunched up as his shoulders tensed, teeth grit as his face turned to the ground. Stendhal was shaking, a sense of pain snaring over is heart, stinging at his now watery eyes. After a moment, anger replaced this strange feeling and he looked up at the other bodies. Men in security uniforms, the same kind that-

...the same kind that had been guarding the Shroud.

 philosophers... The Nameless One!

A rush of flame soared passed him, engulfing and erasing the uniformed men from the scene. "My
"my..." Slowly, with bone chilling calm, Stendhal turned around. "Seems the fire destroyed everything here." His eyes were blazing hotter than the flames, rage searing and focused on the man now speaking: Endeavor. "No evidence of anything involved remaining." The 'hero' was speaking in an obnoxiously calm, cocky and relaxed tone of voice. Stendhal's fingernails broke through his gloves, then the skin beneath. "Guess we'll never know anything for certain about who was involved here... will we?"

There was no more control to speak of.

Stendhal's body moved of its own volition, hand to his sword, mouth agape and roaring like a mad beast, he lounged for Endeavor. While the man had raised his hands to defend himself, he wasn't quite fast enough for vampiric speed of his assailant. Stendhal's knee slammed Endeavor back, his spine hitting a brick wall and the flames wreathing him flickered away to nothing, and Stendhal's blade came to rest over his neck.

It would have been so easy... so right to simply push the blade forward, sever his head from his shoulders...

But he didn't.

Endeavor's eyes were wide, searching as he considered this boy, eyes flitting to his teeth, but he did nothing.

Stendhal, with a hiss of breath between his teeth, snarled at Endeavor. "This..." his voice quivered, "is the last fucking straw. The last thing I lose to that piece of human filth." Endeavor quirked and eyebrow, and Stendhal's mad glare met his eyes as he spat in rage. "When Overhaul is taken care of, when I take him down, Nameless is next!" Veins in his neck throbbed, his eyes bloodshot as he roared at the pretender under his blade. "I'm coming after him, and there is no one who can stop me! He's DONE!"

As the dhampire lowered his blade and began stomping away, Endeavor grinned. "A challenge I'm sure he'll welcome, boy. But exactly what do you have to challenge him with?" Stendhal didn't answer, he just kept stomping away. "You can try to arrest him all you like, but without some damning evidence, you'll have no chance of keeping him locked away."

Oh... so that was how it would be, was it? When this was over...

No. He had no idea how it would be, was it? When this was over...

*Thank you for confirming that suspicion, pretender.*

Stomping away, into the distance, sword sheathed, he shelved that thought for later as he moved away from his friend's grave. Twist and Sparky were gone, and if he had anything to say about it, they were the last people Nameless would ever take from him.

His shaking hand went to his pocket, and this time, naturally, his phone hummed to life. "Fuck you too..." he ignored it, just stomping along.

That was, until it started ringing.

By now, Stendhal was so beyond angry that he's stopped feeling it at all. "Yes?" he hissed through an unhinged grin.

"Your friend... the one who was with you when you came to my home..." Stendhal blinked, trying to place the voice. Eventually, he realized it was Tobo. "On the news, she was in that fire, wasn't
It took a long time for Stendhal to answer. "She was."

For a time, a long time, all either of them heard was the rain. "The child's full name is Erica Nobunaga." Stendhal's eyes fluttered and he gasped. "There's a small storage facility, unit 13, near the northern fringes of the city. You should find everything you need there. It was... all I could save."

Closing his eyes, feeling his energy sapped, Stendhal let out a long breath. "Thank you, Tobo."

"You will likely never hear from me again." The implication was heavy, weighting on Stendhal's already bucking conscience. "Do what you can for the girl."

When he hung up, Stendhal took a breath, then started running. This wouldn't end with his friends dying in vain.

Silently, he wondered if Knuckleduster or Seether knew what had happened to them... pity he didn't have their contact information.

"Truth is truth, lies are lies,
Headlines strike between the eyes,
But when is a word not a word?
How's the meaning been reversed?

Twisted, torn, tricked and turned,
Inside out, upside down,
'Till there's nothing left to talk about..
Except yourself."
AN: I regret not making Vanessa more of a character.

Shame I won't be fixing that this chapter...

Nighteye stood in his office, looking out at what little of the city sprawled out before him. His hands were folded behind his back, and his eyes were sullen and serious, gazing out at that dark pillar of smoke on the horizon. How many people had died, he wondered. Which part of his vision of the future was unfurling now? He could never be certain which version of events would play out. In the end, it was always the most likely of them all, the worst option available.

He wondered how All Might's students were faring, whether or not any of them had died yet. Perhaps none of them would. Perhaps pigs would fly while reality was busy being absurd... although, it was possible none of them would die, not yet. Tired fingers dragged over tired eyelids, down the rest of his face. In just a few short days, there would be a call. A call he could not refuse, and wouldn't think to, nor desire. It would be a call to arms, to defend the legacy of a man fading away in a hospital bed.

This world was too bleak for his sanity, too humorless and cold. Maybe that was why he loved comedy so much, seeing a sea of worst case scenarios whenever he closed his eyes made him yearn for laughter. Of all the times he'd seen the future, the number he'd witnessed his friends and loved ones perish was too staggeringly high. All too often those visions would become real, and he'd live through that loss a second time.

Silently, he prayed that the next few days would defy his expectations, and that those children wouldn't live through such a thing as he. Funny thing was... he thought it would take a miracle, and he didn't believe in such things. It wasn't funny enough to laugh, but he tried anyways.

By the time the bus dropped him off, it was well into the night. Stendhal didn't know and didn't care about the last time he'd slept. There was work to be done and he'd see it through no matter what happened to him now. Walking along the row of storage units, he eventually came to unit 13 and smashed the lock. Door swinging open made way for the rain and he flicked the light switch. Naturally, nothing happened.

He sighed, stomping over and digging through the various containers. Plastic bins, cardboard boxes filled with bits of memorabilia, old clothes, cooking implements that couldn't be parted with, photographs of a family through the decades. The designs and colors were all faded, worn away by father time. He was digging through Tobo's memories, all that was likely left of his family history.

If Philanthropy found out about him helping... Stendhal would be the only one carrying these memories, this history around. Of course, it was just he and Vanessa carrying their family history, all that anyone would remember of them was in their minds. Well, them and Izuku now. Such ponderings ate at him until he unearthed a metal box, locked up tight. It was small, barely large enough to hold a few folded documents.

When he picked it up, something metal rattled around inside. Something heavy. Snapping open the lock, he peered inside, taking care not to let the water dripping from his hair into the box. Alarm froze him stiff when he saw the heavy object: a pistol, inside a police evidence bag. Wordlessly, reverently, he withdrew it from the box and set it aside.
The first document was the details of a man's death, a police officer who'd been shot through the head.

Nakamura's partner...

His eyes ventured back to the gun, sitting beside him, then through the rest of the report. Apparently it was entirely unfinished, the weapon had never been identified. Stendhal supposed he knew why. Setting the file and grisly pictures aside, he dug into the rest of the documents.

Eri's birth certificate... 'Erica Nobunaga, born-' He grit his teeth, eyes bulging with rage, and he set the document neatly aside. Reaching back into the box, he found an old tape recorder, flecked and stained with old, dried blood. It was also inside an evidence bag. Tearing it open, he pressed play and put the headphones on. In silence, he listened. In silence he felt his rage swelling to an unprecedented height and he flew to his feet. Gathering the evidence back into the box, Stendhal started stomping away, trying convince himself that he was not about to kill someone.

Wednesday, August 15th, 2255...

Early morning came around again without incident, followed by breakfast and the afternoon was looking to quiet too. Of course, noon hadn't yet rolled around, but Izuku was hoping it would. Hours he'd spent patrolling the perimeter now, ever increasingly behind on his sleep. His stomach growled, reminding him that he hadn't eaten enough in two days now. Shaking the rain from his white hair, Izuku stepped back inside the building. On his way in, Vanessa passed him by with a friendly wave, her turn to patrol. Sergeant Nakamura regarded him with a nod as he went for the stairs.

"Chizome?" Perking up at Vanessa speaking his friend's name, Izuku spun around and immediately felt his heart sink. That look in his eyes had only been there once in his memories, and it was when he'd almost killed All For One. "Little one, what's-"

The half human didn't answer. He just stomped right over to Sergeant Nakamura and grabbed his throat, hauling him down the hall.

"Chizome!" Vanessa called after him, now running alongside a momentarily stunned Izuku.

What the hell was going on?

Into an empty hotel room they went, Stendhal tearing the officer's utility belt away and throwing it aside as he slammed him against the wall. "You knew... you knew and you sold her out, you honorless insect! you knew!"

The sergeant gagged for air, clawing at Stendhal's armored hands but he gave him no relief.

"Sten," Izuku reached forward, hand on his shoulder only to be pushed away. He didn't notice the red sparks of energy that coiled around Chizome's arm as he shoved, but Vanessa did and her eyes bulged. "Sten, what's going on?"

Running into the doorway were Jiro and Kaminari, looking shocked as could be. Wordlessly, Stendhal took a metal box from his costume's shirt, opened it and grabbed an old tape recorder. After he'd flicked the earphones away, he pressed play and let the recording tell all.

Distorted by time as it was, Overhaul still sounded like himself. "You understand why I've called you here, right Nakamura?"
"I do..." The sergeant's younger voice was weighted with guilt, heavy and restrained. "What you're offering... how can I be sure you'll honor it?"

Overhaul chuckled. "Oh, I am getting paid quite handsomely to complete my work. Rest assured, if you let me have the girl, leave us in peace..." by this point the lieutenant was also at the door, listening with shocked intent. "Then my organization will cease any activity not related to my research. Oh, and I wont kill the girl. I like her and I need her alive." another chuckle, "do we have an accord?"

The silence of the recording weighed heavy on them all, Nakumura just slowly closed his eyes as he grimaced. Then, eventually, his former voice said. "...We do."

As someone in the recording almost dropped the recorder, they heard a third, very close voice whisper, "Holy shit... Ken, how could you?"

Then the recording ended.

Stendhal reluctantly allowed the sergeant to breathe. "Well?" He demanded. "Tell us: how could you, Ken?"

The sigh he gave was empty, that of one who'd realized his time was up. "One girl..." Kyoka's jaw dropped, appalled and Izuku stepped away from the sergeant in horror, "for the Yakuza to stop harassing people. One life, for them to stop killing. Do you have any idea how many lives that decision saved?"

As he spoke, as Stendhal almost blacked out from anger, Uraraka walked into the room, fishing through the metal box. "You..." Stendhal's breathing was heavy, hissing through his clenched teeth. "You dare try and justify this to my face?!" Silently, she picked up the birth certificate. "Tell them you spineless cur, tell them how long she suffered horrors at Overhaul's hands! TELL THEM HOW OLD SHE REALLY IS!"

When he didn't answer, defiantly holding his tongue, Uraraka did. "...She's twelve." All eyes in the room went to her as she stared, horrified at the policeman. "She was born in 2243... went missing when she was five." Holding up one of the files, the earliest file, all present saw the original -not copied- missing person's report. It was dated 2248. "You... you just abandoned a five year old to that Monster?"

Kyoka tried to step into the room, her earlobes twitching, but Kaminari stopped her. She did not need to do anything brash just then.

Taking a deep breath, Nakamura said his piece. "I made a difficult decision. Not a pretty one, but it was the right thing to do." Izuku could swear he heard Stendhal's teeth creaking under pressure as both boys clenched their fists. "You might not see it that way... but one day, history will vindicate me."

Stendhal growled, his entire body quivering. "I should kill you..." he dug his fingernails into the sergeant's throat, making him wince. "No jury on earth would judge me guilty of a crime, disposing of you."

The sergeant bared his teeth, smiling madly as fear overwhelmed his mind. "But will you?" He laughed, shaky and without breath. "Do you really have the strength of will? Are your beliefs really that strongly held?" Stendhal's eye twitched, and the officer laughed again. "I didn't think so. I'm the only person in this room who stood up for what he believed! Can any of you make that same claim!?"
His hand flew to the hilt of his sword, stopped only by Izuku. "Sten, don't!" The half human was breathing shakily, face bordering on a murderous expression. "He's not worth it..."

It was with extreme reluctance that Stendhal released him, the officer's feet finally landing back on the floor. As he gasped, massaging his bruised and bleeding throat, he gave Izuku a relieved smile. "Ah... I knew someone would see sense and agree with m-"

Izuku's fist flew faster than any bullet in history. In one punch, he turned Nakamura's nose to powder, sending him flying back against the wall, his skull cracking the wood clean open before he fell into a limp, groaning pile. Drawing in a breath through his nose, slowly, Izuku bent over and hauled the officer into a chair, then handcuffed him to it with the officer's own cuffs. "Yeah... wouldn't go that far..."

As he slumped against the wall, dragging fingers over his face, Izuku made peace with the fact that he'd just knocked a police officer unconscious. Or at least he tried to. Kyoka and Kaminari were both still too shocked to speak, Vanessa was not. "I'll... go call the police. Check the perimeter." She left the room with heavy footsteps, a hand on her face, fingers pinching at her temples.

As she passed, Kyoka finally rediscovered her voice. "Do we have any idea who's paying Overhaul to create that serum?" No one answered, too afraid to speak. "If anyone knows, please speak up." Stendhal didn't say anything, he just walked out of the room, toward the stairs up.

Kaminari shrugged, sighing quietly. "Maybe-... I dunno. I just... I dunno..."

Realizing this wasn't going to be answered now, Uraraka put forth probably the most uncomfortable question of all their lives. "We're not uh... gonna let Sten kill him, are we?"

"Obviously no, we're not." Izuku dragged his hand down his face, shaking his head as he went for the door to follow Stendhal.

Koyoka and he exchanged a look before he walked away, and then she turned to Uraraka. "No, no one is saying we're gonna kill him."

Giving a mirthless laugh, Kaminari added, "Yeah, no one besides Stendhal is saying that."

Up the stairs, following the trail of water left in his wake, Stendhal proved easy to find. On the floor, back against the wall, closed eyes and the tip of his nose pointing at the ceiling, an arm draped over his knee. Quietly as he could managed, Izuku sat beside him, "are you okay?"

Slowly, his eyes peeled open, but he didn't look at Izuku. "I don't know..."

"Do you... need to talk about it?"

Stendhal shook his head. "Words wouldn't do much good." Turning his eyes to him, his expression softened. "Although, I like that you didn't hesitate to hit him."

Awkwardly, Izuku shrugged. "He was being a villainous ass."

That actually made him smile. "Swearing now? How unlike you." While Izuku looked a little embarrassed, Stendhal reached out and squeezed his shoulder. "You're turning into quite the hero, just like I expected."

Embarrassment faded from his face, replaced by a soft-spoken surprise. "What do you mean?"

With a soft smile, he withdrew his hand. "The day we met, I thought I saw something different
about you... you weren't like most of the others, and I'm not talking about the blood in your veins." Awkwardly, Izuku glanced toward the stairs, hoping no one heard that. "You were so... humble. Your needing to be a hero, call it selfish all you like, was something genuine. Something that wasn't about what I thought the other's wanted."

Feeling a bit flattered, Izuku chuckled quietly, rubbing at the back of his neck. "Ah... what's that?"

Stendhal looked him in the eye. "You understand true helplessness." A heavier phrase could not have been used to accurately describe him. So one of them thought, and elaborated on. "I don't know what dark place your life fell into that gave you such knowledge, and you don't need to say. All I know, is that you can't stomach the thought of letting that kind of thing happen to anyone else. If you can do something, anything at all about it, you will." Looking away, he closed his eyes again, head leaning back against the wall. "Am I wrong?"

It... was difficult to dispute, as to do so would have been to taste a lie. "You know... I thought something like that about you." Stendhal quirked an eyebrow, giving him a sidelong stare. "When we met, you just seemed so... confident." Stendhal chuckled. "Like being at UA wasn't about seeing if you could be a hero, you were just there to prove that you were... what you already were." Izuku smiled, giving a one shouldered shrug. "It was actually kind of cool, I liked the idea of being friends with someone who had as much... conviction as a real hero."

Stendhal blinked, pausing at that choice of words. "...Conviction?"

Izuku gave that some thought. "Think of it as... the strength with which one holds true to their beliefs. How well someone adheres to their chosen path"

He grinned. "Conviction... I like that." Now he was really smiling. "Although, I have to ask: what about now? Now that you know about my past?"

Izuku gave another shrug. "Our choices make us who we are, right? I'd like to think this, the you you're choosing to be now, is the real you; not the man you left behind when you stopped being a vigilante."

So do I...

"Were you... would you have killed him, if I hadn't stopped you?"

The smile vanished, and Stendhal considered that. Disturbingly, no direct answer was forthcoming. "He killed his partner to cover up his crime... then had the audacity to preach at us like he hadn't gone completely insane." The vampire frowned, eyes off to one side, rubbing the back of his neck. "It's no less than he deserves..."

Flinching, Izuku's body drew in on itself, going cross legged, shoulders tensed with hands on his knees. "But do you deserve to be the one to have to kill him?"

Somewhere at the back of his head, the old urge to kill screamed that the answer be yes. Seeing the obvious hope, that fragile thing, in his little brother's eyes... it twisted at that urge, and made him feel as though the answer should be anything else. "... I don't know. It wouldn't be much of a leap, not from the things I've already done."

Izuku flinched again. "But..."

It almost made Stendhal want to cry. "I know, and that belief of yours isn't something I want to break." He sighed, fingers of one hand curling into a fist. "Making you cry... the thought of anyone doing it makes me want to hit something." At that sentiment, Izuku just smiled warmly.
It was a little infectious...

As Stendhal looked away from him, Izuku looked back down the stairs. "What do you think is going to happen with Nakamura?"

The dhampire shrugged. "I don't know. I find it hard to believe he was the only cop involved in what happened to Eri."

Izuku glowed, staring at the floor as he hugged his knees to his chest. "How does a man like that even come into being in the first place?"

"The more varied a person's experiences, the more complicated, more muddled their sense of good and evil." Both boys looked, rather listlessly, at Vanessa, who'd just arrived at the top of the stairs, joining them where they now sat. "I'm guessing Nakamura's were quite varied..." Cross legged, she dropped down across from them, shaking her head. "Not that it really matters."

Stendhal gave a non committal shrug. "At least we can track down her family now... once this business with Overhaul concludes." Then I take down The Nameless One. Somehow..."

Another voice caught their ears, from the same way they'd all come from. "The more complicated... don't you mean confused?" Kyoka leaned her back against the wall, hands in her jacket pockets.

Vanessa shrugged, "Maybe... but in his mind, in any villain's mind, they're all doing the right thing. No one ever believes that they're evil, and that's what makes it so tricky to tell from good, sometimes."

With a scoff, Kyoka closer her eyes and shook her head. "The thought that good and evil aren't so different infuriates me. When your goals become so important that you're willing to fuck over anyone who gets in your way? You no longer get to act like the good guy. That's the difference."

"Innocent bystanders be damned..." Stendhal murmured, humorlessly.

Racing up the stairs, eyes wide and expression fearful, Kaminari had their attention almost immediately. "We've got company!"

The moment of truth was upon them. Leaping to their feet, racing down the steps, they all assembled in the lobby seconds before the front of the hotel exploded. Glass was sent slashing through skin and cloth, jutting out of every surface at odd angles. Patrons screamed, running for cover as... as a hoard of people in black cloaks and skull masks swarmed into the hotel.

Unsheathing his sword, Stendhal flashed his signature smile to Izuku. "Guren: Our usual tactic?"

Izuku's claws sprang from his fingertips. "You read my mind..." then the pair of them lurched into the fray.

Switching on her radio, mounted in her ear, Kyoka quickly put her amplifiers on her hands. "Sitrep, people!"

The non humans moved at speeds nearly too fast to see, blade and claw coloring the air with a thick, red mist. Stendhal's tongue swung about, gathering as much of their opponent's life force as he could with every path the organ described. While Izuku couldn't so 'gently' immobilize their enemies, he could break their limbs and simply knock them out. Vanessa proved to be a very quick study with this tactic of theirs, but they were severely outnumbered.
Shoto was the first to answer Kyoka's hail. "Can't get to you. Engaged someone with some kind of lava quirk. Be there when I can."

Cutting in next was Momo. "Two more to the east exit. Wind and dust. Can't-" her signal devolved into static, and from the west entrance, the building erupted into brilliant, blue flames.

Kyoka hissed, charging into the fray. "Green!" She repeated everything she'd just heard, the vampire listening intently.

Even as he continued incapacitating the mob, he hesitated at a decision. "Do you all need me here?"

"GO!" Stendhal roared, cleaving through a few more of their enemies, "We've got this!"

Nodding, Izuku practically flew away. So far as he knew, at the west entrance, Dabi was unopposed. If he stayed that way, it wouldn't be long before the entire building was coming down around their ears.

Aizawa stood ready at the doorway, Eri hiding behind him. "Don't worry, little one," His tone was reassuring, "Soon, Iida and Ingenium will take you somewhere safe."

Eri just nodded, shaking visibly, trying not to think about what would happen once Overhaul arrived. Above them, on the roof, something clattered down, making her yelp, but Aizawa grabbed her hand.

"Let's go." Hoisting her up, he started running for the roof with her clinging to his back.

He moved so fast Eri could scarcely believe he was human, but the way he clutched at his ribs - from time to time - reminded her that he was. Bursting onto the roof, Aizawa's heels skidded across the surface, grinding to a halt.

The Iida brothers were here, exactly as planned, but so was a hulking, one eyed villain who seemed to be overwhelmingly happy to fight them. "Yes... this. I've needed this! A reminder of what living feels like!"

He was almost too quick for them to match in combat, but the brothers were undeterred. Lunging forward, they both grappled at and punched the villain. Blood spouted from Muscular's jaw as they flew from the roof to a lower section. The Iida brothers let him have it. There were no distractions, no one they had to defend. Their complete focus was on capturing this murderer. Fist and armor collided, splattering blood into the rain. Disturbingly, Aizawa slowly realized Muscular was holding back, and if he stopped he could end this fight in a heartbeat.

With a cackle, Muscular decided that was enough. Seeing that the Iida brothers were extremely fatigued, he made his move. Foot jutting out he hooked it behind the older brother's knee. With a decisive yank he brought Ingenium's knee into range and drove his elbow into it like a hammer. Ingenium howled in pain, Muscular used this second opening to drive that same elbow into his armored face. Stars flashed in his eyes, the left lens of his mask cracked and he toppled over. He was too disoriented to do much besides mumble in agony, on the ground. Muscular stood over him, a boot on his throat.

"Who needs a damned quirk?" Muscular cackled. "Fighting hasn't made me feel this good in so long! That little monster did me a favor!"

Iida charged, roaring out a savage battlecry only to be caught by Muscular's hand around his neck.
Aizawa decided that was enough. "Eri... he whispered, "hide behind the door, okay?" She nodded and did as he asked, leaving Aizawa to race into battle.

"Think I'll kill you first..." Muscular mulled aloud, his savage grin widening exponentially before Aizawa's knee slammed into his jaw.

Landing as gracefully as the days of his youth, Aizawa growled. "Not the most original thing in the world, are you?" Lashing out with his scarf, he snared Muscular's wrist, forcing him to drop the younger brother and hauled himself through the air.

His heel connected with Muscular's larynx, making the villain gag violently for air. If only that was enough to sap away his strength entirely. Using the same scarf Aizawa had snared him with against the hero, he sent Aizawa crashing through a section of roof, landing in a groaning heap.

Gagging for breath, Muscular's smile came roaring back. "No? Like the little guy more?" His hand grabbed Ingenium by the neck, hauling him upwards. "THEN I'LL JUST KILL THIS ONE!"

Like he weighed less than the air itself, he hurled Ingenium off the roof and Iida Screamed. The older brother had just enough time look his baby brother in the eyes, before he fell to the ground. He landed not with a clattering of metal, but with the sickening, wet sound of flesh and bone being run through. He'd fallen onto a pointed, iron fence that lined the hotel's pool. It had run itself right through his heart and lungs. While Tenya screamed in emotional agony, Aizawa forced himself to stand.

Muscular, his face to high heaven, let out a vicious, cackling laugh."THE HERO KILLER COMES BACK TO LIFE!"

His celebration cut short. Iida roared like a ravenous beast, hurling himself at Muscular. His arms wrapped around his middle, engines in his legs at full throttle, sending them both falling off the roof.

"Iida!" Aizawa raced forward, trying to see where they'd landed. When he got to roof's edge, he saw the engine hero, his student, chasing after a fleeing, cackling Muscular. Now the former hunter didn't know what he should do. By chasing after his brother's killer, Iida had just left him and Eri to fend for themselves. There wasn't time to waste any longer, so he just hauled his protesting body back up the way he'd came. "Eri, we have to-

His blood chilled. The former hunter froze in place, staring down a man in bird-like plague mask. "Aizawa, I presume?" His hands were in his pockets, his stance was anything but combat ready. "Oh don't worry." The yakuza's laugh put a nauseous pit in the hero's stomach. "Eri's fine." The villain waved a dismissive hand in the air, pacing toward another section of the roof. "She ran off, didn't seem to want to come with me. I'm sure someone will scoop her up. Cute kids like her always find people who'll take care of them."

Aizawa felt his heart hammering in his chest, even as the villain prepared to do anything but attack. He just leaned on the lip of the roof, overlooking the city. In all his life, fighting villains and monsters alike, no individual carried a more unsettling presence that this man. His eyes looked dead, hollow, like he didn't really 'see' anyone he looked at. It oddly reminded him, as the old comparison goes, of a shark's eyes at the aquarium. Everything it saw, was just food to be consumed.

It reminded him that, really, Aizawa had never truly faced a monster. Not until now. "I don't understand..." Aizawa breathed. "You're after her... why would you just let her go?"
Overhaul laughed, giving the hero a sidelong look, over his shoulder. "Now, who said I was after her?"

Realization struck, then a piece of concrete did at the base of his skull. Aizawa hadn't even realized that Overhaul had activated his quirk until the roof had leapt up to punch his lights out.

As his vision blackened, Overhaul approached. "Using a quirk that erases other quirks... how had I not considered this years ago?" The last thing he felt was Overhaul's fingers grabbing his shirt.

Scorching heat forced Izuku to shed his jacket, throwing it out into the rain. Dabi had practically turned the entire western side of the building into an inferno, all but guaranteeing it wouldn't be standing much longer. Truthfully, Izuku wasn't surprised. If Dabi hated his father half as much as Stendhal seemed to, why wouldn't he leap at the chance to destroy something of his? Figuring that Endeavor must have anticipated this, the vampire wondered if this wasn't the least expensive or profitable thing Endeavor owned.

The thought of ever having that much money was unsettling. As he frantically ran about, searching for anyone who needed his help, he came to the relieving conclusion that everyone had already evacuated. So all he had to do was find Dabi and bring him in. "No pressure..." He gulped, racing through the building, trying not to think about how badly Dabi had burned him the last time they'd seen each other.

Although, now that he thought about it, in that moment Dabi could very easily have just killed him outright. It was entirely possible that Shoto's older brother had shown him mercy; considering the circumstances, killing him would have been entirely forgivable. It was enough to give the vampire pause.

Until he remembered the people he'd killed in Tartarus, and he felt even more conflicted.

...This is just going to suck in every way, isn't it?

Izuku frowned, climbing higher into the burning building, hoping, praying he'd have to fight any other villain.

Then he saw Overhaul.

Why do I pray? If there is a god, he exists to kick me in the teeth...

He landed in front of the man who'd spent weeks tearing his body apart and tried to keep his knees from shaking. "Overhaul." He said, surprisingly evenly.

The villain regarded him nonchalantly. "This might not be the best time to talk..." he said, adjusting the body on his shoulder. "perhaps outside? Where we're not likely to burn to death, as a random thought."

Izuku just raised his fists. "Do I really seem like I'm about to indulge any of your whims?"

With an exaggerated show of disappointment, Overhaul spoke in a defeated tone. "No... guess not." Then he smiled. "But you should probably move before Dabi incinerates you."

It took all too precious seconds for Izuku to realize that wasn't banter, only just avoiding being turned to a pile of ash. "Boss... why did you warn him?"

Overhaul shrugged. "I think he deserves our respect." He discarded the limp body on his shoulder
as Izuku frantically batted at his arm, extinguishing the flame. "Be a pal and carry him home, would you, old friend?"

The vampire's heart sank. "Aizawa!?" Then he growled. "No! You're not taking him!" When he charged forward, Dabi's flames enveloped his body and Izuku was forced to throw himself out into the rain.

"You'd think he'd just act instead of talk..." Overhaul mused as Dabi picked up the unconscious, likely concussed, Aizawa.

With a grunt, Dabi saluted his boss. "See you at home, sir." Then he ran off, out of sight.

Smiling, Overhaul made for the window Izuku had just exited from. If the vampire was to pursue them, he didn't need him following Dabi back to their hideout. "Hmm... been a while since I was the distraction." he mused, leaping out the window. "Let's see if I can still pull it off..." When he landed, he wasted no time in launching the offensive.

The last of the mob fell, crumpling to the ground and Stendhal gasped for air. Why did so many buildings have to explode or burst into flames these days? Why couldn't they just quietly collapse, if anything? Something that didn't make smoke was the main thing. "Please tell me we don't have to drag these thugs outside now."

Kyoka just sighed, setting to hauling them out of the building. "Can't just leave them to die."

It was with no small amount of anger that Stendhal stepped to it. Of course, he and Vanessa managed to carry most of them out by themselves, but the others weren't just going to stand there. It was during their final trip that Stendhal noticed the body by the pool and another sliver of his heart shattered like glass.

No...

Unconsciously, he reached toward Ingenium.

A strong hand clapped him on the back.

"You did good today, Sten." Ingenium gave him a broad smile, earning an awkward looking one from the Dhampire. "If I didn't know any better I'd say strength and taking a beating were your quirk, not that paralysis thing you do."

Someone brushed passed him on their way back inside. He'd been so taken from the present, looking up the man's broken body that the passerby had almost knocked him flat.

Good people just keep dying... and here we are ferrying these would-be killers of the innocent out of an inferno, as if their lives are so precious.

Tch... no sooner will these vermin be free of jail, that they will simply attempt to kill again. To cleanse the world of the 'impure'...

..."At what point does not killing these people become enabling them?"...

He wandered back into the building, his friends were scurrying about, searching for anyone in need
of help. Kyoka went racing off toward the sound of an explosion, screaming in its wake. Bakugo... likely trying to help Yaoyorozu against whoever she was fighting. He made a note to try and find Shoto, when he could, but for now he had business. Treading lightly down the hall, he found where the sergeant had been left, cuffed to the chair.

And he was still there.

Most of the building was already saturated with flame, scorching every inch it reached and this room was no exception. Slowly, the officer stirred to his senses and Stendhal just stood in the doorway, indecision stilling his body. There was something he wanted to do, to make reality, but he... he wasn't sure that he could. Once that line was crossed, there would be no going back.

Nakamura blinked, groggily coming to his senses. "Kid? Kid you gotta help me!" It was only a slight motion, but one corner of Stendhal's eye twitched. "You can't just leave me like this. 'Leave you like this'? As you did to Eri, you mean?"

Indecision made way for something deathly more concrete.

He walked into the room, stooping down to collect the evidence he'd spent so much time to find. Evidence that had cost the lives of two of his oldest and only friends. File by file, the metal box, the gun and all the rest. Satisfied that he had it all, he slowly turned back toward the door.

Nakamura gasped, unable to believe this was happening. "Kid- Kid what the hell are doing!?"

Slowly, very slowly, Stendhal turned and faced him for the last time. "I'm making a difficult decision." Nakamura seemed to shrink, reality finally settling in. "It's not a pretty one, but I'm sure it's the right thing to do. You might not see it that way... but one day, history will vindicate me."

With a shrug, Stendhal added one thing more. "I'm also standing up for what I believe in, after far too long."

The sergeant started screaming, and the half human ignored him, closing the door and crushing the handle. When he walked away, there was a sound of something heavy crumbling, a wet, crunching splatter, and the screaming got much, much louder before it faded away.

"You really don't belong with them..." All For One smiled, his voice echoing in Stendhal's head, "do you, boy?"

Perhaps not.

With a grin, a spark of red energy leaping from his eye, Stendhal left the dead 'person' in his fiery grave. Unsheathing his sword, he tried to remember where he would find Shoto.

But I can't think of anywhere else I want to be. Besides... all my friends are here now, and I plan to keep them alive.

...

I'm sorry...

Izuku...

It was a frantic, hurling dance, throwing himself to and fro through the rain. Water split around his every motion, his form cutting through it like a pin, whirling about in the wind. Of course, to him,
it was a fight for his life. If Overhaul touched him once, that was it. Izuku Midoriya would be dead, just another victim of out-of-control villain activity. The street had been lanced toward him, spires of asphalt striking out like the fists of some subterranean come to claim the surface.

Cartwheeling through the air was working, for now. Overhaul seemed to be dreading closing the distance between them. One strike from either of them, that was all it would take to end this, and both knew it well. One from studying his enemy for weeks on end, the other from being studied.

Of course, dodging was only an option for as long as there was navigable ground to get to...
"You're running out of room, Vampire."

Pillars rose, flying toward him, and his foot slipped. Cursing aloud, he did not manage to dodge before the asphalt smashed him through a pointed, iron fence. Straining with his aching limbs, forcing himself to move, he smashed the street pinning him to the metal and leapt skyward. He'd only narrowly avoided being swallowed by the street.

As he flailed about in the air, Overhaul charged, hands reaching out and Izuku only narrowly twisted out of the way. He lashed out with his leg, forcing Overhaul to leap as he clattered to the street. Naturally, his enemy adjusted mid flight, angling a hand toward him as he descended. Only by rolling aside did Izuku manage to avoid being turned into mist, the street exploding beneath them both.

Sinking into the road together, the Yakuza lashed out with his fingers and the Vampire twisted lower, striking out with his own palm. Had he expected to hit, the battle might have ended, but Overhaul was just slammed back against the jagged concrete with a loud, pained grunt. "You've got some fight left in you after all!" His palm clapped the side of the pit, launching himself free and snaring Izuku in the asphalt.

Panickeing, he hurled his limbs about with all his strength, freeing himself in a burst of movement before Overhaul could close. He landed, slipped, and another spire of street connected with his face, tearing his mask to pieces and sending him skidding away, splashing on the road. With a groan, he got to his feet, and the open wounds on his head crawled shut.

His mind raced, Overhaul lowered and touched the ground again, sending more asphalt tendrils lancing toward him. There had to be some idea, some tactic he could use to give him an edge! Something he remembered...

_Icy fingers touched his skin, the world exploded in a firework of agony, his body bursting, his every seam tearing asunder at the man's touch..._

_A slight cough, echoing under the leather and metal plague mask..._

_Skin unraveled like a shattering stone, blood cascading like the raining sparks of a faulty power line as his tissue hurled itself back into the proper place..._

_Veins up the side of his captor's neck turned black, skin growing paler and a thin layer of murky sweat lined his brow..._

_Another touch of the cold digits, his body ripped to shreds as though by a billion, infinitesimal razor wires, only to cobble back to its original shape..._

_Pale hands remained pure, unscathed as his body seemed to sicken..._

_A trick of the light made it look as though their very existence flickered and his captor's cough..._
rattled with the weight of fluids in his throat...

That was it!

Feet touching the ground, Izuku threw himself at Overhaul, and the Yakuza sighed. "Predictable..." his outstretched hand awaited the touch of Izuku's body, his legs coiling and leaping forward.
"Eager for the end, vampire?"

Moments before they collided, Izuku twisted his body in the air and -with his claws- slashed open his own skin, sending blood trailing into Overhaul's palm. To the villain's horror, his hand absorbed it, it's consistency becoming like runny clay before dropping off his arm with a wet, red splash on the street.

Screaming in fright, Overhaul's other hand flew to his now bloodied stump. "WHAT!?" Clutching at the wound, Overhaul desperately tried to staunch the flow of blood. "What did you do to me!?"

Not quite what I expected...

Izuku winced, surveying the damage he'd wrought, landing nimbly behind his opponent. "There's a moment, when you activate your quirk..." As he spoke, Overhaul sealed the wound with his quirk, backing away from Izuku while his own injuries slowly healed themselves. "Where your hands deconstruct themselves and then throw themselves back together." In stunned silence, Overhaul took another step back. "Going by the mask, I'm guessing you have a weak immune system, it's why your veins turn black as you use your quirk more and more. Your body leaves itself wide open to everything in the air, making your body fight for its life the more its used."

Overhaul's eye twitched, taking yet another step back. "...You were watching closely, while we had you captive."

Izuku dropped into his combat stance, claws extended. "Looking for weaknesses, planning an escape. Or did you think I liked it there?"

To his credit, Overhaul laughed heartily. "No, I'm not crazy, after all." with his one remaining arm, he lowered, flexing his fingers as if he were the one with claws. "Let's end this!" He propelled himself forward.

The vampire met the charge head on. "My thoughts exactly!"

A palm soared over Izuku's head, his fist narrowly missing the other man's ribs as he twisted away. His fingers stuck down, an elbow to Overhaul's wrist almost snapped the hand off as he lashed out with his other hand. Deftly, Overhaul fell to the street, narrowly avoiding ruptured lungs via the vampire's knuckles. His hand slashed at Izuku's legs, dodged with a backward flip. Twisting his legs about, Overhaul sprang to his feet as Izuku sprang off his hands, further backwards.

He'd almost landed when Overhaul charged. Twisting and falling back, Izuku twirled out of the way to surer footing, and leapt clean over the Yakuza's head when he next struck. Landing behind him, twirling around on the slick street, he did a split and ducked passed Overhaul's striking hand as he spun around. With a roar, Izuku launched his fist forward and smashed Overhaul's ribs with a loud, sloppy crunch.

With a gurgling scream, the Yakuza was sent flying back into a brick wall, skidding across the street and splitting the water in his wake.

Slowly, imposingly slowly, Izuku stood up straight, staring Overhaul down. "Got you." Overhaul's mouth spurted up blood. "It's over."
Coughing, laughing through his gargling lungs, Overhaul grinned beneath his mask. "Not yet." his palm struck the ground, and Izuku reflexively fled only for Overhaul to disappear beneath the street.

Cursing under his breath, Izuku put his ear to the street, straining his hearing. Where ever he was, it wasn't here any longer. "Damn it!" He punched the road, standing up with a growling sigh. He spun back around, surveying the now smoldering ruin that used to be a hotel. Smoke poured into the sky, the area gone eerily silent.

He started walking toward the building, to see where his friends had gone, if everyone was safe, when his knees buckled. An unlucky bad step saw him falling into that crater Overhaul had made. Between the fire, his own lack of sleep and nourishment compounded on the two weeks spent in the clutches of the man he'd just been fighting, it was a minor miracle he hadn't already fainted. Straining to stand, his hand clutching at the jagged concrete wall, he merely got to his knees.

_H-... how tired am...?

Dabi arrived at the hideout, chest heaving and muscles straining. With a final, prolonged grunt he dropped Aizawa onto what now passed for an operating table. Breathing heavily, his shaking hands latched the straps over the unconscious hero's limbs. Tightening them firmly, he stumbled to a nearby chair and collapsed in a limp heap.

_Next time... I'm not running all the way...

Between haggard breaths, he heard others making their way back inside. Like clockwork, the team assembled in the lab. "Well... that was a disaster." Ash muttered, nursing a nasty looking burn on her left shoulder.

Her duck billed friend didn't say anything, he just went searching for ice to put over his black eye. "Well, we did succeed in out goal." Seether said, leaning against the wall with crossed arms.

Ash scoffed, shaking her head. "Volcano is captured, Overhaul is nowhere to be found, that entire group of troops is now in jail... Oh, and Muscular went and killed Ingenium. What do you think the chances are his little brother follows him back here?"

Breathlessly, Dabi shrugged. "If he doesn't kill him too..."

"Or get killed by him." Ash frowned. "Savage that he is, I'd rather have him with us than not. He's handy in a fight."

Seether chuckled. "I'm sure he'll be back. Muscular was the hero killer long before he was a member of the Yakuza. It's going to take more than an upstart kid to bring him down." A fact that was simultaneously relieving and utterly disturbing.

That a bloodthirsty man such as he could survive so well, for so long, was not the most lighthearted thought. "So long as he doesn't lead back trouble..." Ash sighed.

Interrupting this conversation was one, one-handed Overhaul climbing up, into the hideout through the floor. The group all regarded him quietly, exchanging odd looks as the Yakuza Boss dusted himself off, then closed up the hole he'd climbed through. "Interesting entrance..." Seether murmured. "Where's your other hand?"
Dropping to the floor, out of breath and pale as could be, Overhaul just tried to breathe through his mask. "Lost it..." His veins were dark and throbbing, pulsing visibly as he sat there, trying to recuperate. "Where's... Muscular and Volcano?"

Dabi sighed. "Captured, and don't know."

Scoffing, Overhaul rolled his eyes. "Wonderful. The main event is about to begin and, once again, he's missing." With his remaining hand, Overhaul stumbled over to a pile of spare parts and circuitry. "No matter... we don't need him yet anyways." Arranging the bits of metal into something resembling a pattern, he braced himself for yet another use of his quirk. "See to your injuries, rest." Overhaul ordered, placing his stump in the middle of the arranged parts. "Stay close by, and I'll call for you when the time is right." With a wince, his quirk melded the metal into his flesh.

The others exchanged worried looks, observing silently as Overhaul flexed his new, mechanical hand. "Was that wise, sir?" Dabi said with a quirked eyebrow.

Overhaul just shrugged. "It functions, so, I think so." Grabbing the crank attached to the table he started spinning it, bringing the unconscious hero ever further upright. "Anyone with a queasy stomach might want to leave the room." and he reached his hand toward him.

The sight that befell Endeavor was not a pretty one. A few badly burned and cut civilians, smell of blood and smoking flesh filling his nostrils, that red-clad creation girl was hooked up to an oxygen mask -something about a dangerous amount of dust in her lungs- and that explosive one was getting stitches in his scalp. His son was sulking in the corner, nothing new there, saying something to that upstart with the bad lungs.

Hmph. Between him and the vampire, Shoto has terrible taste in friends.

He was walking by the morgue when he saw something, through the window. Ingenium, lying dead on a cold, metal table, Valentine standing over him. He couldn't see her face but, from the way her shoulders lifelessly hung in the air, her grief was obvious.

Cute, the monster thinks it has feelings.

Approaching his son, Endeavor crossed his arms. "Report." When he arrived, Eri hid behind the crow-faced one.

The upstart glared at him, Shoto just met his gaze with an expressionless face. "Ingenium was killed, Iida's MIA and Aizawa's been taken, we think Izuku has been too."

"One of the villains is in custody. Most of us are awaiting orders. Endeavor."

"Good. You're all staying here, like good little boys and girls." With a sigh, Endeavor rubbed at his eyes. "Did you attempt to use your flame quirk at all?"

Defiantly, Shoto's answer was immediate. "No."

Endeavor scowled. "Maybe next time, you will, seeing these results." Turning on his heels, he started for what passed for an interrogation room. "Remember your roots, boy." He didn't see it, but both boys now behind him rolled their eyes.

Opening the door, he stepped in to find a man so muscled he might have been mister universe. Around his neck was a quirk suppressant collar, he was handcuffed to the metal chair he sat in, a thin cut lined his cheek. "Ah, number two. What do I owe the pleasure to?" his fingers were blue,
and he was still shaking.

*Shoto must have frozen the man solid, or near enough.* Endeavor grinned, pulling up a seat. "Your hideout. Where is it?"

The hulk scoffed. "I don't talk to pigs." He looked away.

His smile widened. "No surprise there, but you will tell me." The villain rolled his eyes. "Frostbite makes people, so delirious after all." Endeavor stood, walking to the man's side while his curiosity got the better of him.

Turning back toward him, the villain quirked an eyebrow. "What frostbi-?" Endeavor's fist slammed so hard onto his hand that the fingers he'd hit nearly snapped off. He didn't even bother stifling the man's screams, as he proceed to twist the fingers off.

Screaming from the 'interrogation room' made Eri cower behind Stendhal. Shoto just took a tense breath. He knew only all too well what was going on in that room, how far his father would go to get what he wanted.

From behind Stendhal, Eri whimpered. "He's scary..."

A sentiment the heterochrome wholeheartedly shared. "He is."

Gulping, Eri tugged on Stendhal's sleeve. "did Overhaul really take Izuku?" Stendhal didn't say anything. He just hugged her, giving Shoto a look.

A look that demanded action be taken.

Walking up and joining them was Kyoka, flinching at what she heard going on in that room. "Barbaric..."

Again, Shoto just agreed. "yup..."

Moments later Endeavor emerged, clicking his fingers, soon followed by several pros. Likely just heading to conference room. Closing her eyes, Kyoka listened closely, focusing her hearing as best she could on what was being said in that room. "Tch... of course, Nameless's little pet would forbid Vanessa from helping. Wonderful." She rolled her eyes, thoroughly fed up with Endeavor's... being Endeavor.

Stendhal tried to take his arms off of Eri, but she just held on tighter. Hesitantly, he just kept on holding her. "What is he always going on about?"

Numbly, Shoto looked over at him. "Hmm?"

Gesturing off toward where the other boy's father had gone with his chin, Stendal murmured. "Your father, 'remember your roots'. Is that supposed to be important?"

With a tired sigh, Shoto shrugged. "It was the family motto, once upon a time. the full phrase is 'remember your roots, so that you may never again trod down old paths, and walk only towards the brightest future.' These days... he just says it to put people in their place."

Stendhal sighed. "He would..."

Finally, Kyoka opened her eyes. "Wow. One of their own is captured and Endeavor's 'priority one' is getting Overhaul's serum rather than rescuing our people." Her face shifted about with disgust,
shaking her head.

The dhampire grit his teeth. "Good thing we won't be leaving this to them, then."

Photo blinked. "We're going after them ourselves?"

With a nod, Kyoka whispered. "That villain wasn't quiet when he gave up the location of their hideout. I can get us there easily."

Looking very upset by this, Eri reached out and grabbed her pantleg. "No! You can't just go against Overhaul again! What if... what if...?"

In a decision that surprised them all, Stendhal gave about the warmest, gentlest smile his face would ever wear. Putting a hand on Eri's shoulder, he spoke quietly. "Hey, I know it looks like we lost, but we didn't." While Eri blinked, Shoto and Kyoka exchanged a look. "The only real defeat in this life? Is giving up after someone knocks you down. And we don't give up." Somehow, despite all the fear, Eri seemed to relax, and Stendhal gave her a squeeze. "Now, you just stay here, safe and warm, we're gonna go get your big brother back."

Melting all their collective hearts, Eri smiled and nodded. "Be safe and warm too."

Smiling herself, Kyoka nodded. "We will." Then, she turned to Shoto, giving him a questioning look. "You with us?"

"Obviously." Standing up, he dusted off his white costume as best he could, and the trio headed for the exit.

Their people's lives were too valuable to leave in the hands of that brute.

Long, long ago, she'd gotten used to being woken up by screams. The screams from the top floor had nearly made Toga sick. Different voice, but she recognized those screams. She'd heard them the day she met Overhaul, watching him fuse Moonfish and Nomu together. When they showed no signs of stopping, Toga resolved to free herself. Whether or not Overhaul's little experiment succeeded, she knew staying here meant death.

Wrenching her arm as hard as she could, she felt the concrete strain. Grinning, she started pulling and throwing her limbs as hard as she could. Bit by bit, the concrete cracked and snapped. Bursting free of it, she crawled out, then dusted herself off. Of course, her knife was no longer on her, confiscated by the villains. Sighing and rolling her eyes, she stretched her limbs for a moment before lowering herself and slinking through the darkened corridors.

As she walked along, the chill in the air began to bite. When she got back into the light, she saw her breath was vapor in the air and she grinned.

*Icy boy.*

Something rocked the entire building, nearly toppling her. Sounds of rushing flame, Endeavor barking orders, furiously trying to keep his troops in line. The vicious snarling of Nomu, now colored with Mooney's voice as more horrendous crashing sounded, people screaming in pain. She did some calculations in her head. Hungry, tired, still incredibly sore and a bit weaker than usual. A grin spread across her lips.

*Overhaul, Imma commin!*
It was only after the rain had nearly submerged him in water, still lying in the crater, that Izuku woke up. Sitting up with a groan, straining his body to move, he crawled out of the hole and stood up. No time to waste, he started walking, picking up his discarded coat along the way and slipping it back on. Wincing at the still prominent pain in his leg, his hand dove into his jacket pocket for his phone.

He needed to know where everyone was, what had happened, if everyone was okay. A missclick with slippery fingers opened his search engine.

"No, dammit! I need to call-"

His words died before he could finish thinking them through. Right at the top, with video, was the current leading story. "Endeavor: Assault on Overhaul!"

Opening the story, he scrolled down, sifting through images until he was reasonably certain he knew where this was happening. "Okay... point one for clumsiness." Coiling his legs and body, he leapt into the air.

Soaring from roof to roof, bound after bound, he started closing the distance to Overhaul's lair. This time, there would be no escape for that villain.

Behind them, somewhere, Shoto was busy holding off that duck-guy with everything he had; buying time for them to slink away, find their friends.

"You said his screaming was coming from the top floor?" Stendhal whispered.

Kyoka merely nodded, tapping one of her ears. "They never lie."

With a smirk, the Dhampire adjusted his grip on his sword. "Think Endeavor will be able to handle Mooney?"

That made her frown. "I dunno... it took practically an army of us and All Might the last time we fought him. Without Vanessa's help? No way it'll be so easy."

Regrettably, he thought he might agree. "Yeah..."

Maybe we'll get lucky and Mooney will kill him for us.

Suddenly, the entire building rocked, pieces of the ceiling crashing to the ground around them. Stendhal threw himself over Kyoka and she screamed as the building collapsed around them, shielding her from a sizable chunk of wood. Shrugging the debris off of them, he pulled them both from the rubble.

"Why. Can't. Buildings. Just. Stay. up?" He snarled, as they returned to even footing.

Letting some tension go with a breath, Kyoka shook her head. "Because no one in this city knows the meaning of restraint?" Ahead of them, a dusty cloud that filled the next room started seeping into the hall. They stopped, hearing someone breathing through a respirator inside. Listening closely for a moment, Kyoka let out another audible breath. "Straight shot to the next wall, then go right. I'll catch up with you."

Stendhal gave her an almost worried look. "You're sure?"

Kyoka nodded, flexing her wrists. "I owe this bitch for nearly asphyxiating Momo. Go, I've got this..." taking a deep breath, she ran into the cloud.
Fighting an enemy you couldn't see would have been a challenge for literally any other hero. For Kyoka, it was only all too easy. Holding her breath, on the other hand, Stendhal just hoped she could until inhaling was safe. Taking a breath of his own, as sounds of violence erupted ahead of him, he charged through the dust. Slamming into the far wall knocked some wind out of him, but he turned right and bolted again while the ground behind him shook. When he cleared the dust, he coughed a few times but otherwise was fine.

Damn silicosis...

Alone. He was alone again. Taking a tense, deep breath, he started down the hall. Mooney was fighting Endeavor, Shoto and Kyoka had the ones he couldn't name. That meant Toya was up ahead somewhere...

Never simple, is it?

He didn't have to go much farther to find him. To his surprise, both Toya and Toga were furiously digging through rubble, rubble that pair of legs and an arm were awkwardly sticking out of. With a look of almost relief, Toya yelled for him. "Chizome!" his expression was pleading as he frantically motioned for him to come help.

Sheathing his sword, Stendhal ran over. Between his and Toga's strength, the man under the rubble was finally unearthed. "...Seether!?" Shoving the last of the rubble aside, he knelt by his former partner. "No no no no no no no, hang on old friend!"

Most of Seether's chest was... flat. The concrete had crushed his ribs, tearing open his entire torso, blood seeping from every crevice, every opening of his costume now. His paper-thin skin proving to be his undoing. Helplessly, Stendhal looked between the two others with him. Guiltily, Toga lowered her gaze, looking particularly upset.

Quietly, Toya just murmured. "I'm sorry."

Beneath the mask, the now broken gas mask, Seether smiled. "Little Sten... you're not wearing your mask."

Shuddering breath, tears stinging at his eyes, he gave an exceedingly pained expression. "It's right here." He choked, voice cracking as he grabbed for it on his belt. "It's... a little different now, since the day you made it for me."

Weakened hands reached up, peeling away the old gas mask, dropping it aside. "No... I meant... I can see it in your eyes..." Tears dripped onto Seether's face, he just smiled. "you stopped fighting your shadow..."

Sniffling, Stendhal nodded. "Yeah... I did." Respectfully, Toga gave them space, keeping watch for anyone who might come bursting onto the scene, ready to hurt them if they did.

With a raspy, dead laugh, Seether's smile widened. "You ever wonder what this world would be like... if we all just... stopped wearing them?" Crushed lungs took in as deep a breath as they could, blood soaked the ground beneath them and Stendhal squeezed Seether's hand. "Philanthropy and its prophet system... what it did to Mooney... heroes like Endeavor... the masquerade is a disease... allowing things like this to happen while we marvel at All Might..." he coughed, flecks of blood splashing Stendhal's face. "We only ever stop wearing masks, when they're uglier than what hides beneath... to... Stained to give that impression of cleanliness..."

Flashes of memory...
Her body fell, the roof caved in again, he pushed his way through the rubble like a chick hatching from an egg.

They toppled, him pinned beneath her, her blood staining his clothes and skin.

Staining him to his very core...

Seether coughed, gagging a little. "So little genuine kindness... so little... is anything... but masks..."

Seeing the light leaving Seether's eyes, Stendhal brought one of his hands to his teeth. Biting at the glove, he peeled it from his skin before he reached down and gently ran his hand over Seether's cheek. Both men gasped, surprised when Stendhal wasn't hurt by the other's quirk.

Seether, with that face of his, gave a warm smile, closing his eyes as he leaned into the touch. "So... that's... what that... feels like..." His chest sank, the last of his air out of his lungs.

Another dead friend, who'd died such a pointless death...

Lowering his corpse to the ground, Stendhal shakily put his glove back on, reaching for his sword. "Both of you... get out of here." Toga and Toya looked at him surprised. "You'll be arrested otherwise. I can't protect you both and go after Overhaul at the same time."

Toga and Toya exchanged a look, Toga being the first to speak. "Yer helpin us?"

Slowly, Stendhal sighed. "I don't trust Endeavor to be fair to either of you. Run, I'll find you later, we'll think of something then." Turning toward them both, he said one thing more. "I'm tired of losing people... so please, run."

Toya nooded, stooping over and picking up Seether's body. "Okay. Whatever happens next, make sure Overhaul doesn't get away." Alwardly, he paused. "...it'd be nice to follow someone worth following, for once."

The implication was disquieting, but Stendhal nodded anyways. "Be safe..." As the two of them fled, he considered the path he might be heading down.

Working with known criminals, aiding and abetting their escape... planning to rendezvous, possibly collaborate. Leaving a cop to die in a burning building, and even now, he was hoping that someone would kill Endeavor. The way his fingers tightened on his sword, he almost thought it might be him to put that man in the ground. Turning his eyes up, toward the top of the lair, where Overhaul was waiting.

... "At what point does not killing these people become enabling them?"

... "You know... I met a hero once. He was more like a monster, posing as a hero who killed without discretion..."

"I want to be a real hero, whether the law sees me as such or not."

...heh.

For as far back as I can remember...
all my life...

The only real, physical urge I've ever felt, is to kill.

Sometimes I think it's a blessing, looking at others I often wonder how they think at all through those sex drives of theirs.

I don't even want to know how it feel to... want someone like that.

Wanting to hurt someone? To slice them open and tear out their innards?

Sometimes that want is so strong I can't hold still.

The more I've fought against it, the more I've tried to be human, the louder and more invasive it's become.

...

"I never was very good at being human."

I share that flaw with them, with Guren, Jack... so they've said.

It's funny... that very fact, that very flaw of ours?

It's what brought us as close as we are now.

Ironic, luckily.

...

Am I about to throw that away, to do the right thing?

Is my conviction really that strong?

...

...

.

Eri wandered around the hospital, mostly just trying to avoid being seen by anyone. She didn't like places like this, they reminded her of the room Overhaul kept her in. So white and clean and uncomfortable, how could anyone stand being here?

She decided that most probably couldn't, not for long at least.

As she went from one hiding place to another, avoiding the nurses and doctors -how they frightened her...- she overheard bits and pieces of the news, being watched in various rooms.

"The battle seems to have spilled out into a densely populated area. Countless civilians are now trapped in rubble or too injured to flee the scene."

The anchorwoman sighed, morosely.
"In a turn of events we at Rebellion Newsroom find shocking, it seems Endeavor has bitten off more than he can chew. This monster that has been plaguing the city for years now was once a match for All Might himself... I don't think this going to end well, Folks. You might not want your kids to watch."

Eri wasn't sure how to feel about that. Endeavor was a bad, scary man. Nothing like any kind of hero that she'd ever imagined. Yet he was there, fighting the people that had Izuku and Aizawa. She wondered if that was on purpose...

"Oh dear... it seems The Hero Killer has entered the fight. I repeat, it's The Hero Killer, Muscular!"

Now she was getting to a very quiet part of the hospital, near a room the staff seemed to want to avoid. With some light in her eyes, she hoped it was empty.

"Nnnng... Yoichi, cut it out..." Said a raspy, boyish voice, "I said I was fine. Stop fussing over me..."

Of course it wasn't.

"Hey, a burning house fell on your head!" Another boy. "I just wanna make sure your not, like, broken or something."

Eri peeked inside, seeing something that honestly surprised her. A humanoid, talking -blushing- lizard getting a backrub from another boy. His wavy blonde hair hid most of his face, and for some reason he had... an antique gas-mask on his lap?

The lizard boy, squirmed about, wincing his eyes shut. "It was just part of the ceiling, and that huuuuuurts!"

The blonde gave an angry pout. "Remind me: who's 'fine' again?" he leaned close to inspect the lizard boy's back. "Jeez, how are you not dead?"

Squirming a little, his cheeks very, very red -impressive, considering he was blushing through scales instead of skin- he cleared his throat. "There um... this hero with a sword saved me." When he smiled, it was oddly endearing. "It would've been the coolest thing ever if the house hadn't burned down..."

Eri's face lit up, and she stepped a little further into the doorway. "Sword Guy saved you?"

Both boys immediately looked up at her, blinking a few times. "Uh..." the lizard boy said. "Yeah, he did." Another look exchanged with his friend. "Who are you?"

She hid back behind the door, but didn't run away. "I'm Eri... Sorry, I- I didn't mean to bother you."

The lizard boy smiled. "Hey, it's okay. You didn't bother anyone." He turned to his friend. "Right?"

The blonde shrugged. "Nah. It's cool, not like he was naked or anything."

Oh, so he could get redder than that. "Wh- Yoichi!"

Yoichi looked confused. "What? What'd I say?"

Eri giggled, deciding she liked them.

Yoichi ignored the way his friend was hiding his face behind his knees. "Eh, don't mind him.
Shuichi’s just easily frazzled.”

While Eri walked into the room, Shuichi grumbled something under his breath, not looking at either of them. "That's okay, I am too." and she dragged herself up to sit on the foot of the bed.

Shuichi mumbled louder. "You really shouldn't tell people things like that, Eri..."

She blinked, "why?"

Yoichi smiled, raising an index finger and speaking matter-of-factly. "Because then people like me will tease you relentlessly."

The lizard boy shighed. "Exactly..."

Eri thought about this. "What if I asked you not to?"

That actually gave him pause. "Well... I mean, yeah. I'd stop then."

Crossing his arms, Shuichi turned and faced his friend. "Yoichi, would you please stop teasing me so much?"

The blonde stuck out his tongue. "Nope."

Shuichi looked completely offended. "What!? You just said-! Why not?"

Yoichi shrugged. "I dunno... cuz you're cute when you're embarrassed?"

For a few seconds, the blonde just smiled at the lizard. Before Shuichi hid behind his knees. "...I hate you." he mumbled with a tiny voice.

"Sure ya do." Noticing that Eri was giggling, he smiled approvingly. He was about to say something when he noticed the news. "Aw, hell..." he started looking around for something. "Shu, do you have the remote? I don't think Eri should see this..."

As Shuichi started fishing about the bed, Eri turned to the tv. "Huh?" her wide eyes blinked a few times, then widened. "Izuku!" She jumped off the bed, her smile so wide and bright that Yuichi almost 'awwwed' at her. "He's okay!"

The camera was shaky, clearly held by someone in the crowd, close to what was happening. Izuku was standing beneath an enormous hunk of rubble, holding it up so people trapped in some wrecked building could flee.

"I... don't believe it folks. This kid just swooped out of nowhere and started trying to get people out of harms way. It's barely been ten minutes, but by our estimates, he must've saved a hundred people already!"

Eri bounced up and down excited with a big grin. "Save the day, Izuku! I believe in you!"

Yoichi joined it. "Yeah, man! You can do it!" throwing a fist into the air.

More quietly, so did Shuichi. "Go white-haired guy!"

The anchorwoman started to sound relieved.

"I'm getting news that this is a student from UA! The very same student who was captured by and battle against All For One some weeks ago!"
Fuzzy as the images were on the screen, it was easy to follow every movement he made. A crying child was pinned beneath a car, her leg bleeding. Izuku just knelt with a smile. "It's okay." Lifting the car up, he picked up the child and pet at her little head. "It's going to be alright now, you're safe." In pain as she was, she seemed to calm, clinging to him for dear life.

Vicious, malicious cackling made the vampire turn around, watching the owner of that laugh closely. "That's a big claim, little man." Wordlessly, Izuku handed the child to her father -who'd come running over despite his fear- and he stared down Muscular. "How the hell can you say that so calmly?" the purple monster known as Mooney lumbered behind him, eyeing Izuku like a hungry wolf. "We could slaughter this entire crowd if we wanted to! What reason do you have to fill these people's heads with foolish hope like that?"

Had he known that the entire world was watching, that his next words would inspire Eri and others to heights he'd never have predicted, the cheers that would follow and palpable relief, He might have chosen his words more carefully. Had he known the impact this would have...

But he didn't, so he said the words that he'd long forgotten waiting his entire life to say. Very quietly, with a small, determined smile, he said the first thing that popped into his head. "Because I am here." Then he threw himself at the villains, and the world cheered.

Halfway across the city, Eri screamed at the top of her lungs. "YOU CAN DO IT, BIG BROTHER!" and the rest of the crowd let loose a cry of elation.

Claws extended, meeting teeth racing toward his flesh and igniting sparks in the air as the teeth sundered. He twisted about, narrowly avoiding Muscular's wild punch. A knee to The Hero Killer's gut sent him flying. Winding his body into a spring, he hurled himself at Moonfish and attacked with the ferocity of a mother bear defending her cubs.

Mooney and Muscular... avatars of pain in the young man's eyes. One in a very, very literal sense the other in ways far more twisted. An amalgamation of two men, one who had shown him the price of failure -the trauma of watching someone die- the other being the one who'd ripped his most treasured person away from him. The way he moved, the way he fought, was in defiance of it all.

Punch after punch, slash after slash at his body and Izuku refused to relent. He stood defiantly against their attempts to crush him, against his painful memories and dolled out equally as much punishment as they. Fist and claw and fang marked his enemies, fatigue of the last weeks forgotten entirely as he showed them just how strong they'd made him.

Teeth flew from Muscular's jaw, a savage hit to his sternum and he bent over. Izuku brought his elbow down onto the back of his head, driving him into the street. He was wobbling, knees shaky as he turned toward Mooney. The beast of a man pounced on him, his paw-like hands smashing him down into the pavement, pummeling him senseless.

In desperation, Izuku's claws came out, slashing aimlessly at the monster's body. Healing factor vs healing factor, and one of them was at a severe disadvantage. A wild kick with his pained leg sent Mooney reeling back, and Izuku pulled himself up with all his strength. Maw wide open, he flew at Mooney and bit down on his throat. If his healing factor was going to keep him in the fight, then he'd just have to do what he did at the USJ: hurt him until his body exhausted itself!

As Mooney struggled to pry Izuku off, the vampire kicked off the ground and hauled him through the air. With extreme precision, he threw the monster at a telephone pole and Mooney slammed right into the transformers. Electricity arced off his body as it violently convulsed, the telephone pole collapsing and crashing against a nearby wall.
The transformer exploded, shocking Mooney with enough power to keep the lights of six city blocks on for a week straight. With a groan, shaky arms reached up, forcing him to stand again, but Izuku leapt right at him. His coiled body unleashed all his strength into one punch, and the two of them went sailing through the ruins of a crumpled building.

Eri held her breath, as did the entire onlooking world while the dust refused to settle. Thick clouds of dust and smoke obscured the entryway they'd created, and a silhouette started walking shakily out. The lumbering form of Mooney had most gasping, screaming with fright as it shambled out through the smoke.

"Wait..." Eri said, her eyes going wide, "That's not-!" Mooney was dropped, almost thrown to the ground and like a curtain his form was moved aside to reveal the hero who'd carried him from the burning building. "IZUKU!"

Weak and panting for breath as he was, he gave a thumbs up as the world cheered. "See?" he panted with as big a smile as he could manage. "Everything's alright."

"The scarlet lotus has bloomed."
The pain was utterly unbearable, unlike anything Aizawa had experienced before. As Overhaul's touch unraveled, ripped apart his body and stitched it back together, he kept stealing glances at his knife. The villain had found it up his sleeve, removed it and placed the weapon aside after blindfolding him. If Aizawa couldn't see him, he couldn't stop his quirk. Somewhere in his mind, Overhaul was enjoying this even as his body sickened more and more, every time he used his quirk.

After another, final implosion of his flesh, leaving the former hunter gasping for breath. As he sagged toward the floor, against his restraints, the villain began to laugh. "I've done it..." the vial in his hands, stoppered with a cork, held the perfect serum. "It's finally complete!" He reared back his head and cackled, holding the symbol of his victory to high heaven. "I can cure the disease! Re-balance the world!"

The door smashed in, clattering in a heap to the floor. "Overhaul..." said the strained, snarling voice of Stendhal. "It's time for you to answer for your crimes. For the lives you've tainted!"

Flourishing his sword, he snarled. "Now... where's Guren?"

"Who, the vampire? Shouldn't he be with you?" Rolling his eyes with a tired sigh, Overhaul put the serum in his belt. "Must there never be a moment of levity? Some joy is allowed without it being so rudely interrupted."

Taking a deep breath, Stendhal let it out slowly. "Do you even know what's been happening to your men?"

Crossing his arms, Overhaul shrugged. "No. Should I?"

Twitching lips threatened to bare teeth, teeth that a hissing breath was drawn in through. "Seether... is dead."

Overhaul gave another, pitiless shrug. "Oh well."

Stendhal's face froze for a moment, then he bared his teeth. "Oh well!?"

The villain shrugged again. "Yeah, shame. Thought he'd do something useful before biting the dust, but oh well. Can't win em all."

His hand gripped ferociously, violently at the hilt of his sword. "Insolent..." his voice raised into something resembling a roar. "Heartless fiend!" Throwing himself at Overhaul he swung his sword with the ferocity of a cornered beast.

Ferocity that was hopelessly telegraphed to a ready opponent. "Child's play..." His hand clapped the wall behind him, then a pillar of concrete launched toward Stendhal.

The unyielding material smashed into his sword, sundering the edge of the blade into a jagged, craggly mess before slamming it into his face. With the loud, wet, crunching splatter of breaking bones, Stendhal's nose was shoved and torn; the hard cartilage, bone and flesh shoved into his left eye as the metal of his katana dug into his face. His spinning mind didn't have the strength to keep him standing, so he clattered to the floor as the world started to fade to black...

"Now..." echoed Overhaul's voice. "Now I can erase these hideous quirks, from all who stand in my way."
A white expanse, somewhere boundless and empty. Somewhere the half human was not at all familiar with stretched out before him. Colorless and featureless, this place, where ever it was, felt so familiar.

When he tried to take a step forward, he found that he had body, and his foot landed on something he couldn't see. "Where... where am I?"

"Inside your mind." Stendhal spun around, sword drawn and aimed at the unseen person's throat. He had a warm smile and swept back, pointy black hair. His eyes were threatening, those of a pitiless killer who wouldn't think twice before crushing human insects under his heels.

That face... he remembered it well. "All For One?"

"That's me." His tone was friendly, arms behind his back as he spoke.

Stendhal lowered his weapon. "How? How are you speaking to me..."

Widening one corner of his smile, All For One tapped the side of his skull, his eyes flashing bright red. "You didn't think that change came from nowhere, did you?"

Implication clear, the dhampire's jaw dropped. "You- you gave me your quirk?" All For One laughed. "Why? Why would you do that?"

The dead villain shook his head. "A moment of panic," he explained, "I figured I'd eventually be able to ensnare your mind, take control of your body, but... no luck there." He gave him a respectful nod. "Your will is immeasurable. It wont be long now before I'm erased by your subconscious."

Stendhal blinked, unsure if he should be flattered by any praise from this man. "You give me too much credit..." he looked away, into the endless expanse. "Even now I'm having a crisis of faith... when I'm back on my feet, I don't know what I'll do."

Again, the dead villain smiled. "Yes you do." Stendhal's ventured reluctantly back to that face, oddly comforting at this moment. "Since the moment you were made, created in your burning home, that very night, you've always known what you will do. You know it so well, have it so seeped into your bones, that even now with your dying body, you possess all the strength and endurance you possibly could. Your will, assurance of self alone carries you now. Not something so weak as your flesh."

Stendhal truly didn't know what to make of that. He scoffed, "If I know who I am... if that murderer I've tried so hard not to be is really me... why am I hesitating at becoming him?"

All For One laughed again. "Because you're not a killer, that's not who you are, it's merely what you are." Extending one hand, he offered Stendhal the floor. "Say it."

Closing his eyes, Stendhal, for the first time in his life, allowed his inner self, his shadow to envelope the rest of his mind. His chest felt light, limbs stronger than ever and the expanse began to change around them. Blank white melted into a sour brown, tinged and burned black around the edges as crimson, thick fluid oozed down the 'walls' around them. Swirling vortexes of red, the color of hate and rage, shone brilliantly around them.

Fury, anger and frustration at a callous, ignorant world. A world that cared not for those who suffered such as he, such as his only remaining and dearest friends. Emotions that drove him to
stand against it all, and fight back against whatever would dare to make more victims such as them. "I am a hero. A true hero. Not someone who yields to the foolish constraints these pretenders revel in, take advantage of, but one who will do what is right regardless of consequence."

All For One grinned. "Now... what are you going to do?"

Stendhal... no, perhaps someone else grinned. "I am going to bring down Overhaul, and then The Nameless One, along with Philanthropy."

(Oh wont you tell me? please just tell me, explain... how this should work...)

Hand gripping at the hilt of his broken sword, he felt the world swirling back to his senses.

(Well now who could it be... that lives inside of me?)

Heedless of this, Overhaul kept preaching to his captive audience. "Now all can be set right, former order restored, the Yakuza ruling with iron fists! My empire, in all its rightful glory! No more Philanthropy, no more heroes to keep me in the dirt!"

(I'm broken, lying helpless, shattered... Surrounded by the world...)

As he rose, with chilling slowness to his feet, Stendhal chuckled. "So... that's all it was ever about, wasn't it?" Shocked, Overhaul turned around and faced him, blinking. "What was that I overheard about curing a sick world?"

(And yet, you're smiling bright... Completely blind to life)

"You preach... and preach your ideals, but men you have deemed your lesser have spoken with greater weight than you, Overhaul..." He lunged, swinging wildly, and Overhaul danced away. Slash after slash, with strength and speed that defied his injuries, Stendhal forced him to retreat. Until Overhaul ducked to the floor, launching another pillar and ramming it into Stendhal's ribs, sending him flying away, against the far wall.

The Yakuza in question was slow to accept that this was happening, but do so he did. "Still alive and babbling... you may be a more worthy opponent than I gave credit for."

(My ruptured lungs... they were left this way... for once I'm out of breath...)

Stendhal lifted his bloodied head and gave a dark, ominous laugh. "A compliment I will not return, for there is something you lack, something dreadfully important to all who seek to preach as you do; lest their sermons lead their would-be-flocks astray." He glared, still smiling wildly at Overhaul. "what you lack... I have in great abundance, hypocrite."

(the truth I seek... never felt so bleak but, I maintain my depth...)

Overhaul, lips quivering into a snarling sneer, spat back at him beneath his mask. "And what's
With the hilt of his broken sword, he smashed his ruined nose back into place, unobstructing his
vision and bringing the blade to bear on his enemy. There he stood, weapon and face the very
symbols, representations of Overhaul's failing, did he name this trait so sorely lacking.
"Conviction." His grin was wicked and unhinged, that of man insane and in love with his insanity.
The grin of a wild beast reveling in the fact that would turn the one it gazed upon into meat. "You
are no worthy opponent, for you have no conviction to speak of, false prophet."

(I'm breakable, yet unbreakable, I'm shaking yet, unshakable, until the day when you find me...)
from his flesh, he saw Aizawa out of the corner of his eyes, free of his restraints and defending his student with a fearful expression.

Aizawa had acted out of desperation, instinct, and hadn't dared to imagine what would happen next.

Stain sidestepped Overhaul's reach and slashed downward with brutal speed and precision. In a splatter of red, Overhaul's only remaining human hand was severed clean off.

His quirk, his only avenue of victory in this or any fight, gone forever.

Only Stain wasn't done there. Reaching out, he grabbed the knife in Overhaul's elbow and shoved it up along the length of his arm. As Overhaul screamed, Stain wrenched it further and slashed clean across Overhaul's chest. The Yakuza gagged, gasping fruitlessly at the air with ruptured lungs and a severed esophagus and Stain grinned maliciously at him.

Sheathing the broken sword, he grabbed Overhaul by the hair and slammed him against the wall. "It's over!" Aizawa shouted, tearing his legs free of his bindings. "Stop it now, Stendhal! Before-!

In a wet, vicious crunch of skin, muscle and bone, Stendhal ran Aizawa's knife into Overhaul's heart.

Aizawa's jaw dropped.

Overhaul's mask fell off, revealing the shocked, helpless and terrified expression beneath.

Stain grinned and snarled. "May the fires of hell wreak a millionfold the agony you did upon that child, wretch!" Wrenching the knife from Overhaul's heart, he speared up through the bottom of his jaw and into his skull, a wet spatter of blood pooled out the top of his head when the blade poked through.

Blood poured from Overhaul's corpse, from behind his eyes, through his lips and nose and injuries, and Stain ripped the blade away, tossing the body to the floor. Overhaul's vacant eyes stared straight ahead, one eye completely dilated with the other entirely contracted, blood pouring like tears onto the floor as he limply lay in a motionless heap.

Aizawa stared with a gaping mouth at what his student had just done. Cold blooded murder. To his further astonishment, Stain knelt beside the body and removed the man's belt, wrapping it around his own waist. Racing footsteps from down the hall came to an abrupt halt at the door, Guren and Jack, arrived in time to see Stain standing over the dead villain.

Jack's eyes went wide, hand over her mouth stifled a gasping outcry of shock as Guren took a numbed step forward. "Wha... what just...?"

Only Stain didn't hear them.

He was too busy staring at the bloodied knife in his hands.

A knife he recognized from the darkest, most horrid memory he had.

The building shook, something overhead had smashed through completely. He flung himself sideways and the roof caved in.

Wooden shards, bits of concrete, something wet and warm covered him. His head was hurting, felt
like something had cut him. Even still, he pushed through the heavy, heavy rubble like a chick from an egg. His eyes were barely working now, limbs were so weak.

Coughing, tasting blood in his mouth, Chizome's fingers fumbled about and felt a familiar shoulder. A smile spread instantly across his face. "Mom?" Strength somewhat renewed, he crawled the scant distance between them and-

...  
...she wasn't moving.

_Panic set in. "Mom, we have to go! Get up!"

*He shook her, pushed her, trying to rouse her but nothing worked. The building shook again, and she was shaken just enough to roll down the rubble. Chizome grabbed on and was dragged along with her, battering against the smoldering rubble before being pinned beneath her. She- she was cold. Why was she cold? When he saw her face, his eyes went wide. Open, lifeless, dry, those familiar warm eyes, those loving things she'd always looked at him with... something wet was spilling onto his chest, an object digging into his side. When he looked down, what he saw would be etched into his eyes forever.*

_A knife, jutting right out of her heart._

Chizome screamed, and the building exploded.

...  
"This..." Stain murmured as his fist clutched at the hilt, fingers threatening to sunder it. "This is the knife that killed my...!" Slowly, his eyes turned to Aizawa, horror, shock, utter disbelief worn plainly. "...Where did you get this knife?" His voice was barely perceptible, quivering at edge of the abyss.

A moment of fleeting terror overwhelmed Guren and he halted all Movement. Aizawa just breathed. "I..."

Stain roared. "OUT WITH IT!" Everyone in the room froze, save for him as he quivered barely contained fury. "This is the knife that killed my family..." His predatory gaze locked onto Aizawa's boring holes into his soul. "Is. it. your. KNIFE!?"

For a long time no one spoke, the two men stood there, staring each other down. One was ready to commit murder, another was utterly defeated. In the end, Guren was the one who answered, stepping between the two. "Stendhal..." Slowly, weakly, Stain's eyes met his, lifelessly. "Put the knife down. Please?"

There was something in that request. Something pleading, vulnerable and scared. It took all of ten seconds to puzzle it out.

Silence hung in the air like thick smoke, oppressive and strangling. It was far from quiet outside the room, but in there it was as though all sound had been swallowed up. Blood dripped from the knife in his hand and from his injuries, standing between them and the freshly made corpse, his face was still raw and bleeding, eyes open wide. The look on his face screamed of shattered innocence, so shocked, wounded and betrayed. The three others stared at him, waiting for him to say, do something and when he did... it threatened to break the youngest one's heart.

Slowly, lip almost trembling as his jaw hesitated to speak, his words were scarcely breath against a
ringing that had started to form in their ears.

"...You knew?"

Guren winced, mouth closed, slow to open again. "Sten, I-"

The distance between them was closed in a blur, fingers roughly gripping his collar, clattering of Guren's shoes at the floor as he tried not to fall over, barely keeping his balance in time. "Did." his voice trembled, eyes somewhere between angry and heartbroken. "You. Know?"

Guren's arm was raised, his hand hesitating at his big brother's arm, not quite closing the distance and holding on. His expression was determined, worried, then sad, then open and vulnerable, twisted with regret. When he eventually spoke, his voice was almost nothing. "...I knew."

Stain's reaction was anything but what he'd been prepared for.

The knife fell to the floor, clattering against the concrete as he stumbled back, falling onto his hands and breathing heavily.

From far, far away, Guren said something, but it echoed and rang, unable to reach him. Ringing filled his ears, everything went blurry, and Guren knelt beside him, hand reaching out.

Stain punched him in the face, sending him flying across the room, hand on his sword he was on Aizawa in less than a second. He stared into the murderer's eyes, waiting for him to do something.

Only Aizawa just stood there, expressionless as he looked back into his eyes as the blade pushed against his skin. "...do it."

Stain faltered, eyes fluttering. "What!?"

Guren scrambled to his feet, Jack finally pulling herself out of her moment of shock. "Crow..." she warned softly. "Think: that's not going to do anything but inflict more pain. You can't bring them back with more bloodshed!"

While his little brother quietly panicked, eyes flitting between Aizawa and Stain, he stared into the eyes of his friend. Those pleading, desperate, fearful eyes. In those eyes was someone who knew exactly how he felt, had been in his exact position before. He didn't know it, not so well as Guren, but she had; only she'd chosen the path of mercy, when the fight was over.

Aizawa's hand came to rest on Stain's. "It's okay." When Stain looked back, he was smiling peacefully. "I've expected this... for over ten years." Stain felt his heart slow. "I just didn't think it would be one of my own students..."

Guren's voice trembled, his hand slowly reaching forward. "Da-... Aizawa, sir, please..." Were those tears, in his little brother's eyes? "D-don't-..."

That... word Guren hadn't but almost said... before their teacher's name...

...Was Stain about to commit the same crime, the one that had made him into a murder addicted monster to begin with?

Was he really about to just... create more of that same pain in his own little brother? A little brother who had already suffered so much, so much the same as he?

His teeth grit, body shook and he shoved Aizawa away from himself. Hands gripped at his hair, as
he stumbled away, body twisting and writhing in anguish as he threw his bloodied face skyward and screamed. Fingernails dragging down the sides of his head, face to the heavens he screamed and screamed for all his powerlessness, brutality and helpless rage. The scream of a man overwhelmed with pain, drowning in it since the earliest days he remembered. The scream of a man who could do nothing but lament his own humanity, making the same mistakes that bore him to being the man he now was.

He fell to his knees, hands clenched into fists, cracking the hilt of his sword as he screamed again, voice shredding. He didn't care, he just kept screaming. Guren and Jack approached, hands reaching, comfort offered but Stain recoiled.

"AWAY!" he shrieked, repulsed, reviled by them offering such a thing to something like him. A creature so utterly, horridly Stained as he. "JUST STAY AWAY!" His arms lashed about, the blade of his sword swinging wildly, keeping them at bay.

"Sten, I'm not gonna hurt you!" Guren winced as the sword clattered off his armored forearms, sending sparks through the air.

"STACK BACK!" he shrieked again, staggering away, toward the open, broken window.

Guren's eyes went wide. "Sten, stop!"

"GET AWAY FROM ME!"

His feet snagged on something, Guren leapt forward and grabbed his wrist trying to pull him back inside the room.

Stain panicked.

Hauling Guren about, flailing, he upset both their balances and out the window they went. Plummeting entire stories toward the ground.

"NO!" Guren, pulled Stain through the air, spinning them both around and shielding him with his own body.

NO! NO NO NO! NOT FOR ME!

Guren's back hit the pavement with a sickening crunch, Stain crashing down on top of him and felt something go wrong. Hand still on the hilt of his weapon, Stain stood and pulled back, the blade slowly sliding from Guren's flesh and bones, his blood spilling onto the street. The sword in his hand had plunged itself into the chest of his little bother, who lay there, gasping beneath him.

Stain backed away, horrified, staring at his hands then at Guren. "I... I said..." A very wounded Endeavor rounded the corner, clutching his bleeding gut and looking at them in confusion.

As he wondered what the hell was going on, Stain's little brother just reached for him. "Don't..." he gurgled, coughing, as his body slowly started putting itself back together. "Don't leave..."

It was pointless to even say anything, as Stain just turned around, staggered a few steps then vomited. As Guren peeled himself off the road, stood on barely working legs, Stain leapt into the air and disappeared across the rooftops, running as far and fast away as he could.

What did I just do...?

What have I done...?
Somewhere, from the fading corners of his subconscious, a voice answered: "The right thing." And Stain kept on running away.

"I don't want to hurt you, It's not my nature.

A monster born from dusk to dawn can't be your savior,

Remember the 'me', the way I used to be...

As who I still should be..."

Left there, staring after him as his body refused to work, Izuku reached out, staggering toward where Stendhal had been. His body worked as hard as it could to heal but he was still bleeding when he threw himself into the air. Izuku was still breathing hard, jaw trembling, forcing it to stay shut as his knees slammed into the lip of the roof.

"ARGH! Damn it, WORK!" He hissed at his legs, taking another shaky leap after his brother.

Stop... don't run away!

When he landed, his right leg gave out and he went tumbling across the roof in a clatter. Splashing up water and soaking himself down to the bones again.

How... how did this all go so wrong?

Clambering to his feet, he looked into the distance and saw Stendhal getting ever further away and leapt again into the air. As he flew, favoring landings with his left leg, he remembered something Mina had said, months ago...

"Saw it happen all the time, when I was a kid." She spoke quietly. "If you push someone hard enough, make their life painful enough, one of two things happens. They either become someone amazing or... they turn into the thing that hurt them."

He slammed into the surface of the next roof, footing slippery and saw stars in front of his eyes before shoving himself back up, racing after him again.

"At what point does not killing these 'people' become enabling them?"

Stendhal leapt from the rooftops, hidden from view now, and Izuku plunged after him. He was in such a hurry he hadn't noticed the car on fire, nor the hero 'Backdraft' about to extinguish it with his quirk.

" Stick with me, Midoriya..." Stendhal had smiled, "we'll go places..."

A torrent of water slammed into Izuku, knocking and washing him thoroughly over as he screamed. Running water... sure just add more to the list of injuries taxing his body. He wasn't on desperate mission or anything!

"Guren!" Backdraft immediately stopped. "I'm so sorry!" He went over to him, offering him a hand up. "Did the fall hurt you? Why are you screaming like that?"

He almost bit the hero's hand off, only narrowly avoiding doing so by punching himself in the face. It brought back memories from his first heroics class... As Backdraft stood there, unsure what to do, Izuku shakily got to his feet, jaw clenched like beartrap and started hobbling away. "S-
sorry..." he wavered from side to side as he started running.

...How long had it been since he'd slept? Or eaten? How far had he pushed himself toda-

**SNAP.**

It finally happened. Three years of clamping down his jaw, and finally, finally one of Izuku's teeth just cracked and shattered under pressure, the pain was so bad all he saw was white. Then...

then...

...  

"*We're the last of us now... Brother...*"
"So... you're here again." looking to the cafe, where the illusions lingered, Shigaraki's head tilted back, eyes trailing over the graffiti that adorned the building's side. A painting of All Might, just smiling a friendly smile, the words 'never forget' painted above and below. "Back in the old dream, seems a little sadder this time though." In reply, Izuku merely grunted, turning the pill bottle over in his hand, listening the medicine clattering around inside. I almost seemed as though he were considering having one. "You never did say what brought you here, you know."

Sighing, smiling, turning his eyes to the light that shone above, he let it fill his gaze. "Yeah..."

Sitting back, making himself comfortable, Shigaraki tilted his head, looking Izuku over. "Feel like sharing now?" Izuku closed his eyes, feeling something welling up behind them. "You're here again, aren't you? Maybe it's something you need to say..."

He considered his answer, all the easier things to say that seemed to make some kind of sense or another, things that wouldn't hurt to say. But none of those were true, the only thing that was true was the answer that hurt the most. "...it's easier here." Shiragaki blinked, drawing his knees up to his face, arms around his legs as a tear rolled down Izuku's face. "Out there, in the real world, it's... so hard, all the time." His head tilted back, eyes to the sky, as if looking to god for some kind of explanation.

But none was given.

Izuku felt the tears running down his face freely as his voice quivered a little. "Here... things might be bad for a little while, things might be difficult now and then but there was so much in between those moments. So much good, so much happiness and it didn't hurt... things didn't hurt. Living in this dream was easier than dealing with life."

Shigaraki smiled, sympathy clear on his face. "You still want to run away." Izuku's eyes closed, head held low with shame. "Even now, after all your hard work, all your effort has made you into a better you, you want to leave it all behind."

Slowly, shamefully, Izuku nodded. "Yes." His voice croaked.

The dead villain put a hand on his shoulder, squeezing lightly. "Is that the kind of thing that makes hero?"

He just scoffed. "Of course not."

"Then what are you really gonna do?"

... When the white faded, the memory of that dream from days ago in the hospital faded, Izuku saw he was holding one of his teeth in the palm of his hand. Inside his mouth a new one was growing in, and it hurt like hell. He had no idea where he was, or how long or far he'd chased after Stendhal. All he knew was that he'd failed to catch him, and felt hollow inside...

As his eyes scanned about, Izuku found nothing even gave the slightest hint where his brother had gone. Numbly, he got out his phone and checked the news, brain on auto-pilot. Aside from the obvious, a few injuries here and there, everything was fine, everyone still alive was okay. Even Iida had turned up, thoroughly exhausted and with the engines in his legs spent, but he was alive.
His friends were okay, Aizawa was okay, Vanessa was... going to be heartbroken. Kyoka was almost unharmed, save for her obvious shock of seeing their friend commit murder. Closing his eyes, he sighed and dropped his tooth, then started walking.

He was tired, hungry and fucking done. Time to go back to his room, to the dorms, and get some sleep after a long, long drink.

Enough was finally enough, and he could barely take it anymore.

The interview had been mercifully cut short by Endeavor coming and taking over. Rubbing at her eye, Kyoka stepped over some rubble, seeing those villains she and Shoto had fought being taken away.

Aizawa was just slumped against a wall, thoroughly exhausted.

She ran over to him, hoping he wasn't too far gone. "Hey!" He looked up at her listlessly, and she slowly stopped advancing. "...what happened?"

A tired hand reached up toward his face, dragging along the nearly colorless skin. "You were there... I don't think I need to say.

She frowned, expression souring, frustrated at how helpless she was. Frustrated at how much her teacher had just surrendered to it all. "How the fuck did things go this wrong?"

Unable to do much else, Aizawa simply shrugged, "things, I think, were always headed this way. They had been since long before this day had come. All we could do when the moment came was just hope it wouldn't go down the worst possible path, try to lead it somewhere better." He gave a bitter, dark little smile. "I'm honestly not sure if that's what happened or not." He started walking away and she just watched him.

Right now she felt... pointless. Like everything they'd been doing for days had been some sick joke, and this was the lackluster punchline. Overhaul was gone, dealt with, the Yakuza officially disbanded and crushed. Ingenium was dead, Stendhal was... had revealed his true colors. At least right now, as far as Overhaul and his goons and all their goals could be concerned, it was over.

Sighing, palm pressing at one of her eyes, she started walking away. The others had already started going their separate ways too, in all manner of direction. She didn't stop to ask what or where, she just wanted to go back to the dorms, shower and go to bed. Izuku was, to her knowledge, headed back too and likely about in the same, dreary head space. She wouldn't blame him for getting drunk out of his skull after all this, lord knew she was tempted have a drink hersel-

...Drink.

Kyoka's feet ground to a halt. The power had been out for three days... his supply of blood had to have gone rotten, and considering the extent to which he'd pushed himself in their efforts through everything, he needed something now.

...She gulped.

Chances were, he was not going to go for this. The very idea seemed contrary to anything he'd allow himself to do, much less to her. Even so, she'd started walking, her amplifiers moved to her pockets as she strode onward. Her heart was in her throat, and she felt colder than she should have
in the autumn air.

In a few weeks so much had changed, so much that could not be undone. While she'd initially been conflicted, able to enjoy some of what had happened, this moment felt nothing like a victory. Before it had been somewhat bittersweet, a promise of better things to come, but this felt dark. A friend had just committed murder and their teacher had nearly let his own life be taken.

One of Izuku's best friends and the man he now looked up to more than any other, and a man he'd almost called 'dad'... on top of the physical and mental exertion he'd put himself through these past few days, he had to be about ready to snap. Of course, this wasn't even considering the fact that all of this was immediately proceeding the rescue effort when he'd been in Overhaul's clutches.

As she'd already thought, his level of exhaustion on all fronts had to be reaching a breaking point.

At least the dorms weren't much further now...

Through the main gates, down the walkways, several students murmuring amongst themselves about 'some older student with white hair' and she was practically there. Several of the first years seemed spooked, they said it was something about the look in his eyes, the way he was shaking and obviously avoiding everyone around him.

*Definitely barely holding himself together...*

Through the door, up the stairs, around the bend and she was now only a few yards away.

"GOD DAMN IT!"

She hesitated, hearing his outcry of frustration as he slammed his useless fridge shut.

Clearly her suspicions had been correct.

Closing what little distance there was left to his room, she stepped beyond the threshold with surprising softness of step, reaching to pull the door closed behind her.

Naturally, his heightened hearing caught the muffled sounds of her footfalls. "Now's not a good time." he was standing by his closet, hands on the walls, and looming and bent over the non-functioning appliance with a grim look on his face. Whatever he was thinking, his mood seemed to lighten as she closed the door.

However, his surprise when she spoke told her that he thought she'd respected his plea. "I'd figured as much..." she said quietly, still hovering by his door. "But I think you need someone here right now."

At the realization that it was her in the room with him, he seemed to shiver. "Kyoka... you should really go." His fingers twitched, clawing at the wall he'd propped up against.

Daringly, she stepped forward, reaching out for his face, to brush her fingers through that gorgeous white hair of his. "Before you send me away, will you hear me ou-?" he lunged at her, his hands on her sides, bringing her up against the wall adjacent to his door with a thump. She winced, partially from being slammed into the wall and partially from surprise, slow to open her eyes again.

When she finally did, what she saw pulled at her heart in a way she hadn't been prepared for. There he was, her Izuku, shaking almost violently, his jaw trembling, twitching with restraint. His hands, those strong hands of his, quivering as he forced them away from her body, his unsteady breath cold against her throat as he loomed over her. Trapped between his arms, watching him so at war
with himself, thinking himself a danger to her... it was hard to tease him, or feel annoyed at that mentality of his when it became so evident that keeping his control could be such a war within himself.

But then again, every human has their sin, some part of themselves they must control, contain. Wrath, lust, gluttony... the first was hers, always quick with that temper, whether with a scathing remark or some jab from her quirk. She'd always been an angry one, sassy or otherwise. Contrarily, Izuku had not always been like this, while it undoubtedly was a part of him, it had never been a reigning force over his faculties as it was now; as it had been for the last three years of his life.

He could say he accepted it now all he wanted, she could see it: what it did to him in moments like this. "I-" his voice wavered, fingernails -claws?- scratching at the wall behind her. "I'm not-" he was pushing at the wall, moving himself away from her with as much willpower as she'd ever seen him use.

They'd been in this scenario once before, only then it had been far different. Emotions were high, it was true, but not like this. No, that moment had been tender, soft. Now... that guilt in his eyes, that fear, it gnawed at them both equally, though while it filled him with shame she couldn't help but feel sympathetic. As he made the last motions to push away from her altogether, she made some motions of her own.

Reaching up, behind her neck as her fingers pushed through her hair, she unclasped her choker with an audible click. His body froze, eyes locked on hers as she calmly gazed into his. Rather than unceremoniously drop the accessory to the floor, she moved her hand to his arm, and slowly slid her palm up to his shoulder. Her wordless invitation only further elaborated by her other hand, reaching up and softly tapping her neck.

Jaw trembling, eyes ever uncertain, he hesitated. "Kyo," she smiled at his use of the nickname, accidental though it was, "are- are you-?" the hand on his shoulder brushed upwards, cupping behind his head and softly coaxing him toward her. A final bit of hesitation and he brought himself to her, shaking all the way. His breath was now much warmer on her skin, traveling a much shorter distance as his fangs slowly came into alignment with her skin, and she closed her eyes.

A short outcry, a squeak really, was issued as his fangs slid into her flesh. He almost pulled away right there and then, but her hand at his scalp pet soothingly, easing him away from his guilt. "It's okay..." she breathed, as his tongue lapped at her skin and the blood flowing forth. "It's okay, I'm okay..." still, the whimper of a reply he gave was enough to twist up her heart. Izuku... She held him a little tighter

Slowly, as he began to drink, his hands ventured back to her body, winding his arms around her as hers clutched ever tighter at him. This feeling... it was nothing like the other times he'd bitten her. Before, on that first night when they'd met, it had just been a shock, a painful one at that, which had her heart-rate and adrenaline spiking through the roof. Of course, that scenario was well and truly behind them, as his hands unconsciously roamed up her back, fingertips sending sparks through her skin so explicitly said. As he calmed, with his lips on her neck, her hand petting at his scalp and neck, she realized just how... intimate this moment was.

Fire was welling up inside her, body climbing steadily in temperature as his fingers gripped at her back, trailing along her spine. Her breath was hot in her lungs, each intake of air seemed more desperate to quell her climb in temperature than the last. Steadily rising too was her pulse as she started squirming against him, her skin seeking his touch eagerly. Her fingers tightened in his hair, no small amount of confusion fluttering across her brain as surely as the butterflies in her belly.

What... what is this? She opened her eyes, not remembering when she'd closed them, searching him
over as if for an answer. *What am I feeling? It's not... it can't be, not from*- His tongue at her neck sent a shiver coursing through her and a stuttering inhalation of breath. Her head fell back, bumping against the wall as her excitement soared, his hand gripping tightly at her shoulder as her body cried out for-

No, that was absurd. She- she wasn't turned on by-

As her eyes opened again, looking down at his body -now very firmly pressed up against hers as he effectively pinned her to the wall- she felt them creep wider still. His hand wasn't anywhere near her shoulder. One was at the small of her back, just above her rear and the other was between her shoulder blades. But... why did she...? Then she saw it, her hand gripping at his shoulder, tightly, almost as though she intended to anchor him there. That sensation she'd felt had been her own grip, on him.

...I'm feeling what he's feeling. Her eyes fluttered, brow twisted in puzzlement. *He... he wants me?*

Not a revolutionary thought, to be sure, but she'd be lying if she said she'd ever stopped and thought about that. Well, outside those feverish fantasies of hers, but still, the reality of it had somehow crept up on her. He was her boyfriend, and had at multiple points expressed his attraction to her, so she'd gleamed from his wandering eyes and the way he squirmed, getting antsy whenever they kissed, whenever their bodies were close. Wouldn't have thought this would do it for him. She gulped, right as he'd taken stock of her rather jumbled mix of reactions just then.

Pulling back, away from her throat, his blackened eyes searched her once again. "What?" he murmured, worry clear in his voice, on his face. "Are- are you okay? That wasn't too much, was it?"

Her eyes, half lidded and shimmering as her breath refused to level out, locked onto his. She shook her head and with one hand, fingertips barely reaching the skin of his cheek, she scratched enough to give him goosebumps as she turned her face.

When his worrying eyes saw that her skin reacted much the same without prompt, his eyes widened and he went to draw back further still. "O-Oh! Um..." he gulped suddenly all manner of nervous. "ah- I- that wasn't- I didn't-" there was that look, that worry, that thought... he really was afraid that she thought he was gross.

No, Izuku, She thought, even as her excitement refused to recede. *I could never think that about you*. Her eyes fixed on his failed to reach him, leaving him heedless of her thoughts, feelings. *In fact, I think exactly the opposite, you idiot...* as he continued stammering, groping about for any way to make her feel better, to brush aside what she knew so she wouldn't feel uncomfortable, she reached for the door. *My idiot*. As that thought crossed her mind, so too did the hint of a smirk on her lips.

Oh god, he just felt so ashamed... of all the ways, of all the contexts that could have been conveyed to her, it would be the worst. As her hand went toward the doorknob, his heart sank. *Great...* he deflated, *this is it. This is the part where she finally realizes she's with a-*

*Click.*

...*With a...?*

He blinked. Confused, he ventured his gaze toward where her hand had gone. To his surprise, what he saw put him simultaneously at ease and served to make his heart skip several beats: she'd turned the deadbolt closed. ".*.Kyo?”
Her hands were on him, pulling him closer to her, their bodies in much the same position they had been, that shimmer in her eyes stopping his breathing. When their lips slid together, the tactile warmth and softness of hers together with his sent sparks across his brain. He'd remembered their first kiss, but not the feeling so clearly. That sensation, that soar of bliss at her touch, feeling calm, excitement, comfort and affection all in one gloriously electric moment. His brain had almost skipped past the moment, barely taking notice of its occurrence despite their rather obvious feelings then.

Now he remembered it very clearly, and realized this one felt... different. It carried weight, meaning, need. When he drew back, slightly less confused as his eyes searched hers yet again, the adoration shimmering in her half lidded eyes melted away what remained of his hesitation. As their lips slid back together, her hands up his back, he stopped thinking she might have ever been uncomfortable. When she coaxed his lips apart, and her tongue entered his mouth, he almost stopped thinking altogether.
Chasing Cars

-Satellite Vi/Black D0g

Tongues tangled, curling around each other almost delicately. Hands traveled over clothes, eager to explore the skin beneath but not daring to. Not yet. Shaky breaths were taken between kisses, only to be cut so abruptly short by one leaning back to the other. Mostly, he'd lean back, uncertain, and she'd chase after him, slowly, waiting for a sign he didn't want to kiss her. When he gave no such indication, she'd smile, bringing their lips and tongues back together.

Wait, wait, what was she doing? Hands on her shoulders, signalling that he wanted to break for a moment, she did not pursue when he leaned back this time. "Kyoka, um..." he searched about for his words, "what... what is this?" No room for assumptions, after all, lest one lead to something unwanted being done.

Hands and fingers stroking at his shoulders, the beginning motions of coaxing him out of his coat, she whispered. "I want you..." his jaw dropped, eyes fluttering once again as she leaned back in but not quite all the way, leaving just enough room for her to ask a question of her own. "Do you still want me?"

He almost couldn't believe she was asking him that. "Yes, I- I do." Laughing nervously, breathily, he added, "It- it's just- I-I've never-"

Nodding, softly, she cut him off. "Me neither." Obvious though it seemed, stating it put some much needed common ground beneath them, something to center him with. Her hands went to his coat's lapels and tugged, prompting him to move closer again. As her arms re-encircled him, she let herself revel in her excitement a little longer. It was starting to get very warm in his room. "Kiss me?" she whispered, their faces very close together, tantalizingly close to touching.

So it was his turn to nod, only his nod was less restrained as he momentarily indulged her, the wet clicking of their lips ringing in both their ears. He smiled, holding her closer still, his warmth radiating through her clothing, blanketing her skin, his lips sparking hers with electricity with every flit of motion now. He had her up against the wall again, his arms around her, keeping her from pressing her back to it as they gazed into each other's eyes, pausing for a moment to breathe. "...nervous?" he asked, hoping she wasn't.

Smiling, she shrugged. "Are you?"

Gulping again, he nodded. "A little..."

Closing her eyes, she leaned up, "Trust me..."

Eyes half lidding he murmured in reply. "I do trust y-" She'd cut him off, seeking to rekindle their passion to its earlier level as she slid their lips and tongues back into their little dance. As she did, his nerves melted away completely, and he started to kiss her back in earnest. Pushing, pressing his lips almost fiercely against hers as his tongue coiled around hers and brought a moan out of her which lit him on fire.

My god, that sound was heavenly... Seeking to draw another from her, his fevered passion amplified as he brought yet more energy to the kiss, making her squirm against him and the wall, sandwiched between them as her hands clung tightly to his shoulders.
His body pressed to hers, the harder planes of his form fitting snugly up against her softer, yielding curves, the fabric of her bra through her shirt sent sparks through his brain yet again. It seemed to work similarly on her, he was pleased to find. "Mmm!"

Delicious, there was no other word for that sound. *More... I want to hear more of that...* He started squirming too, his hands frisking about her now, gripping at the leather of her jacket and tugging it down her shoulders. *I want to hear her enjoying this, I want to drive her crazy, as crazy as she drives me.* Her body, her shapes, the give of her flesh as he explored, pressed against her had him up the walls. ...Fitting, he supposed, considering.

As his hands pulled the jacket from her shoulders, the heavy material dropping to the floor, she felt her heart hammering in her chest. Hands brushed up under her shirt, the skin of his palms gliding up her belly sending tingles radiating from every inch of her he touched. When the fabric started bunching up, revealing first her midriff and then dark fabric of her bra, her breath almost halted completely. Raising her arms for a moment, he wasted no time tugging the garment off, throwing it aside, but he was still very clothed himself, and she didn't like that.

In a moment of clarity she started unbuttoning his shirt as his hands resumed exploring her, dragging hungrily over her skin as his lips, his teeth -not his fangs- went to her neck and her thoughts threatened to vanish. A hand was at her chest, kneading, squeezing at her flesh and by god did that feel nice. Another hand was at her rear, venturing into her pants and grabbing as much as he could, pulling her up against him, their hips pressing at each other.

Panting at the feel of his mouth at her skin, she felt herself pushed flush against the wall. "Oh..." she murmured, smiling and wriggling in his arms as she tried to shove his shirt and coat away in one fell swoop. Then she was pouting and glaring daggers at the undershirt she hadn't expected to find beneath. Grabbing at the hem of it, as he dropped his arms long enough to let his outermost layers fall away, she brought her mouth to his ear.

"Off." she commanded, and he raised his arms for her as she slid the offending garment up and dropped it off to one side. "Good boy." His jaw dropped, utterly failing to formulate a reply as his entire face went red and she rewarded him with a flick of her tongue against the shell of his ear, sending shivers she could feel through his skin. *He is just too cute...* Fingers tangling in his hair dragged his mouth back to hers, as her free hand roamed over his chest.

Fingertips traced over the ridges of his collarbones, the slight bumps of his sternum, venturing to his pectorals, pressing her palms flat against his chest, twisting over his nipples made him shudder. *Mmm... wasn't sure he'd like that.* She smiled, dragging fingernails lightly down his abdomen, stopping when she reached his abs. *When did he stop being so skinny?* Twisting her wrists about, she felt out the shape of his lower torso. He still was a bit scrawny, but his muscles disguised that fact a little. Just enough, in her opinion.

"Hmm?" he pulled back, eyes searching hers as her hands had apparently stopped, blinking a few times.

She laughed a breathy laugh, shaking her head. "Nothing, I just... remember you being skinnier than this."

Smiling bashfully, he blushed, leaning back in and kissing her throat. "You're pretty easy to look at yourself... among other things." he murmured into her skin, his breath making her shiver in anticipation before he nipped at her skin, lapping his tongue up to her ear.

Another breathy little laugh, "when did you get so confident?" Her fingers fumbling with his belt buckle, then with the button and zipper of his pants.
He shrugged, kissing his way back to her lips. "Couple seconds ago, when I realized I had you close to naked in my arms." Then he seemed to realize how thoughtless he was being, halting just shy of kissing her. "Ah, wait, I- that's not bad is i-?" she'd grabbed him, fingers tangled in his hair again and dragging him in for another dalliance of their tongues and the question no longer seemed to matter very much.

That he squeaked when she pulled him to, catching him completely off guard, had her chuckling into the kiss. Too. Fucking. Cute. She stroked at his cheek, her other hand pushing his pants off of him, letting them drop down his legs. Overcoming that moment of mild surprise, he slid her pants away as well, and she stepped out of her boots before kicking the last of her hero costume away, leaving them both in just their underwear.

His palms went to her chest, fingers squeezing into the flesh of her breasts, somehow bringing even more heat to the surface of her skin. When his fingers slipped beneath, teasing at the rosy buds of her nipples she gasped, tensing a little in his arms as her lips pressed more urgently to his. She likes that? Finding this difficult to believe, he knew he wanted to touch her there, but it seemed unlikely she'd do more than tolerate this somewhere in his mind. Working his fingers more diligently at the sensitive nubs he felt them harden in his grasp and her hips pressed up against his, one leg sliding up his side as she groaned at his touch. Heh... guess so. Lucky for them both, he guessed, as he started trailing kisses across her jaw, down her neck and to her shoulders.

She was panting heavily, excitement making it hard to hold still. "Wha-?" she breathed, eyes aflutter as her head fell back, against the wall. When one hand slid down the length of her body, fingers venturing into her panties, her eyes widened. "Oh my go-" she gasped again, hands clinging to him as he slid a pair of fingers inside of her. Okay, this is happening! When he started flexing his fingers, stroking away inside her, she leaned her face to his shoulder, teeth at his skin.

Misreading this for a moment, he drew his head back, a look of concern on his features. "Sorry, too much?" when he went to withdraw his hand, one of her own flew to his wrist, holding him in place.

Shaking her head, cheeks flushed so red her blush had spread to her neck, the lust glistening in her eyes left no room for him to misread. "Don't stop?" he nodded, leaning in to kiss her properly once again, nuzzling her and she him with a pair of smiles between them before he started working at her again.

Holy- She could feel her hips moving, in time with his rhythm seeking more and more friction as the moments passed, her legs tightening around his hand. Why is it so different when he...? His fingers at her chest, lips at her skin as he pushed the bra out of his way, sliding his tongue over the skin of her boob, mouth over her nipple and drawing more of her in with sweet, sweet suction. Is it because I can't control him? Because his touch is his own, touching me where he wants to touch me? An all too simple realization, but at the moment thinking might as well have been an Olympic event for how difficult it was proving. Because he wants to touch me... That thought alone thrilled her, never mind what he was already doing to her body.

Noticing her reactions to his rather feverish treatment, the autopilot of his lust crazed brain shifted aside. He gazed up into her eyes, gauging her reactions as his fingers, lips and tongue worked at her skin. He was surprised that he still had enough focus to read her at all. So... here. Insider her, his fingers shifted, focusing his fingertips on one spot in particular. and... like this? Altering the pace of his hand, his fingers, he soon had her gasping for breath, her body shaking with every motion of her hips and his hand. In a few scurrying motions, fingers gripping tightly at his hair, she brought their lips crashing together, earlobes snaking around his neck and holding him to her as she... Oh... was that her... finished? Her quick, urgent breaths tickled at his face, little moans under her breath as her every exhalation seemed to burn against his skin. Eyes fluttering open, cheeks,
neck and chest flushed scarlet, those violet orbs shimmering with passion, adoration as she smiled at him. *Looks like*. He smiled in turn, leaning back in and kissing her again.

Hands slid up his chest, to his shoulders, rubbing at them for a few moments before she shoved him. Stumbling back, eyes wide, the thought that he'd done something wrong put a look on his face, but she followed him, pivoting him about and pushing him back onto his bed.

*Oh.* he relaxed and she put herself right over him, a knee on either side of his legs as she leaned down, hands on his shoulders and pinning him to the bed. This time, she was the one exploring him as she kissed, nipping at his neck, trailing kisses down his chest, his abdomen, below his navel. Fingers snaking into his waistband, tugging his boxers gently down. He felt his face go impossibly hot as she continued kissing her way down, humming with the telltale lilt of mischief in her voice. *Oh...* He gulped, suddenly growing very fidgety beneath her, as her mouth, god her mouth... what was she even- that couldn't be legal, nothing that felt that good could be anything other than a crime.

As he squirmed about beneath her, her hand keeping his hips motionless, she couldn't help but love how easily he'd submitted to this. Sure, if his reactions were anything to go by, he was loving every second of it just as much, but still. *He really does try to behave for me.* Pleased with this realization, realizing she couldn't very well let this encounter end so soon, she slithered her body up the length of his. As her face loomed over his, that look on his face made her heart flutter like a butterfly, she whispered. "*Mine...*" hands gripping at his shoulders, holding him down to the bed.

Smiling, he nodded, enthusiastically at that. "*Yours.*" he murmured, waiting patiently for her to lean down and kiss him.

And she did.

Their lips slid together, her teeth nipping at his lower lip and drawing it into her mouth. A groan escaped him which had her purring as she fiercely kissed him again. Slowly, hands trailing up her sides, he reached up, fingers fussing about with her bra-clasp for a few seconds before he unhooked it. She paused, arms drawn in, shoulders bunched up with a coy smile on her face, she pushed her breasts together, the fabric of her undergarment loosely pressed away from her skin, hinting that it could just drop away at any moment and never in his life had Izuku felt luckier.

"*You're beautiful...*"

She smiled with red cheeks, shrugging a little. "*You make me feel beautiful.*" He leaned up, chasing after her, kissing her passionately as he reversed their positions, fingers at her panties, dragging them down her legs. When they finally got low enough, she kicked them away. "*Want to take the lead?*" she murmured with a smile, as he'd started kissing down her body, she laughed when he decided to pay special attention to her chest, evidently his favorite feature of the female form.

"*Not quite...*" his voice was husky, dipping lower than it usually did as his mouth reached a similarly low altitude as she had, just a few moments ago.

Wait, what was he...? A hand flew to her face, clapping over her mouth to stifle a particularly loud outcry. *Oh, oh my go-! Holy shit, Mina was right about- Something about 'luck' drifted across her brain, but she couldn't place it. Good god, she'd thought his hand felt nice! "Izuku~"

Hearing her moan his name like that, his first name, had him riled up all over again. At no other time had he been happier to have that name, and he amped up his assault on her body, tongue slithering about and teasing where he already knew she was most sensitive. Feeling her squirming
about, her hands making fists in the sheets and in his hair only encouraged him further. Her back arched up slightly, she bit her lip and a moaning, high-pitched squeak caught his ears.

He hadn't quite expected her legs to clamp so tightly around his head like that...

Her lungs were desperate for oxygen, chest heaving with every breath as she pulled his face up to hers, tossing her bra aside. Tongues coiling as she pushed her mouth to his, she hauled him onto his back, bringing her hips level with his. When her hands went to his shoulders, his arms around her as their lips slid hungrily together. Her hand trailed down his chest, as low as she liked, taking hold of him, guiding him to her, she shimmied her hips a little and what followed was the most intimate feeling either of them had ever known. The heated, unbearably passionate embrace of their hips as their shimmering eyes spiked the desire and need rising between them. Shuddering breaths, her moaning into his mouth followed in their initially slow movements as she pinned him to the bed with her body. Together like that they felt absolutely divine, but it wasn't enough, they needed more. Hands on her hips, lips on hers, her neck, her shoulder, kissing anywhere he could reach as her body began to writhe in a rhythm almost as old as time. It wasn't very long before his was doing the same, breath heated and urgent as she clung to his naked shoulders.

Dipping her head down, settling herself more up against him as she did, her lips went back to his and hungrily ravaged at his mouth. His hands were on her body again, exploring, caressing every inch he could as her hips kept moving of their own accord. He leaned up, arms encircling her as her hips pushed him down into the mattress. Hands gripping at each other's shoulders, fingernails digging in, tongues dancing together, nibbling at each other's lips, necks, shoulders. "Kyoka..." Every inch of her was set ablaze, hearing her name pass through his lips like that. Like he didn't just want, didn't just need, but adored her. A smile crossed her lips, a passionate, gleeful exhalation of her breath brushed along his skin and she was kissing him like her very life depended on it. His reaction, cradling her back and the back of her neck like fragile treasures as he anchored her in place was... perfect.

Breathing hitched, burning in their lungs as they frantically writhed together, bodies singing as if in rapture. Her hand flew to the soft, yielding surface beneath them and found his hand, their fingers weaving together. It wasn't long before the rest of the night slipped into a passionate, blurry haze not unlike a dream.

Instinct took over as their hips began searching for that perfect rhythm, sliding, dancing against each other with burning, building urgency. With every step closer to it, that building euphoria, a climbing feeling of unfiltered bliss bloomed like the birth of a star. Was it possible for them to ever have enough of each other? Frenzied passion, bodies pushing harder, closer still, sought to find out. Legs tightened around him, breathing becoming urgent as their bodies writhed against each other.

Utterances of their names were passionately spoken, her hands gripped at his shoulders, skin slick with sweat, while her forehead pressed against the nook of his neck and shoulder. She held herself up with one hand and the other held him against her at the middle of his back. There was their rhythm, that feeling so close to completion it ached. Their motions became frantic, desperate for a release from the blissful heat pooling and radiating from their cores and she felt the conclusion of their undertaking drawing near.

A sudden spasming of his jaw put Izuku's mind on high alert. Practically wrenching his face away from her skin, he felt that raging, ravenous hunger snaking its way over his brain. He'd relaxed a little too much, been caught up in the moment and not paying attention. Clamping his teeth together, the molar he'd split earlier started protesting but he ignored it.

The woman on his lap, presently all too aware of his present and momentary struggle, decided
otherwise. Without losing her rhythm, running a hand up to the base of his skull, she coaxed him back to her neck.

He groaned, looking at her with pleading eyes, though what exactly he was pleading for she knew not. Nodding hurriedly, she barely managed to speak. "It-it's okay..." from the sound, the lustful waver of her voice alone, he almost lost enough focus to go for it. "y-you can-" *Holy fuck. "You can b-bite me again."

Not entirely convinced, hesitated, jaw shaking right up against her skin. "K-Kyo, I-

Gently, though not as gently as she'd meant, she pulled a little firmer, bringing his mouth flush against the earlier bite mark. "T-trust me. Okay?" Tone level and sweet as she could make it in spite of her heavy breath, she felt some of his shaking subside, with her palm against the back of his neck. "I kn-know what I'm allowing..." Even still, he took another second or two before he finally surrendered control completely, fangs sliding back inside her skin and she let loose a noise that sent his brain clear across the world. *Maybe that does do it for me...* She blushed, eyes almost entirely closed as she nuzzled her cheek against his hair.

Of course, now that he was no longer fighting himself in any regard, his desire, his other hunger had snared control. In a blur of motion neither had almost registered as real, he'd placed himself on top of her.

Her eyes fluttered, cheeks practically glowing scarlet as he drove himself into her, bringing moan after moan out of her lungs as he did. As if he needed further encouragement, which she was surprised to find only served to make him and subsequently her more desperate for release. She was practically screaming now, fingernails digging into his back, cutting into his skin as surely as his fangs into hers. He groaned, the sound sending a fluttering through her abdomen which made the growing bliss in her core fly that much higher, that much hotter.

"Izuku~!" She bit her lip, her entire being quivering as he grunted in response. Hard to talk with your mouth so clamped on someone's neck...

There, her body writhing desperately beneath his, which was doing very much the same, she felt it. That blurring of their senses from when he had her up against the wall, that little reward she got from giving him her blood now amplified to an insane degree. Sure enough, she felt everything he felt and it compounded on top of every sensation already firing off in her body. Sparks roared in her vision, colors her brain could barely comprehend fluttered like a flock of glowing, iridescent butterflies in the night. Every inch of her body felt a light, hazy warmth igniting her every pleasure center; like joy was something new to her senses as the day she first smiled. She knew she was close, if not already there.

Grabbing his face she pulled his lips to her own seconds before her entire body shuddered in waves of quivering ecstasy, as her voice let loose a trembling cry of pure, agonizing pleasure. The clawing of his fingernails at her back was her only warning before he followed her example with a few final thrusts of his hips, and then that sensation coursing through his body roared across her brain as well, taking its sweet time to flicker away as he spilled into her. Kyoka Jiro had never been one to believe in heaven, but right there and then, she was tempted to start. She could only sigh into their kiss as their bodies sang in what must have been euphoria. That feeling of closeness, from having made each other feel such a wonderful thing, was something they'd never forget. Breathing hitching, gasping in short bursts slowed to a crawl as they held each other.

She lay beneath him, arms around him and one hand petting at the back of his neck while the world spun. A few moments later and he'd deflated, body collapsing slowly onto hers. Had she not held him there Izuku might have moved to lie beside her. She wanted him right where he was while she
pulled the blankets over them. It was there, face nestled at the nook of her neck and shoulder, that 
she felt... Wait... was he crying?

Blinking, unable to look at him with their bodies so close together, she tried to lean back. "Hey, are 
you okay?" The thought of him being upset tore at her, she desperately hoped he wasn't.

He leaned back, an idle hand touching below his eyes as his breath shuddered. Sure enough, there 
were tears flowing freely. Working quickly to wipe them away he stammered, "S-sorry." even as 
his breathing threatened to start sobbing. "Sor-

She placed a finger over his lips, looking up into the glowing eyes on that face of his. The look she 
was giving him was far from impatient or irritated. She just looked... sad, quietly worried. "Don't 
worry about it."

At her soothing delivery of those words he felt his shoulders start shaking, try though he did to 
quell the feelings breaking free. His eyes scrunched up, a last ditch effort to keep the dam from 
bursting, but she wasn't having it. Gently, she pulled his face back to her shoulder, nestling him 
there as she pet soothingly at his neck.

At the tears trailing down her neck and shoulder she felt her heart break a little. "You poor 
sweetie..." her voice carried no small amount of concerned affection. "It's been so long... hasn't it?"
He halted all motion, waiting like a scared rabbit for her words to bludgeon his already aching 
heart. "Since you were allowed to just... let your guard down."

She... she was right. This was a feeling he hadn't known for years, washing over him: calm.
Freedom from holding his guard up in constant vigilance, from his fear of hurting those around 
him. He felt human, like he could just relax, breathe easy for the first time all over again.

He was allowed to be weak again.

Nodding, afraid to release the emotions, he managed a strained, pitiful whimper confirming what 
she'd said, still terrified the moment wasn't to last; that it was already over. Instead she just held on 
to him, stroking the back of his neck.

"You've got my word," she whispered, face squished against the crown of his head, "you have 
nothing to be afraid of. Okay?" And he started sobbing, holding onto her as tightly as he could, 
body trembling with each sob that forced its way out. "I wanted everything that just happened 
between us... I'm just hoping you did too." When he nodded against her, she smiled and squeezed 
him a little tighter. So they remained as they were, cradled in each other's arms, exhausted on all 
fronts, letting their emotions and minds equalize as reality set in. They'd just done something 
neither of them could ever take back, and that they clearly wouldn't want to for the world.

All else, and anyone else's opinions on the matter be damned.

Sniffling, after a long while, sleep threatening to overtake him, Izuku peered at her face -that 
beautiful face- and worked up the nerve to speak. "Hey... Kyo?"

"Yes, Izu?" She breathed, exhalation sending tingles down his scalp as she caressed his cheek.

He gulped, nuzzling her palm, looking tiredly into her eyes. "I..." Say it already... He chided 
himself, If you can't say it now, when can you? So just say it. "I Know the timing here is kinda 
terrible, thinking about everything ahead of and behind us, but I have to know... " Her expression 
went a little softer, her fingers trailing through his hair, playing at his scalp. He gulped. "Will you... 
I want to stay with you." She blinked, her head tilting to one side as she gazed quizzically into his
eyes. "For um.. forever." That smile she gave, if there was any doubt left lingering over his heart, had banished it away. "Do you want that too?"

Peppering his forehead and face with slow, gentle kisses she hummed, a little smile perching on those lips of hers. "Of course I do." From the tone of her voice alone, even if she'd said something about a rudding toaster, the same message would have been conveyed. "Actually, I was gonna ask...Be mine forever?"

In reply, he nodded as enthusiastically as his tired, tired body could manage. "Forever." He sniffled a little. "I'll be yours forever."

Then, at her wordless prompt -tugging at his hair a little- he leaned back a little more, and she looked him in the eyes as she smiled. "You'd fucking better..." That sparkle in her eyes, the entirety of her face just looked so... happy. "Because no matter how this plays out, no matter where we end up? That's what I want too, Izuku."

The smile that spread across his face upon hearing that could have melted a glacier, "Then it's a promise..." it certainly melted her heart all over again. As she continued kissing and petting her man and he nuzzled her, relishing in the blissful security and happiness he felt; her doing much the same for a while longer.

Adjusting their bodies a little, getting comfortable, their arms tangled around each other's forms, holding each other close. As they nestled together, fatigue claiming what was left of their vigor, she watched his glowing, green eyes drift shut. After a few moments, when she was convinced he'd fallen asleep, she reached up and turned off the light, settling in for a sounder sleep than any night prior. That night, neither of them had nightmares of any sort as their consciousnesses drifted in slumber.

"We'll do it all...

Everything...
On our own...

We don't need...
Anything...
Or anyone...

I don't quite know...
How to say...
How I feel...

Those three words...
Are said too much...
They're not enough...

I need your grace...
To remind me...
To find my own...

Forget what we're told,
Before we get too old,
Show me a garden that's bursting into life...

All that I am,
All that I ever was,
Is here in your perfect eyes,
they’re all I can see...

I don't know where,
Confused about how as well,
Just know that these things will never change for us at all...

If I lay here...
If I just lay here...

Would you lie with me and just forget the world?”
The Will of One

AN: Today (December 10th, 2019) marks a year since this fic started. Hopefully, those of you who’ve been here since the beginning and all the rest, find this chapter and the last two or three to be everything you were hoping for. Thanks for sticking around, for reading and all the kind (and critical) words, everyone.

Never expected anyone would actually want to read this, so thank you for enjoying this with me.

The end is relatively near, and in this chapter: a seed I planted all the way back in chapter six finally blooms.

-Black

It was a dingy, old, little hovel near the outskirts of the city. The walls were stained with black streaks, water damage if one were to guess optimistically. It smelled like old, musty leaves and mud, perhaps of rotting meat and fruit. Old drawings made by children remained on the fridge, on yellowed paper left to linger in the sun. Crumpled and flecked with stains of water and soap, splashed over from a sink that was all too close to the fridge. A dishrack and cupboards were filled with wooden bowls and cutlery, ceramic cups with hand painted designs.

Coats with faded color and bits of string at cuff, collar and hem perched on a coat rack that had darkened over many a long winter. The entry way floor was discolored, stained by boots and shoes that had tracked mud, snow and water into the dwelling. Little rooms, three of them, had wooden beds whose mattresses were old, cotton and feathery stuffed cots. Quilts were draped over each, pillowcases handmade with uneven, unmaching squares of cloth. The pillows themselves were the same as the mattresses, fluffy and warm.

Furniture was odd and crooked, carved from unwanted and warped bits of wood that might have been the leftovers from cutting down bent and broken trees. The only source of electricity was wiring running from a generator, sitting in the basement carved from the stone of the hill the house was built upon. Tacked and pinned to the walls the wires sat, outlets plugged into bits and pieces of them at various, odd places. When the fireplace wasn't lit, strings of little lights tied around the rafters blanket the house in pleasant, warm illumination.

The house was perched at the end of a small valley, hooked into an alcove that shielded it from all manner of weather. Winters were harsh, in that snow would spill into the little valley and bury whatever was left beneath or near the overhanging hills and rocky outcroppings. A sprawling forest was near enough, oaken trees that shaded and hid anything lurking in that place that nature yet held its dominion. At night, one could hear the wolves howling, or the call of a great bear over the singing insects and frogs.

One's only avenue of approach was the old, winding, stone road that led right to the doorstep. Cars would have all manner of trouble, making it to this place. This was probably why a pair of horses were lodged in an old stable, covered in thick, green vines of ivy. Of course, to feed them, one would need a steady supply of oats and hay which was why the house had no shortage of these things planted about, here and there.

Around the house, behind wooden fences, were little gardens were sprinkled about, lettuce, radishes, leeks and beets. On scarce occasions, there would be strawberries and watermelons growing beneath the apple tree, and the adjacent pear tree. Some distance away, for those who
cared to find it, was a little rice field where those who lived in the little house would farm.

Outside, in the rain and with an old, bamboo shovel headed with carved stone, a man was digging. Six feet down, four across at the heads and feet, and eight lengthwise. He wiped sweat and rain from his brow with an arm that was scarred, burned and withered. His skin, in many places, was similarly marked. Neck, chest lower legs, around his mouth and eyes. Pulling himself from the hole, Dabi leaned on the shovel to examine his work.

It would be a suitable grave... not that this was at all a comforting thought.

Wandering back from the woods, a pair of slain deer on her shoulders, Toga's hair was a mop drenched with water and blood of her kills. How and when she'd come to own this place, was a tale she would later tell. But for tonight, there was work to do. "Where is he?" he asked, out of breath.

Swinging the carcasses off her shoulder, she dropped them onto an old, stone table, inside a little shed just by the house. "Seether's bundled up in the basement, wrapped him in an old tarp." Her tone was morose, softly spoken. "Not the best place for him, but it was all I could really do."

Dabi nodded, shaking some mud from himself. "Good, but... I didn't actually mean him."

Realizing who he meant, Toga shrugged. "Not sure, on his way, probably. I hope. Haven't ya heard from him?"

With a shrug, he plunged a hand into his pocket and plucked it out. "No," he replied, "you're terrible at giving directions." his brow furrowed at an odd angle, his lips frowning on one side as his eyes drooped.

With a roll of her eyes, Toga shook her head and shrugged. "Well, I dunno what ya want from me. I always did fine with directions like those."

"Says the woman living by herself in the wilderness like an old witch."

At the insult, Toga gave a toothy, crocodile smile. "That ain't me. She's buried out in the woods, somewhere."

Not sure if she'd intended the unspoken threat he'd heard, Dabi gulped and quietly nodded. "I... see."

When next she spoke, it was with an oddly quiet voice that didn't quite reach him through the rain. "No ya don't, Frankie..." if she hadn't turned away from him to gaze down the old road, he might have heard her.

Further down the road, almost too far to see, a figure dressed in black and red was wandering toward them. Dragging his feet, one arms supporting the massive, purple monstrosity on his back, the other hanging like a soggy, broken wing of a bird left outside a window it had flown into. His bleeding face had been ignored, his flesh still oozing his life essence away, only for the rain to erase its existence from the roads he traveled altogether. In one of his hands was a broken, jagged edged sword, scraping along the stones as he staggered onward. His breathing was raspy, hoarse and heavy; like one who had almost drowned at sea, and blood trickled from his lips in sloshy torrents, here and there. Behind him, another pair of souls traveled along.

A man and woman, she was wrapped in a trench coat she'd stolen along the way, who raised her arm and called to the people in the distance. "Dabi!" Waving side to side. The man was muscular, bruised an scarred, bearing only one eye in his skull. He limped along, looking just a little too laissez faire about everything going on around him, not bothering to pay much of it any mind.
Eventually, the sounds of metal dragging on stone and her voice reached their ears, and Toga - along with Dabi - turned their eyes to those wandering forms, coming up the road. "Uh oh..."

When Dabi thought he might have noticed what she meant, he started running toward his friend and she soon followed. The splashing, muddy sounds of their footsteps reached his ears and Stain might have smiled at any other time. As he was now, his blurry eyes barely noticed them long enough to recognize them. No sooner had he done so, feeling relieved to see friendly faces at last, when he fell to his knees and then his face with slap, a splash against the stone. Mooney rolled off his back in a limp, burned heap.

"What the hell happened?" Toga demanded, rushing to Ash as Dabi knelt by Stain.

She shrugged, shivering to no small degree. "He- he just-" she sighed, wincing a little and looking at the fallen men with a guilty expression. "Slashed his way through the armored car, said Mooney was too vulnerable to leave in the hands of the authorities. Said if I wanted to live, I'd better come with him."

As his sword clattered away from his hand, Dabi took Stain's hand. "Hey, hey!" With bleary, slow moving eyes, Stain looked at him. "You're okay now, alright? You can rest, we've got you."

Weakly, Stain raised a hand and dropped it on his own chest. "Evidence... in..." he nearly blacked out just saying that. "hide it..."

It was only as he lay there on the road, the rain washing him over, that Dabi noticed his old friend was bleeding from his side. "Toga!"

At his alarmed outcry, she ran over. "God dammit..." she tore open his costume, inspecting the wound as closely as she could. "Oh good, someone shot him..." with a growl, she got to her feet and hauled Mooney onto her back. "Get him inside, Frankie, I'm gonna hafta to do something about that."

Nodding, he scooped him up, not noticing the way Stain reached after his fallen sword. "Is he gonna be okay?"

Toga gave him a look. "Course he is, dummy. It just ain't gonna be pretty puttin him back together... Now come on." She started running toward the house. "We're officially on the clock here!"

Another round of hurried nodding and he started after her, Stain limping bobbing in his arms as Ash picked up the sword. All he would remember after that, as they rushed inside, was the moon peering through the stormy clouds up above. Stain had always liked the full moon...

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**Thursday, August 16th, 2255...**

Whatever time it was, she had no earthly idea. She hadn't gone to sleep in her own room, where the curtains weren't so thick as to entirely block out the sun. For a moment Kyoka was worried, waking up in a strange place, but the arm wrapped around her reminded her of where she was. In bed, with him, safe and warm. Of course, much to her embarrassment, she and he were still very naked and she blushed, hiding her face against his chest. In his sleep, he hummed, arm coiling just a little tighter around her, his face nestling against her hair.

Unable to fight back the smile that followed, she slid one of her arms around him, running her hand up and down his back, slowly. His breath felt warm, soothing almost, as it pushed through her hair.
If she closed her eyes again, she wasn't sure if she could manage to stay awake but she closed them anyways. Fragments of time replayed before her eyes, just moments, memories of this strange man she'd fallen in love with.

When they'd first met, back when she'd heard him falling to the unforgiving surface of that alleyway, all she'd thought was 'what is this idiot doing? He didn't hurt himself, did he?'. Then he'd sunk his teeth into her neck and that had rapidly shifted to 'WHAT THE FUCK!?' followed by '...who the hell is he?' after he'd protected her. Weeks later, she couldn't remember exactly how long it was, he'd shown up again in the classroom of 1A and she couldn't believe it. That strange, clumsy boy who'd bitten her in the alleyway wanted to be a hero. What was stranger was that he was suffering such a similar ordeal as she had, back some years ago, even then at UA.

Seeing Bakugo treat him like that... that might have been the moment her heart had opened up to him. When she was really curious, interested enough to find out just who he was. As things would eventually turn out, he was just this sweet, gentle boy who had turned into a creature of the night. A fanboy who'd been born quirkless, living under the oppressive treatment of a bully given free reign to do as he pleased.

They'd saved each other's lives at the USJ, barely kept their friendship going the weeks that followed thanks to her; then he'd been her shoulder to cry on, her support at the sport's festival. He spent two years fixing her Zune for her, when she'd carelessly thrown it into his arms. So much more, of course, could be said about all these moments and more that followed, but really? These were the ones that she'd been surprised to find herself cherishing above the others, spent with other people she cared for. Her mind, her heart, lingered on them, mulling them over, analyzing them and trying see if there was anything there that might have hinted at something more. It was only later, a year or two later, that she realized 'oh... I've got a thing for him...'.

Now here she was, here they were, and she really wanted to kiss him. Funny, what a simple thought will do to one's mood.

A soft hum, some sluggish stirring of his body, and his eyes started blinking themselves open. After he'd noticed her arm around him, her body snuggled up to his, he leaned back with red on his cheeks.

She smiled, warmly. "Hey, you."

He gulped, nervously smiling with her. "H-hey."

"How are you feeling?"

It took him a moment to answer that. "Groggy, nice, like I'm thinking in slow motion."

She nodded, still blushing a little bit too. "Me too. I think that's normal though, after um..." she couldn't say it.

"Y-yeah, I mean, we uh... it was, um..." Neither could he, so he cleared his throat instead. "Probably..."

His arms went to squeeze her, but she leaned up, pressing her lips to his with a murmuring hum. When she didn't pull back after a few seconds, he closed his eyes and just relaxed. It only lasted a few seconds longer and when it was done, she tickled the tip of his nose with hers. "So... How are you feeling emotionally?"

A little, tired sigh was his only reply for a moment or two. Hands started petting at her back,
slowly, careful not to push the blankets off of her. The power was probably still out, meaning it was more than likely a little chilly. "Like I don't know what to begin processing first."

So much had happened, as it seemed to go with them and theirs. The secrets of Eri's past and how they'd been covered up, Ingenium and Iida, Endeavor somehow being worse than they'd expected. Aizawa nearly letting his own student decapitate him.

Stain...

"I know what you mean," she mumbled, nestling a little closer to him and freeing him from his thoughts. "can't stop my head from spinning every time I start thinking about any of it..."

He squeezed her, she nestled her face against his chest again, both relaxed a little. "Aside from Iida... everyone's okay, right?"

She nodded. "Momo just needs rest, get the dust out of her lungs, but yeah. Aside from being upset about Sten, they're all okay." When she felt him deflate at his name, her arms squeezed him. "...are you okay?"

A halfhearted gesture between shrugging and shaking his head, then he mumbled. "Not really..."

Frowning, she held on tighter. "Okay. That's okay."

Sighing, he pressed his mouth and nose into her hair, breathing in her scent. "Is, um... this how you felt about Toga?"

She gave a breathy little scoff. "Probably... yeah. I still do. I was kind of hoping you had some other idea than 'try and stop them, hope for the best'. Kinda all I've got right now..."

That was probably as good an idea as they were going to come up with. "Sorry..."

She kissed his sternum. "Can't really blame you. It's not like there's really much else we can do, yeah?"

"Sadly, yeah."

The sad reality of it all was, they were still just students. No resources or real connections that could do much of anything. Any such time where they could really influence decisions like that, the fate of people gone horribly astray, was years down the road. When they were heroes, when they had money and real authority to speak with... what a dangerous and scary thought, that they might one day influence things like this.

"Hey, Kyo?"

His turn to pull her from a darker headspace. "Hmm?"

With a slight gesture of his head, he whispered. "Hold still..."

She did not, in fact, hold still. Instead she looked where he'd gestured, seeing what had him worried. Coming down from the ceiling, on a thin line of silk, was a familiar looking spider. "Little Seven." Kyoka smiled. "Long time no see." She reached out, slowly, her fingers extended and the seven-legged black widow reached for her fingertips.

His hand trailed up to hers, careful not to startle either of them. "Please be careful..."

With a smirk, she rolled her eyes. "Relax, she's not going to bite. She's probably just cold..." Seven
crawled into her palm, nestling there and cleaning herself. "Spiders don't handle cold well, their blood -it's not actually blood, by the way- can't actually freeze, but when winter rolls around? They turtle up and enter this sort of suspended animation, until it warms up again." Looking at the way seven huddled into her hand, her smile took on a sadder tinge. "I don't they like being cold..."

Uncharacteristically, he reached toward the spider without the slightest hint of fear, and let her crawl into his hand instead of hers. "You sure know a lot about them..."

Smiling at his sudden 'bravery', Kyoka shrugged. "Watched a couple documentaries with the family, a few summers ago." She looked at his face, pleasantly surprised to see he was calm as ever, holding the spider, where once he would have been terrified. Perhaps it was acceptance, of a sort, she gathered; so it was with the spider as it was with himself, or so she hoped. "Mom didn't like them, but dad I couldn't stop watching."

To her further surprise, he even slowly reached out with his other hand to stroke along the arachnid's body. "Have you always liked creepy little monsters?"

Still smiling she glared at him, playfully. "Are we still talking about spiders?"

Sheepishly, he looked away from her. "Y-yeah..." The way she arched her eyebrows, giving him that skeptical look, soon had him caving. "...No." he quietly admitted.

"Good boy." She would never get tired of his reaction to being called that. "Neither of you are creepy monsters, Izu." She ran her hand up his arm, her palm cupping the back of his hand as he cradled Seven. "You're both just a little misunderstood...

He didn't say anything, he just lay there with her in his arms, cradling the spider for a little while longer. Such heavy things, painful things loomed like shadows over them. Things from the past, recent or otherwise, things undoubtedly about to happen. Quietly, he wondered what mom would think of her, of Kyoka. He knew she'd like her, she always liked girls like her in movies, books, what have you. She'd spent a week fangirling over Lisbeth Salander, once she'd discovered those books. Kyoka, in a way or two, was fairly similar. ...God, he missed her.

"Hey, Izuku?"

Blinking a few times, he sniffed. "Yeah?"

Turning to look at him, she reached up and stroked one of his cheeks. "Why did you want to be a hero?"

Thankful for the distraction, from those thoughts, he gulped back the tension that might've made him sound upset. "I um... I wanted to be happy." Surprised, her expression did a bit of a jump. "Since I was kid that's just... when I was little, after something horrible happened," she wiggled closer, trying to reassure him with her presence, her warmth, "my father said 'if you don't want the people you love to leave you, be something worth loving.' "

Horrified, making no attempt to hide it she mouthed the words 'what the fuck!?' before he went on.

"God, he missed her."

"Hey, Izuku?"

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He sighed. "Five year old me heard that and thought... 'I guess being a hero is the only way I can be happy'. ...Kind of stupid, right?"

Shaking her head, she turned over and wrapped her arms around him, holding him right. "It's not stupid..." Her face pressed to his shoulder, his neck. "I think... I think that's why I wanted to be a hero too."
He blinked. "Really?"

She nodded. "I wanted to be strong enough to take care of my friends, so I'd never lose anyone the way I lost K and Himiko." She grimaced, trying to hide her face and looking every bit as guilty as she felt. "If you're stupid because of why you want to be a hero, what does that make me?"

Looking over he shoulder, he reached over and placed Seven on the radiator before he squeezed her back. "A wonderful, caring person who anyone would be lucky to have calling them a loved one?"

Blushing, now she was hiding her face for a very different reason. "Idiot..." she muttered, shoving her face entirely from view as he smiled. "I didn't say that so you could be all... like that..."

"Yeah, but it just seemed like the thing to be anyway."

Still embarrassed, she turned and looked at him again, not quite able to look him in the eyes. "How screwed up are we?"

He shrugged. "More than we should be, less than we could be."

Hard to argue with that, mostly because it was vague. "Very non-specific, Green."

Another shrug and then he tried again. "About... as much as the Skywalkers?"

She rolled her eyes. "My god, you're such a fucking geek..."

He stuck out his tongue. "Says the woman who knew enough about I was talking about to have that reaction... and to quote Star Trek at me."

Glare at him though she tried to, there was that hint of a smile on her lips that gave her away. "I don't like that you're a match for me, mister Midoriya."

He smiled, making no attempt to hide how he felt. "And why's that?"

With an air of haughtiness, she looked away from him. "In case you hadn't noticed..." she said, lazily inspecting her nails. "I like em a little submissive."

"I am a little submissive." That smile, she couldn't hide. "No one says I can't tease you back while I'm submitting."

She shrugged with her eyebrows, smirking a little. "Fair point." And she went back to using his shoulder as a pillow. "...I really don't want to get up."

He reached up, stroking at her hair. "Me neither."

Trailing fingers up his chest, lazily drawing patterns over his skin with her fingertips, she murmured. "Probably going to have to deal with fallout from yesterday..."

"In some way or another..."

Pouting, she managed to force herself to sit up, stretching as she did. "Can't be helped, then." She noticed his eyes roaming over her body as she stretched, deciding not to tease him for it, lest the mood go back to something less than what they needed it to be to get ready. "Can I use your shower?"

Nodding, he went to sit up. "I still haven't unpacked yet, so there won't be any towels in there."
Gimme a sec, I'll get you one."

"Such a gentleman." She ran fingers through his hair as she sauntered off to the shower, with an intentionally tempting sway of her hips.

"Such a gentleman." She ran fingers through his hair as she sauntered off to the shower, with an intentionally tempting sway of her hips.

It took a few seconds to reset his brain enough to go digging through his luggage, after that... He exhaled through one corner of tight lips, puffing up one of his cheeks after she'd closed the door to his bathroom.

*Right. Towels. Should, probably...* He cleared his throat, hearing the shower spring to life and Kyoka cursing at how cold the water was.

Somewhere off to his right, a phone started ringing. It wasn't Kyoka's. After a second, he went and fished his phone out of his coat. When he saw the unknown number, he considered ignoring it, but answered it instead. "Hello?"

"Finally awake." Izuku's heart almost stopped at the sound of The Nameless One's angry voice. "To my office. *Now."

Izuku gulped. "Yes, sir." And the line closed. Finding himself now in a hurry, he grabbed those towels for his girlfriend and knocked on the door.

She hummed a little laugh. "Izuku, you can come in."

For a moment, he wondered why she laughed, until his memories reminded him that they had -in fact- had sex last night. "R-right." he walked in, towels in hand, seeing her silhouette through the curtain. "I uh... got summoned. Hero stuff."

She stopped moving. "You're afraid."

Was his heartbeat really that loud? Yes, actually, it was. "Ever heard of 'The Nameless One'?

She was silent for a moment. "Once or twice..." she said suspiciously. "Supposedly the CEO of Philanthropy. Why?"

Another, semi-audible gulp. "Long story." He paused, "He's the one who just called." The water switched off, she yanked the curtain aside and grabbed a towel. Blinking, faltering at her as she strode passed him, furiously scrubbing herself dry he stammered. "Uh, Kyo, wh-what are-?"

"Remember when Vanessa pulled me aside? In Tartarus?" She was busy pulling her legs into her clothes, not really looking at him.

"Yeah?"

Grabbing her boxers, she tossed them to him. "She took a few minutes to warn me about being with you, with a vampire. Said it wasn't the kind of thing most people could really handle, but I told her I wasn't most people."

*Understatement of the century, my love...* He thought, rubbing the back of his head.

Pulling her bra straps up her arms, she set to fussing with the clasp. "When she decided that wasn't enough to scare me off? She told me everything." Izuku suddenly, froze, looking her in the eyes like a frightened rabbit. "I know what he is. What he had to done to people like you. I'm going with you."
He laughed, more out of nerves than anything else. "Kyo, he's not gonna-"

Still mostly topless as she was, when she stood up and stared up into his eyes, he knew to stop arguing. "I'm going with you, Izuku."

Again, he gulped. "Yes ma'am."

"Good," she said quietly, "it's very sweet that you and her worry about me, but I can handle myself, Izu." she leaned up, giving him a kiss before wandering to the door. "I gotta go take my meds... shoulda taken em last night. Back in a sec." Clawing into her shirt, she didn't bother with her socks or boots just yet. When she pulled the door open, she closed it quickly behind herself, lest anyone else see him naked.

Climbing into an outfit that wasn't very different from the last few days, Izuku muttered. "I have a knack for getting very close to scary people..." and he quietly got dressed.

Blackness, pain everywhere, dizzy...

Where was he? He remembered walking a long, long time but not where he was going. Somewhere up a winding road, an old road in the forest outside the city. Familiar faces, someone on his back, being carried under the full moon... All just vague concepts and shapes, nothing was really clear. When he winced at the pain in his face, his brain, his entire skull along with his nose started crying out in agony. His face contorted, and he screamed silently as his hands slowly went to his mutilated face.

Bandages, thick bandages winding around most of his head, something hard pressing against either side of his eyes finally opened, he chanced a look around the room he was in. Not one thing about the place looked familiar, not the way the walls and support beams for the roof all looked hand built, the smell not the old, green teakettle quietly rocking back and forth on the stove, not the christmas lights strung up everywhere. The only thing that did look familiar, wasn't a thing at all: it was Toga, humming to herself at the round dining table, reading an old, dusty book with the evidence box in front of her.

With a series of pained groans, Stain sat up. "Mornin, sleepin beauty." Toga chirped, not looking up from her book, as Stain looked at his new clothes. "Ya had us worried sick for most of the night, surprised yer even movin yet."

Fussing with the shirt that was clearly too big for him, stitched with big, clumsy stitches, Stain muttered, "I heal quickly..." even as he coughed, and his side cried out in pain. Groaning, his hand clutched at where he'd been shot, feeling stitches through his shirt. "Where are we?"

Toga shrugged, not seeming to care much for her own answer. "House where I grew up, after my folks were killed."

Stain looked around, casually sidestepping the uncomfortably familiar topic. "...you grew up here?" She giggled, he looked at her like she were telling an obvious lie. "This place is too... normal to have spawned something like you."

She blew raspberry at him. "Meanie." Then she went back to her book. "Never judge a household by the way they keep their home lookin." She turned the page. "Dinner should be ready soon, hope ya like venison."

Standing up, he found his legs more than a little shaky. "Only ever ate it raw."
Now it was her turn to look at him like he'd lost his mind. "Riiiiiiight..." she nodded, "well, the rest of the animals are out in the shed, if ya really wanna eat like a caveman."

He rolled his eyes. "Where are the others?"

Toga glanced about, not really looking. "Mooney's off, sulking in the woods somewhere. Prolly eating some wild animal he caught by now." She turned another page. "Frankie and the stripper are prolly fuckin. Somewhere. She shrugged. "I dunno, they just seemed to give that vibe, ya know?"

Not sure what to make of that, Stain nodded. "And we know Mooney will be coming back here how?"

Pointing to the front door, Toga said, "Told him I'd ring the big ol' dinner bell if we needed him home. He'll come runnin, don't worry."

"Right..." staggering a little, he started toward the bathroom. "Who patched me up?"

Toga smiled. "Me. You're welcome."

When he made it to the mirror he just stared. He looked like a mummy and he didn't like it. This just wouldn't do at all, and he started tearing the bandaged off.

Jerking her head toward the source of the noise, Toga slammed her book shut. "Oi!" She yelled, jumping to her feet. "What the heck are you doin!?" He didn't answer, opting instead to just keep tearing at the bandages, for the sake of his dignity. "Yer gonna fuck up yer head again, Puddin!"

When she reached forward to stop him, he just shoved her arms away. "Would you stop calling me that?!"

Crossing her arms, she pouted as she glared at him. "...Sure, Sten."

He sighed, continuing to tear at the bandages, trying to free his face from its constraints. "Why'd you even start calling me that to begin with?"

She shrugged, eyes following the movements of his fingers. "To screw with ya."

Stain didn't even try to suppress the growl that followed. "How endearing..."

Toga sighed, slumping sideways against the wall. "Your temper is so nasty I'd swear you were a wolverine."

That made him quirk an eyebrow at him. "I'm not nearly hairy enough and my bones aren't coated in metal." Shaking his head, he went back to struggling with his clothy prison. "Or did you mean to compare me to a wolf?"

Slowly, she blinked. "I meant the small, fuzzy, very pointy animal called a wolverine." He turned and looked at her like she'd grown a second head. "Native to Canada?" she put forward, only to be met with the same look.

For a few moments, his jaw just hung open, staring at her like she were a woman out of her mind. Eventually, he said, "There's no such thing as a wolverine."

Sighing, Toga shook her head, planting her face in her palm. "Go to the zoo, dude... they're real." Deciding he wasn't going to keep arguing, Stain just went back to what he was doing, and Toga got tired of watching him struggle. "Here," she sighed again, "if you're gonna do that, leave it to
someone who knows what they're doin."

Even though he growled, he didn't stop her this time. "...did you look through the evidence?"

Slowly unwrapping the bandages from around his head, she nodded. "Disturbin shit, I'll tell ya that much. See ya found my stashed data too, thank ya."

"I try to keep my promises..."

She gave him an odd look. " 'Try'?"

Expression going a bit grim, he shrugged. "Pretty sure I've broken quite a few, killing Overhaul..."

Toga just smiled. "I knew I liked ya, thanks for killin him for me."

As she finished unwrapping his head, he looked awkwardly away from her. "I didn't do it for you..." mumbling, he turned to the mirror and inspected his face.

There was going to be a nasty scar, going diagonally from his right eyebrow and ending below the furthest corner of his left eye. Looking at how many stitches, band aids along with the metal plates she'd taped on, he was amazed he even still had a nose. The hook shape of it would likely be even more exaggerated when it healed.

Running fingers along the length of his ruined nose made him flinch. "Why didn't you just cut my nose off?"

Shaking her head, Toga rolled her eyes. "Cuz I'm not a lunatic? Just leave it alone, it'll get better, no need to go hackin it off."

Surveying the effort she'd expended just to hold his face together, he wasn't so sure. "It might have been easier."

Leaning close to the mirror, she turned a scrutinizing eye to her work. "Nah, woulda made patching it up even more of a nightmare. Easier just to patch ya up as it was, trust me on that."

There was a metaphor somewhere in there, something about connections between people, he thought.

Once she was satisfied that he wouldn't be mutilating himself, she started walking from the room. Only... "Toga?" She looked over her shoulder. "...Are you human?"

Grinning, she tapped her abnormally long canines with the tip of her fingernails. "Not entirely, Sten." After a moment she gave him an almost sympathetic look. "Guessin yer familiar with the whole 'dead parent' thing, huh?" When he stopped looking at her, her smile faded a bit. "Won't pry. Jus don't think ya gotta haul that baggage alone, yeah? Ya can bitch about it, if ya think it'll help."

Shaking his head, he let out a little sigh. "It never does."

Respectfully, she left it at that. "Get some rest, yeah?" she went back to the table and her book, leaving him there to stare into his own eyes.

Empty, soulless, hollow, colorless and dark. He wasn't sure which descriptor was more fitting. Maybe all of them were... for the people he'd lost these last few days, he wondered if anyone else even knew or cared that they'd died. Twist, Sparky, Seether... Breathing was harder now, his body felt heavier. Moving felt slower, sluggish even and he was cold even with the fire going in the
living room. Every time he blinked, his eyes threatened to stay glued shut. Stumbling out, back to
the couch, he almost placed himself gingerly onto it when he remembered something.

Seether...

Stumbling to the coat rack, he grabbed one that was about his size and slid into a pair of rain boots.
This time, Toga didn't say anything, she just let him go. It was time to bury another old friend...

The towering spire that was the SHROUD loomed over them like an ancient skeleton, strung up in
a forgotten museum. It cast long, thick shadows across the city as the rain refused to relent,
somewhere inside people were still putting it all together. They weren't going there. They were
going to the building just across from it, the offices of Philanthropy and The Nameless One.

Looking up at the pair of towers, hanging ominously over the city, Kyoka somehow felt a little
uneasy. "Ego much...?" She murmured, trying not to think about why something about this place
felt so wrong.

Izuku didn't reply, instead he just kept walking into the building. Whatever this feeling was, it
wasn't worth angering Nameless to puzzle it out. Once inside the lobby, a security guard stopped
Kyoka from venturing further into the lone elevator. "I'll be okay." He reassured. "If this was
anything to worry about, I doubt we'd see it coming."

She gave him a far less than pleased look. "Comforting..." she muttered, before shaking her head.
"I'll be here. If Endeavor starts going on about the family motto, just ignore it. That whole
'remember your roots' thing is nowhere near as poignant or intimidating as he thinks it is." She took
a seat in the lobby as security ushered him into the elevator.

When he eventually emerged at the top, he was greeted with an odd sight. It was a very old room,
so old it couldn't possibly have belonged in this spire of a building and it didn't. Creaky wooden
floors, glass windows so touched by time it had become a murky green. Bookshelves built into the
wall sagged at their centers, the tomes thereupon so frayed and decayed that their materials had
begun to turn to dust.

A desk at the center of it all fared no better. Meticulously dusted and maintained though it all had
been, the makings and furnishings -to the threadbare, moth eaten curtains, lounge chairs and
couch- were on their way out. It was from a house that had once belonged to a humble family,
farmers at the border of Edo. Now, the last living descendant was a man in his fifties, the last
inheritor of an ancient legacy. When his grandfather had built this place he'd gone to the decrepit
family home and salvaged one room: the study.

He sat at the desk, tapping his finger impatiently as he stared at his computer screen. "I am not
pleased, boy." Uncertain what he was expected to say, Izuku just walked in front of the desk and
waited patiently. With an exceedingly irritated sigh, Nameless showed him the clip from
yesterday's fight with Muscular and Mooney. "Of all the things you could have said... why that one?"

Taking a moment to compose himself, suddenly afraid, Izuku shrugged. "It was all I could think of,
Sir."

Nameless stared with eyes that bored into his very soul. "People are already talking." He said with
a twitching upper lip, as he stood. "Comparing you to him, calling you the next symbol of peace.
All because you managed to fell one opponent you two had in common and say one particular
phrase." Izuku gulped, but otherwise didn't give away how nervous he was. "You are aware of how
viciously people tear into even the most benign things we say, yes? How much the masses can pull from a simple phrase if the story seems sensational enough."

He nodded. "Aizawa's taught us a fair bit, Sir."

Nameless laughed, smiling sarcastically. "Yes, well, pardon me if that doesn't instill confidence. His solution has always been to avoid attention, rather than handle it gracefully." He sat back down and swiveled the monitor back around. "Can you live up to that expectation, boy?"

Izuku blinked. "Sir?"

Nameless looked at him with as much patience as he could muster. "Do you think... That you could be. The next Symbol of Peace?"

Despite the fact that his jaw dropped for a split second, it didn't take long for him to recover. "I- I'll do my best, sir!" He only hoped his voice wasn't too shaky.

With a shake of his head and a long sigh, Nameless spun his chair around toward the window. "You understand... we have little choice in this regard; you must. The nation cannot afford to be so disheartened again, you've seen the results so far. Chaos, fire in the streets. Imagine if our second Symbol failed before his career even began... it would upset everything my family was worked for over the last hundred and fifty years."

Another gulp, and he nodded. "I understand, sir."

"Good", Said Nameless, "there is one other thing." He raised his cigar, indicating the importance of the question. "Stendhal: we hear he has the perfected serum that Overhaul was working on. Would have any idea where he is?"

Wincing, Izuku lowered his head. "I wish I did, sir..." his fists clenched, expression lost and hopeless. "He's... I don't think he's himself anymore."

"Sadly, I think you may be right..." with a sigh, Nameless flicked his fingers over the arm of his chair. "Leave... I have better things to do than comfort a monster masquerading as a child."

Flinching at that particular comment, Izuku bowed and turned around. Had he not raised his eyes so high, had he not seen on thing in particular, perhaps all that would follow in the next few days would not have come to pass. One, simple piece of information, left hiding in plain sight as hung above the door, would give rise to the harrowing events to come yet. There, in the old wood, stained with time, was a phrase engraved above the door.

**Remember your roots.**

His jaw dropped, eyes wide and he stopped moving. For a few moments, his heartbeat was all that he could hear, until the elevator door slid open and Endeavor stepped through. As Izuku blinked, 'Nameless' sighed with impatience. "Is something on your mind, monster?"

Thinking quickly, he went with the first thing that came to mind. "Why don't you have a name?" At this, Nameless actually spun around, perplexed as he and the vampire faced each other. "It's just... odd. You'd think somebody who runs Philanthropy would want their name known."

Blinking a few times, 'Nameless' was slow to smile. "There's a bit of a story there, around a century and half ago. Three... musketeers, lets call them, who cast aside their names to play their parts to rebuild a world in shambles. Of course... they'd never predicted that their initial plan would be so fragile, things went in a far different direction than they hoped, but I'd like to think it turned out for
the best." Reaching into his desk, he grabbed and lit an expensive looking cigar. "You already met one of them: All For One. The others were, One for All and then..." he pointed the cigar at Izuku.

"...The Nameless One."

The old man smiled. "Correct. I don't have a name any longer because someone has to keep playing their original part. That and... names are rather useless, when you think about it." He took a long drag from his cigar, letting the smoke fill his lungs before slowly letting it out. "Your woman is waiting for you, monster."

Nodding, Izuku started to walk away. "Thank you for indulging me, Sir." When Endeavor and he passed each other, he managed to keep a straight face. What followed was the longest elevator ride of his life.

Endeavor stood, hands in his pockets, staring at the elevator. "...Why did you tell him that?"

Spinning the chair around, the old man let another cloud of smoke free of his lungs. "Because it was the truth, and the next Symbol of Peace ought to know that bit of history, don't you think?"

With a low growl, Endeavor turned and faced him. "I was going to be the next symbol of peace."

The old man smiled. "Considering what happened yesterday, I think that is long out of our hands, and it would do you no good to try and change it now."

Sighing, Endeavor walked to the window. "Did he know where his friend went to?"

"No," Said the old man, "no, I imagine if he did he'd be there right now, by his side."

Scoffing, the 'Hero' leaned against the glass, staring out at the SHROUD. "Such loyalty... no surprise it goes both ways. Decent way to manipulate people."

The old man sighed again. "I don't think that boy is pretending to feel anything he expresses."

Endeavor smiled. "Precisely why you are, once again, the figure head. Do not make another decision without my knowledge."

"Your father knew it was important that I do such things." The old man took another long drag of his cigar. "If Philanthropy always operated in alignment with his goals and visions, it wouldn't be long before anyone began to suspect who was really running the show."

With a roll of his eyes, Endeavor turned around with crossed arms. "Is that why I was forbidden to fill the shoes of my father until recently? To get that idea into my head."

"No," said the old man, "that was to allow you to learn that anger and violence are not things you can solve every problem with." So the man's 'marriage' might have taught him, if he'd cared at all about the woman he was with. "Tell me... if you'd been at the helm of Philanthropy, back when that boy defied you at the sports festival, would he still be alive?" Endeavor's knuckles cracked, fingers going white beneath his gloves. "I thought not, which was precisely why I waited until you had better control of yourself to let you assume the mantle, as per your father's dying wish."

Scoffing, Endeavor shook his head. "Really? You're telling me my father cared at all for me? Were that the case, perhaps he might have given me more of his time; trained me how to be a better hero, a better leader."
"He was busy trying to give you the best world he could." The old man frowned. "Were you not born, I don't think he'd have panicked when he discovered Vampires were real. The misguided fears he expressed about them spreading and delving this world into chaos would not have been there if you weren't around."

Endeavor rolled his eyes. "Misguided fears you went along with."

With great slowness, the old man gave a sad, sad smile. "My childhood friend was worried about his son. You also forget: when he learned the error of his ways... he did let the last of them live."

"A mistake if ever he made one..." grumbled the 'hero, turning back to the window. "Those beasts are too dangerous to be left alive."

Once again, the old man smiled. "Is that your pride, sense of responsibility to the world or your voice as a father talking?"

After a few moments, contemplating his own feelings, Endeavor sighed as he gazed out the window, over the city. "Yes..."

The husk of a nightclub, bar or whatever it was had been left to rot in the rain. Even as he stood there, panting, Izuku wasn't sure what he was looking for. "You're sure this is the place?"

Turning over his shoulder, he saw Shoto and Uraraka nod. "Positive," she said, "this is where we went, following that first lead."

Shoto quietly added, "I gathered he had more capable friends here than just... I don't remember her name..."

While he looked a little guilt, Kyoka put a hand on his shoulder. "Green..." she said quietly, "I don't think there's anything left in there to find."

Crossing her arms, shifting her weight uncomfortably to her other foot, Uraraka frowned. "Why are we even here anyways? This seems a little sudden..."

"Yeah, man." Kaminari shrugged. "This is a bit outta the blue..."

Ashido just scratched her head. "You okay, buddy? Sure you're thinking clearly here?"

In reply, Izuku just threw them his phone, shoving his way into the rubble while Kyoka lurched forward to catch it. "Green!" She hollered, over the din of her growling stomach. After last night, and their rush out the door without breakfast, she was understandably famished. "Be careful, unless you want to go get a new phone..." Shaking her head, she tapped out his password and clicked on the video.

It was a clip of Stendhal threatening Endeavor, taken from the news and it had Shoto alarmed and confused. "Let me see..." he took Izuku's phone, flipping through his various tabs. "Midoriya, why the sudden interest in my father? What's going on?"

"Please just help me look." He moved an exceptionally large section of wall aside, and it crumbled to ashes almost as soon as it settled.

While the others looked a little lost, Uraraka started looking about. That was, until she saw the collapsed mailbox. With some reluctance, she walked over to it and peered inside. "Hey, Green?" She said, earning all their attention. "There's an envelope with Sten's name on it. His real one..."
Half running, half limping his way over Izuku looked at the envelope with some urgency. "What's in it?"

Feeling a little concerned for her friend, Uraraka ripped it open. "...Just a USB?"

When she handed it to Izuku, he almost looked triumphant, worried as he seemed to be. Turning to Shoto he said, "You brought your laptop, right?"

The quartet went and took shelter at a bus-stop, to keep the devices safe from the rain. As they read, their hearts collectively sank. "Green..." Kyoka breathed, "this is from the hard drive... from that place..."

He nodded, continuing to scroll through the sea of text and images. Uraraka looked as if she were going to be sick, Shoto just stared without expression, one hand gently clenched. "There's gotta be something here..." Something that tied the information to Philanthropy.

At the mention of this, Kaminari's face went white. "Wait... that would mean..." he practically doubled over, hands over his face. "Oh god... no, just fuck... ugh... don't tell me I got Sten's friends killed!" Without saying anything, Ashido just leaned over him and hugged him as tight as she could, trying to calm him down.

"Wait," Shoto said, "go back up." Izuku nodded, doing just that, slowly, so Shoto could see what he'd thought he'd caught. "There." he tapped the screen, at a photograph of the mad scribbling inside Mooney's cell. "That's a string of co-ordinates."

Kyoka and Uraraka both stared at the image with increasingly disbelieving faces. "Um..." Uraraka murmured, "that's just a mess of ones and zeroes?"

Looking over, not leaving Kaminari alone, Ashido whispered. "No it's not..."

Shoto shook his head. "Not if you can read binary." Taking out a pen, he looked about for something to write on. Izuku just rolled up a sleeve and gave him his arm. "There," Shoto said, "we should be able to get there no problem." Putting away the laptop, they started away, Kyoka doing her best not to complain about her growling stomach. Kaminari was just trying not to throw up.

By the time he'd stopped shoveling dirt back into the hole, over his friend's body, Stain was thoroughly spent. Dabi stood by his side, looking exceedingly worried. "You really should have let me do that."

Stain shook his head, putting down the shovel. "I owed him this much... at the very least."

Hands in his pockets, Dabi let out a sigh. "You two went back a ways?"

With a nod, leaning on the shovel, Stain breathed heavily. "He's part of the reason I am who I am, one of the few who could every claim to be a positive influence." Sniffling, blaming it on the rain and cold, he added one thing more. "He was a good man. Didn't deserve the place his left threw him into."

Putting his palms together, Dabi bowed to the grave, not saying a word. For a long time, they just stood there and mourned, reflecting on the moments of his life they'd shared with him. "He was an odd man," Dabi finally said, "seemed to have it in his head that I needed guidance, kept trying to convince me that throwing in my lot with Overhaul was a mistake. That I'd be better off anywhere else."
Stain, almost laughed. "He wasn't wrong."

"I know," Dabi toed at a loose bit of dirt, "just... hard to forget that he was a monster, underneath it all."

Then he laughed. "He made no attempt to hide it, Toya."

Dabi... seemed to shrink at that. "He took me in when I had nowhere to go. After years of being by his side... I didn't want to believe that he was really so apathetic to a child, just like me..."

Expression pained, he nodded respectfully to Seether's grave, "he finally got me to a place where I could see it, gently coaxing me along, away from him and how I wanted to see him."

With a smile, Stain clapped Dabi's shoulder. "Seether was good at that. He saw people for who they were, even when they didn't, pushed em along down the paths they were always going to walk down. He... had a way with saying what another was already feeling, to teach them about who they really were."

Nodding, Dabi looked toward the house. "If we're doing this 'wake' thing, I think we need alcohol... I'm too sober to cope with how awful this feels."

Leaving the shovel speared into the ground, Stan squeezed his friend's shoulder. "I missed you, Toya."

"You too."

Slowly, they started slogging back to the house. When they reached the interior, they saw Toga and Ash sipping tea together, huddled by the fire with Mooney curled up behind them. When Stain looked at Ash's neck, he successfully avoided rolling his eyes at the little, red bruise he saw. "Welcome back." Toga chirped, patting a pillow by the fire. The pair of boys shrugged at each other, each taking a seat by the others, though Toya went to sit by Ash. "How ya feelin?"

Stain shrugged. "Lighter, I guess."

Offering him some tea, which he accepted, Toga nodded knowingly. "About how it goes." and she sipped her drink again softly.

Not knowing what to say to that, he reached for the evidence box and started leafing through it. "Is there anything else? Anything you might have about Philanthropy or The Nameless One?"

She nodded, while Dabi just stared lifelessly into the fire. Calmly setting aside her tea, she stepped over the sleeping Mooney. "Gimme." She reached out, her hands waiting for him to grasp them.

After a few failed attempts to stand on his own, he sheepishly let her help him up. "Thanks..."

She shrugged, walking toward the front door. "C'mon." Reluctantly, he followed, not eager to back outside.

Once they'd left the house, going around the corner, it was a simple matter to just wander into the basement. Flicking at a switch, the entire room lit up and Stain nearly laughed. Wall to wall, with bits of string connecting documents and photos that had been tapped and tacked about. "Somehow, I am not surprised."

Toga almost looked offended. "You try keepin track of all this usin just yer head." At the far end of the room was a simple, square, wooden table. Sitting on it was about the oldest looking desktop computer Stain had ever seen.
Sparky would have loved that...

She wasn't there just for the computer though. Reaching into an old, cardboard box, she pulled a projector and a pair of speakers therefrom and plugged them into the computer. "Yer gonna need to see this first... before I explain what all the rest of these things are." she gestured about the room, clicking on a video file she'd saved to the computer.

As the projector struggled to produce images, Stain strained his eyes at the recorded faces. One bore a resemblance to... someone, he couldn't place the face but it made him mad. The other was a tall, blonde who also looked a little familiar. Third, he eventually placed. "...All For One?"

Some hours later, they'd arrived at their destination. A small, square, concrete shed up in the mountains. If it hadn't been for Izuku and Uraraka, they'd never have made it here in as little time as they had. All the same, by the time they'd reached the door, the girls were shivering violently.

Ashido and Kaminari were clinging to each other, muttering and shivering in unison. "Blankets... hot cocoa and puppies... beaches and sunshine..."

With chattering teeth, Kyoka tried to speak. "G-g-g-green? Wh-what the hell are we doing here?" She and the others were huddled as close to Shoto's left arm as they could be without actively pressing against him. Something the heterochrome was not exactly comfortably with, but he didn't talk them out of it.

"Looking for answers..." he said, grabbing the handle of the enormous, metal door and shoving it open.

Shoto couldn't help but frown slightly. "Why? What triggered all this?"

"Oh, just a revealing conversation with the Nameless one..." he gulped, fighting off a cough at the overwhelming scent of old dust. "Made me wonder if there was something more to Stendhal's investigation."

Once he'd learned the man's true identity, one particular thing fell into place: Someone had been paying Overhaul to make that serum. Someone who had no qualms about small children being hurt and used. Put those two things together, along with the fact that her very existence had been all but erased and Endeavor's true identity, and suddenly Philanthropy was even more terrifying than before. It hadn't surprised him that the underground facility had been Philanthropy's doing, and really that confirmation was all he was looking for: evidence to start trying to put Endeavor away forever.

That news clip, of course Izuku had seen it, the one where Sten had threatened Endeavor just confirmed where he should start looking. That Mooney had taken the time to leave a desperate hint, leading to this place, in his cell? It was just a bonus. Once the others had huddled inside, and he'd flicked on the lights, he saw an old furnace. "Shoto?"

With a nod, he strode over and looked inside. "Gather round." Extending his left hand, he ignited what little there was to burn, throwing more wood and coal inside. It was a matter of seconds before the girls had gathered around it.

At another end of the single room was a small laptop, hooked up to an odd, circular device in the floor. Izuku walked over to it, clicked it on and sighed in relief when it whirred to life. Immediately there was a prompt for a password. "Damn it..."

Noticing her boyfriend's frustration, Kyoka walked over, rubbing at her own shoulders. "What's
"Wrong?" he just showed her the screen. "Ah... maybe... well, it was something written in Mooney's cell that brought us here. Maybe something we read there might be the key?"

Izuku shrugged. "That entire cell had things written on it. Where we would we even start?"

Raising a shaky hand, Ashido suggested, "M-maybe that stuff about the butterfly effect?"

Kyoka frowned, huddling up to Izuku for warmth. "Y-yeah, but which part? He went on and on about all kinds of random things."

Rubbing at his chin, Izuku thought about this. "Wait... there was a name he got wrong... Edward Fish, I think he wrote."

Shivering, teeth chattering to an almost comical degree, Kaminari shrugged. "So?"

Izuku just spread open his hands. "Edward Fish." Everyone just looked at him, not sure what to say. He sighed. "MoonFish." Now them seemed to get it. "Maybe his brain hooked onto that name, or least that part of it, in some desperate attempt to remember as he was going further and further into madness?"

Nodding, Kyoka stepped up to the keyboard. "If I remember right... he dated that day with a name..." She typed in that exact name, Lorenz, and then something happened.

The circular device at the center of the room started flickering light upwards, and at the center was a blue, translucent man. "If you are hearing this... if you have found this place, then I am already dead."

"A hologram?" Mina awed.

By her side, Kaminari beamend. "So cool..."

"Shhh!" Said everyone else.

At the center of the room, R.J. Mooney's holographic recording kept talking. "When this recording is ended, do not take the laptop with you. Just copy the information and run, take it to the most powerful, influential person you can find. The things I have done... have helped Philanthropy to do... I will never erase or repent for my sins... but hopefully this mitigates the damage that will undoubtedly be done..."

Seconds later, another recording started playing. It was a recording of three men, sitting at a table. One of them looked familiar...

Stain stood in awe of what he was witnessing, a piece of forgotten history.

"Tell me, old friend." Said All For One. "What exactly are we doing here, in your home?"

The one that made him angry smiled. Stain decided he was 'the first' of them. "We are here to discus the present and the future, along with our parts to play in it."

The blonde crossed his arms, not sitting down to join them. "I take it you have some idea as to what we should do? You wouldn't summon my brother and I without reason."

The first chuckled. "As you can see... the world is in a state of chaos. This sudden appearance of newfound powers has... unbalanced things."
All For One shrugged. "Your point?"

With a grin, the first went on. "We can fix it." he stood up, circling the room around them. "An old bit of theater I learned from politics, fifty years ago." he held up a finger. "Nothing unites people like having a common enemy."

Intrigued, All For One almost smirked. "And where do you expect we'll find such an enemy?" The first turned and pointed, right at him, prompting All For One to laugh. "I see... and why would I become that enemy?"

"Because," said the first, "When all is said and done, when the ashes and dust finally settle, the world will have order once again!" He clenched his fist. "The three of us will sit on top of an empire as kings, the... heroes who'd ushered our species from an era of darkness! We give them an enemy to rise up and defeat, and from there, from that unity that... collection of Heroes we will rebuild society!"

The blonde nodded, not quite convinced. "And how would we ensure that this continued? If the heroes killed my brother and I this could very easily spiral out of our control."

Again, the first smiled. "That's why, You will be the one to lead the opposition. His rival, if you would."

The two brothers looked at one another, eventually All For One spoke. "You'd... have us trying to kill each other? On opposite sides?"

The blonde shook his head. "Out of the question."

The first came and stood between them. "Can we really let this world continue like this? We are three most capable people." he held his hand between them and a blue flame wreathed his fingers. "We must do something... what if someone else comes along? Trying to snare power for themselves? We can't count on them to be good willed philanthropists like us, gentlemen."

After some time, a long, tense pause, All For One sighed. "So that's it then? We create a war where we control both sides and thus use that to try and unite everyone under one unanimous banner? To save the world from itself?"

"Brother..." the blonde said quietly.

The first grinned again. "Yes."

Slowly, All For One put his hand on the table, between the three of them. "I will be the villain, my brother will not."

The blonde looked as though he might cry. "And will be his enemy, so that no one may kill him." his hand was placed over his brothers.

"And I..." said the first, "Will be the anonymous sponsor, rallying people and resources for the heroes."

Slowly, the now dead villain took in a deep breath. "All For One..." he said.

"And One For All." His brother concurred.

With an approving nod, the first Nameless One smiled. "Then we have an accord..." he turned and looked to the cameraman. "End it." and the recording ended.
Unable to breathe, his heart hammering in his chest, Stain went and looked at the documents covering the walls. What he read, miles and miles away, his friends listened to.

"When I built the Prophet system..." Mooney's voice went on, as the hologram showed a 3D map of a sprawling, underground complex. "I thought I was just making something that would keep Nighteye's quirk alive after he died. A way to predict certain disasters before they happened..."

The sprawling complex was little more than the world's largest sever room. Massive computer towers lined up and all interconnected, calculating in tandem and all leading back to one master control unit at the center, above them all.

"I couldn't have been more wrong," Mooney's voice was so deadened with guilt, the group of young heroes almost wondered if he really was a corpse. "While I was busy programming the machine to perform its primary function, my compatriot, Tobo, was ensuring it would be used for something far more insidious than that..."

Another image, this time of a handful of computer towers glowing green from all around the complex, soon clustered together as a line of text gave their specifications.

"Surveillance." Izuku's eyes fluttered, sharing a worried look with Kyoka. "Of course, the predictions would need input. Variables from the outside world, information on people and their lives."

The image of the sprawling complex that was 'The Prophet System' flickered away, and Mooney was back, dragging a hand down his face.

"I thought we'd be using to prevent disasters... not to ensure them." Files flickered to life all around him, dancing to and fro.

Bank statements for various families, showing at one time enough money to support themselves and live happily. Then the same family names were listed on documents of foreclosed houses, bankruptcy statements, investigations into missing savings that seemingly vanished into thin air.

"When a child is born with a quirk we deem 'villainous'..." Mooney's shame and regret were so audible one might have been able to cut through it. "We... Philanthropy would ensure that child would wander down a rotten path, once the prophet system determined that such a thing could be done, by introducing the correct changes. The fabled fluttering of a butterfly's wings..." He stared off into the distance. "We made sure there were always villains for heroes to fight, so that empire those three men had worked so hard build would remain forever standing."

With a heavy heart, having to lean against the wall to avoid falling, Izuku remembered something. He remembered what Shigaraki had said, that day in the USJ.

"'Powers meant to help, but not kill...' ahhh...What a foolishly naive statement. Tell me... What's a man to do, if a quirk like this," and at the touch of all five fingers to the pen, it turned to dust, "isn't meant to hurt people?" At his mockingly voiced inquiry a swirl of purple energy came into being behind him and people began stepping through it. "Because I'm just not sure."

This... was this what he had been talking about?

"We ruined people's lives," Mooney droned, unable to do much else, "just to keep the people watching heroes and villains fighting each other. To make sure the world didn't devolve into utter chaos once again', I'm sure Nameless would say..." With a tired, sigh Mooney reached for his
wrist. "Copy the documents on the laptop. It's all the proof you need to end this forever... Though what comes next, I'm afraid to know." Then, with a shake of his head, he added. "Perhaps... the world really would be better off, without quirks, as Kai said... Well, if that's possible, I leave it to him now. Turning that child over to him is... no. It's no less evil than anything else I've done. I just hope its worth it..."

Then, the hologram flickered away.

All around the room, the collected future heroes stood in shocked silence until Izuku slumped to the floor. "Oh god..."

Hand over her heart, slumping back against the table, Kyoka breathed in shock. "That... this is what Himiko was onto..."

"Guys," Kaminari said, reaching out and squeezing Mina's hand, "How fucked are we for knowing this?"

When no one said anything, the silence just let the obvious settle into place. Above it all, Izuku thought he might have heard All For One's last words, echoing in the room. 'From the very first time, the fight you fight for will always be mine...'

Standing at the center of the basement, Stain quivered with too many emotions to stand a hope of processing. "This entire time," he said, slowly turning toward her, "you've known all of this since before the USJ attack?"

Toga, with an uncharacteristically heavy countenance, nodded. "Me, All For One, Shigaraki and Kurogiri."

He looked at her with new eyes, taking one step forward. "When he went crazy... going after Izuku, you split from the group to try and make sure the original mission was complete." Again, she nodded. "Did you know what was going on with Eri before you found her?"

She shook her head. "The bossman did, no doubt. As soon as I pieced enough of it together, Mooney and Philanthropy, I tried to leave it the hands of ol' Kyoka gurl." She reached up, fussing with one of her pigtails. "Regretted that in a heartbeat... once I put all the other pieces together." She smiled, looking as sad as she ever did. "Been hopin she and her boy would just run off together... but I guess they're too stubborn for that."

To describe Stain's expression, the only fitting word would have been 'awe'. "Who are you?"

Grinning that crocodile grin, she shrugged. "You know me... just yer girl, Toga."

Not sure what to say to that, he just went with the first thing in his head. "You're really just doing all this, for her?"

Toga nodded. "She's my best friend. Bout the only I got left..."

He almost looked a little guilty. "Forgive me... for misjudging you."

"Pfft," she batted at the air, "ain't like ya knew any better, considering I had Eri runnin scared, who'd blame ya?" Then she flashed her signature smile again "but I am pretty awesome, ain't I?"

Stain just laughed. "Not how I'd phrase it, but I suppose so." He chanced a look up at the door. "Would you mind doing one more thing for me?"
She shrugged. "Like what?"

Sitting on the stone floor, going cross legged with closed eyes, he said, "make sure I'm left alone for a little while?"

Unsure just what was happening, Toga scratched behind one of her ears. "Uh... sure, but why?"

Stain's expression vanished. "Meditating. I have to talk to the... bossman." He'd expected her to say something to that, to have some sort of comment. But he didn't hear anything. Just silence and eventually he wondered if she'd even heard him. "Toga?"

When he opened his eyes, Stain was no longer in the basement. He was up on a mountain, in a clearing overlooking Musutafu.

"Okay..." he mumbled, "Guess it worked."

Standing up, he looked about. There was craggy path winding down the mountain, with uneven stone steps that looked more than a little slippery. Down below, the world seemed to be completely covered in thick fog, navigating the way down would have been impossible. Turning back around, he saw the steps leading to the summit and thought he might have heard singing coming from that way. Finding himself without weapons, or indeed anything else to defend himself with, he steeled himself before venturing up.

As he drew nearer to the top, he began to recognize the lyrics being sung by All For One.

"Through the glass 20 stories high,
I have watched this city burn.
If everything you just said is true,
there's no hope someday they will learn...

but if I say here with you,
then I will never know the truth...

As I walk through the city streets,
these frightened people watching me pass,
There is an evil that holds them here,
yet they won't try breaking it's grasp...

But if I stay here with you,
then I will leave them to their doom...

Do not say 'this is how it has to be',
you do no better than the fools of this burning city...

You have heard me tell this story...
Many times before you sleep...
No matter how dark this city gets...
Even now there is hope for man..."

Once arrived, Stain began to sing the other part.

"Even here it is not safe...
Even this grave has been defaced...
Someone has written, in some angry hand..."
All For One grinned, speaking the rest of that particular verse aloud. "Hope rides alone." Climbing to his feet, the dead villain laughed. "That song always made me think of my brother, and that first Nameless One."

Stain almost rolled his eyes. "So who's protoman, in that song then?"

All For One spread his arms wide open, spinning on his heels. "Couldn't it be me? I can't exactly claim to be the hero singing, as I'm dead and all."

Shaking his head, Stain moved to stand by his side. "Why did you do any of this?" All For One looked at him curiously. "Why go after All Might? Why trying to bring down the world you built over a century ago?"

The dead villain sighed. "I was promised a seat at the top, to rule beside my friend and brother." Looking out at the city below, he gave the ghost of a smile. Fitting, one might suppose. "Instead? I was betrayed, my brother killed and I was doomed to forever be the 'Symbol of Fear'..." Bitterly, he shook his head. "I decided I wasn't going take that sitting down, thought I'd... put the world back the way I found it, if I couldn't rule it as it was. Killing All Might? Was the bare minimum, step one done, before leaving the rest to society at large, to Overhaul and Toga, and now you."

With a groan, Stain rolled his eyes. "Wonderful... at least you're not pretending it was ever for a noble cause anymore."

All For One laughed again. "All the same, I don't expect you'll turn away from this fight."

As the dead villain started walking back to where he'd been sitting, Stain glared after him. "And how's that?"

With a smile, All For One sat back down. "You can't stand pretenders, much less monstrous ones exploiting the weak, hurting the innocent." With a wicked grin, he added, "leaving freshly made orphans to burn, drowning in their family's blood."

Stain drew in a breath, before growling it out. "Who is The Nameless One? His real name."

With a shrug, All For One started to turn to dust before Stain's eyes, from the bottom up. "Let's just say... puzzling it out will be no complicated endeavor for you." And all that was left of him drifted away in the wind.

"Idiot..." Stain muttered, closing his eyes.

When he opened them, he was sitting in the middle of the basement, Toga watching him closely. "Back so soon?"

He nodded, and in that moment, a thought crossed his mind. It would be so easy, for the lot of them to just stay here. This place was isolated, likely unknown to anyone else and was completely self sufficient. The lot of them had been through so much, when you put it all together, no one would have blamed them for just running away from it all and living in peace.

But that, was never something Stain would have allowed himself to do. He suspected Toga couldn't really do it either. "...We've got work to do, my dear."

"As I live there is no evil that will stand,  
And I will finish what was started:  
The fight of Protoman."
They were used to the scent of alcohol, one in a more personal sense than the other. She was used to smelling it on his breath, he didn't really smell it anymore. Tonight, however, it was on both their breaths. Vanessa's apartment was squalid, unkept and neglected when she cared about it. Two days isn't long to ignore anything, barring one's self or another living creature.

Add alcohol to that equation, and a serious bout of depression? The rest falls messily into place. Her skin was faintly yellow, bags under her eyes and wrinkles were forming around her mouth, hair a complete rats nest. "You know... I think this is the first time you've been here."

He was standing in the doorway, having propped himself up against it like an old, ratty piece of luggage on one's shoulder. "It is." Out of the corner of his eye, by her bedside, he saw a photograph. Her and Ingenium, his arms around her, their lips pressed together...

Sighing, he started slowly forward. "What's the occasion?" She was busy pouring herself another glass of whiskey, setting the bottle aside with barely the dexterity required to avoid spilling. "Which horrid thing are you here to offer your condolences for?" Despite her angry tone, despite how she tried to let rage take over, the pain and sorrow had won out on her face.

Aizawa dropped himself onto the floor across from her, taking his hip flask and opening it. "Do I have to choose?"

That was almost enough to make her cry, but she muscled it back, sniffling as she drained her glass in seconds. "You're really here to just... make sure I'm okay?"

He was slow to shake his head, taking a long swig as he did. "I already know you're not." To his surprise, she offered him her bottle.

Eventually, he accepted. "Could be poisoned, you know." She remarked.

"I don't care." He took a rather sizable swig before passing it back to her. When she took it back, she might have looked a little concerned. "...was it?"

She smiled a hollow, mirthless smile. "You think I'd make it that easy for you?"

That earned at least a little bit of laughter. "No."

Refilling her glass again, she stood up and got another, filling it up and handing it to him. "Is your lady awake yet?"

He blinked, taking a long time to puzzle out who she meant. "Ah... Shino hasn't been, well, 'mine' for a very long time." Taking a sip, he shook his head. "Moonfish, High End, whatever his name is... she's lucky he didn't punch her head off, I'm told."

Vanessa winced. "I'm sorry."

His head slumped to one side, bumping audibly into the wall. "Really?"

She nodded. "Yes," another glass drained and subsequently refilled, "she seemed like a good person, I'd hoped she'd have recovered by now."

His turn to drink. "Didn't know you two knew each other..."
The shrug she gave was about as lifeless as her voice. "We met a few years ago. She and I talked about how we came to be heroes." A faint smile, this one real, graced her features. "I lied... but she saw through it. Only told me she knew the truth years later, after I'd already told her. She said that... whenever she was near me or you, it was all she could see, thanks to her telepathy."

He drained his glass entirely. "Ah..."

Vanessa sighed, reaching over and refilling it for him. "She still loves you." His eyes trailed away from her, staring into his glass as it hovered by his face. "But I guess you already knew that, didn't you?"

"I did, but... I don't really think a serial killer belongs anywhere near 'love' or things like it." His eyes went back to hers, but she looked away, taking another sip. "Why are you... being kind to me?"

She rolled her eyes, sighing in exasperation, almost sobbing if her cracking voice was any sign. "Who but Izuku is left for me to care about?" sniffling, she shook her head and drained her glass again. "God... when Nameless finds out about Chizome..." her face was shoving into her palm, tears running from her eyes. "Not that it matters..."

A question died in his slowing mind, mere moments before he'd asked it. "Of course... you know about his condition."

More sniveling, drinking straight from the bottle and then nodding. "Yeah. I went looking for him, after Overhaul. Found his apartment and a letter from the hospital. I... I, uh..."

Shaking his head, he emptied his glass and set it aside. The room would start spinning any second now... "I don't think he'll care that you went through his mail..." She started crying, hands over her face as her shoulders shook violently and loud, pitiful sobs filled the room. "Did I ever apologize?"

When she finally calmed herself enough to answer, she shook her head. "No, but for what?"

"Any of it..." She just shook her head again. "Would it matter if I did?"

It wasn't often that she looked at him and meant it. That she would look into his eyes without giving the impression that she saw anything other than a monster, staring back at her. "Are you sorry, Aizawa?"

His face grimaced, tears almost started flowing, but he held himself together. "I'd take it all back in a heartbeat if I could."

Sniffling, wiping at her nose and eyes, she shook her head. "This the part where I forgive you?"

To his credit, Aizawa laughed as he shook his head. "You'd lose all my respect if you did."

Her laughter was loud, Vanessa nearly fell out of her chair as she reached again for the whiskey. "Yeah... me too." What little of it was left, was soon gone. "I'm sorry too..." He blinked at her, giving her a quizzical look. "I don't know why or what for, I just... I'm sorry."

Holding up a hand, shaking his head, he closed his eyes. "Forgiven, forgotten and... you really don't hafta be..." he hiccuped, slamming his already aching head against the wall behind him. "What the'ell're we gonna... what're ya gonna do about...anythin?"

She lay across the chair, upper body dangling over one arm, her legs across the other. "Find Chizome, take him far, far away from this awful place?" She shrugged. "If he lets me..."
Swallowing, nodding as the room spun and wobbled, Aizawa groaned as he cleared his throat. "S'a good plan."

Suppressing a laugh, she turned and looked at him. "Are you drunk?"

"How're you not?" He blurted out incredulously, while she howled with laughter. "Guess y'are."

Letting herself pool onto the floor, stretching about like a cat, she collapsed in a listless heap. As she stared up at the ceiling, hoping the alcohol would make her feel just a little better, she felt like crying more. "What about you?"

At that question, the answer it made him think of, he reached for his flask again. "Well... Nameless's probly gonna... any ess'cusse to kill folks like you..." She winced, keeping her eyes closed as she failed to keep the tears in. "I... ain't lettin that 'appen..."

Turning her face toward him, as his sobriety disappeared in total, she looked over his face. Every wrinkle, every detail, every mark and scratch and bit of stubble like she were trying to memorize it all. "That's not an answer."

With complete clarity, without any sign of the drink on him, he looked her eye with the face of the hunter he'd buried over a decade passed. "I'm going to kill The Nameless One." Rearing his arm back, over his head, he threw his hip flask into her garbage can.

"Tilling my own grave to keep me level...
Jam another dragon down the hole,

Digging to the rhythm and the echo of a solitary siren,
One that pushes me along and leaves me so..."

Barely past 12am, the group of future heroes was sitting in Izuku's abandoned house. Several of them were slurping noodles, take-out ramen, while Izuku sat cross legged with his back to the wall. None of them could sleep despite their obvious need for it, their minds were all far too burdened with what they'd learned. His shaking hand grasped at a glass bottle, bringing it to his lips and draining it barren.

"We need to evaluate our current situation." All eyes in the room turned toward Shoto, standing with his back to the wall beside the entertainment center. "What we know, what we have on philanthropy, cannot be ignored."

Swallowing her mouthful, Kyoka tensed. "If you have any ideas, I'm all ears." She set aside her take-out bowl, setting atop the other two she'd emptied. "Aside from being UA students, it's not like any of us have any clout."

Mina raised her hand. "Outside our families, you mean, right?" Even Izuku looked up at that point. "Both you guys, Todoroki and Jiro, your families have influence. Maybe we could see if they or their resources could be used to start making noise about it?"

Both of them looked a little awkward, Shoto actually squirmed a little. "As much as I'd love to use my father's own resources against him, there's no way he wouldn't take notice of it and shut us down hard." As he turned his gaze to Ashido, the lower lid of his left eye twitched. "He might go easy on me, but I doubt he'd hold anything back against any of you."

Kyoka sighed. "Yeah... my folks might've been popular in the music biz, but that's old news by
now. They kinda set that aside, once I was in the picture. They don't have anywhere near the pull we're gonna need for this."

Kaminari opened another soda. "No chance in hell Aizawa can help from that angle either. He's famous for avoiding even having a media presence; imagine what would happen if his first real bit in the spotlight was going on about some conspiracy?" He sighed, bringing the bottle to his lips.

With a frown, looking at her lap, Uraraka hugged herself. "I guess Valentine's out too, with Nameless watching her like a hawk. No way she'd get anywhere."

Izuku's gaze fixed on the wall right in front of him, his breathing was level but hard. One wrong step, one wrong decision, and everything could go wrong. The evidence could be buried, erased, along with their entire lives. Aside from Kyoka and Shoto, who'd notice or care about the rest of them?

Wait a moment... "Something doesn't add up..." The others turned to Izuku as he stood, ponderously rubbing his chin. "All the evidence we've found, starting with the facility where they made Moonfish... it was just left there for us to find." Hand away from his chin, he turned and addressed them all directly. "There's no way Philanthropy would ever be careless enough to just forget about anything like that. Them leaving it behind had to be on purpose."

Jaw dropped, Kaminari blinked. "What, seriously? Who the hell would do something like that?"

"Furthermore..." Kyoka puzzled, "how'd they make that happen without Endeavor finding out? It's gotta be someone close to the top of Philanthropy's food chain if they can pull all that off."

Izuku was already fairly certain he knew who it was. "Whoever they are, I doubt we'll be able to count on them for any sort of support. If they had ability to speak more publicly about what they know, they wouldn't have had all clues we've found lying in plain sight."

Mina growled out a sigh and slumped back against the couch, fingers scratching at her scalp through her hair. "We keep coming up with folks who can't help us!"

"At least it narrows things down a little." Kaminari said with as encouraging a smile as he could. "Alright... what about the heroes we interned with? Do we think any of them are up for it?"

Shoto deflated a little. "I...interned with my father."

Mina's jaw dropped, right along with Kaminari's. "Why the hell did you do that?" She said incredulously.

When he didn't have an answer, just looking away toward the floor, Kaminari shrugged. "Do you have a masochism thing, buddy?"

At Shoto's helpless squirming and blushing and Ashido stifling her laughter by covering her mouth, Izuku cleared his throat and stepped forward. "Can we... stay on topic, please?" Kyoka scratched at the side of her neck, giving both men a knowing, sheepish smile, though she said nothing. "Anyone else, who did you intern with?"

Frowning, Kyoka sighed a little. "Death Arms. No way he's got the influence to help us out."

"Us either," Ashido frowned as Kaminari just self consciously scratched the back of his neck, "much as I loved my internship, she's nobody anyone's heard of..."

Izuku was about to speak up when Kyoka held up her hand, and everything went quiet. "For the
love of-" Growling, she stood up, stomped her way to the door and hauled it open. Before anyone could comment on her sudden outburst, her earlobes had lanced out the door and produced a rather gravely scream from someone lurking outside. "God damn it, Bakugo!"

Jaws in the room collectively dropped as she snagged the warhead by the back of his collar, dragging him inside. As he stumbled into the room, nearly falling flat on his face, Kyoka did her best not to slam the door. "WHAT THE HELL, LONG EARS!?"

"SHHHHHHHH!" Hissed everyone else.

"Pipe down!" Kaminari harshly whispered.

"We're trying to keep a low profile here!" Ashido added.

Bakugo just growled, straightening up his clothes. "Good fucking job, leaving the lights on and showing up all together like that then! I'm amazed no one called the fucking cops! This place is supposed to be abandoned!"

Uraraka had gone pale as snow. "um... how much did you overhear?"

Kyoka's eyes narrowed. " 'showing up all together'... you overheard everything, didn't you?"

He looked like he was about to snarl something, only to stop himself and take a deep breath. With a tempered sigh, he just nodded. "Yeah..."

Hands in his pockets, Izuku slumped his shoulder against the wall, watching his old friend closely. "Feels like I haven't seen you for a while." Bakugo winced at that comment. "You been okay?"

Sheepishly, the warhead nodded. "It's been busy the last few days. With what's been going on..."

Izuku remembered all too well how responsible Bakugo felt for it all, the bullet All Might had taken for him. "Say no more." His smile was disarming, a gesture his old friend welcomed with a smile of his own. "So... what are you going to do now?"

Bakugo scoffed, quirking an eyebrow. "Are you kidding? I'm in." The others sighed in relief, though Kyoka was by far the most subtle about it. "I was about to knock, say that maybe Jeanist would be up for helping us, but..."

"But what?" Kyoka said, her backside leaning against the lip of the couch. "Think the fourth best hero in the country might not be up for it?"

With a roll of his eyes, Bakugo turned and faced her, arms crossed. "Considering how prim and proper he is? I doubt he'd be up for helping us do a smear job on the now reigning 'Number One'." Ashido and Kaminari both deflated, Shoto just silently sighed, shaking his head. "If that's even what you guys have in mind."

Shaking her head with a shrug, Ashido slumped back against the couch. "Hadn't really decided yet. We're still trying to figure out what our options even are."

"In case it wasn't obvious," Shoto interjected, "we haven't come up with much."

Izuku ran a hand over his face. "Maybe we should sleep, come at this with more functioning brains."

Shoto raised an index finger, stepping hesitantly forward. "Actually... I had a thought: Nighteye."
Kyoka's face flashed an angry glare, flickering for just a moment before her expression fell, eyes closed. "Really?" She spoke quietly, turning slowly round to face him. "Why him?" Izuku wanted to hug her, for that reaction to the idea.

For a moment, Shoto hesitated, and his expression took a similarly depressed turn as her's had. "I think he might appreciate the 'big picture' aspect of it. See our side and want to help us."

"Either that or shoot us down completely." Uraraka said, propping an elbow up on the arm of the couch, palm to her cheekbone. "Doesn't he tend to see things in the worst way possible?"

Her comment earned an involuntary smile from the vampire, touched that she'd remembered too. "He does..." shaking his head, pressing fingers to his eyes, "sorry to say that might be why I didn't even think to call him for help." When his hand cleared from his face, Izuku's expression was dark, brooding. "But he's our best bet, unless anyone else thinks of something."

No other idea was forthcoming, at least not that anyone gave voice to.

With a sigh, Izuku pushed off from the wall, feeling heavier all of a sudden. "Okay... it's beyond late. We need to get some sleep, rest up for tomorrow."

"And all it brings." Shoto said, dropping himself into the easy chair and closing his eyes.

Kaminari just gave him a look, like a dog halfway between curious or worried. "Gloomy much?" he attempted the jest good naturedly, although it was not met with a reply, leaving him to wonder whether or not he'd offended. Ashido didn't say a word, opting to just drag Kaminari down onto the couch with her as she closed her eyes. "Night, guys."

"Night,Den." Kyoka walked to the kitchen, snagging her purse as she went, fishing around inside it for her medicine.

Uraraka walked to the front door, spinning around to face Izuku after a moment passed. "Talk about crazy..."

He couldn't help but agree, nodding before mumbling to her. "Surprised you're sticking around for this, figured you'd be out of dodge with the others."

She smiled, rubbing the back of her neck. "The rest of the class, you mean?" She shook her head. "Last I heard, they were dealing with the rest of their semesters in other cities."

Awkwardly, he nodded. "Yeah... don't get me wrong, I'm not upset that you're here, but I thought you'd have joined them; run off to find new scenery, get more of a reputation."

Her expression went a little sad, though that smile remained. "Here I thought you knew me better than that."

Blinking a few times, before he could ask what she meant by that, Bakugo joined them by the door. "Hey, uh, roundface." Eyes aflutter, she turned to him instead. "You don't have to hike back home, I'll just sleep on my couch if you want an actual bed."

Her jaw dropped, eyes again aflutter. "Oh, um... yeah, I'd appreciate that. Thank you."

He just shrugged, tilting his chin toward the door. "Right next door."

With another smile and a nod to her would-be-host, she turned back to Izuku. "Goodnight... Green."
"Goodnight, Uraraka."

Her smile flickered of sadness again, as she went to the door. "You can just call me Ochako, you know?"

An apologetic smile and another nod came before his reply. "Right... Goodnight, ah, Ochako." Then she left.

Bakugo actually chuckled. "You two are still awkward as hell."

The vampire crossed his arms. "Old habits, I guess."

Suppressing a yawn, the warhead nodded, giving his old friend a once over. "New look suits you."

Izuku managed not to look as awkward as he felt. "Think so?"

Bakugo shrugged. "That's me being selfish... It's just easier to look at your face without feeling guilty."

Izuku laughed, though he managed to do so quietly. "Heh... you're still an ass, Kacchan."

The warhead gave an obnoxious smile, though the glint in his eyes told that it was deliberately so. "You expected anything else?"

"A guy can dream." Somewhat hesitantly, he playfully punched Bakugo's shoulder. "Sleep tight, and thanks for joining this fool's crusade."

With a grim face, Bakugo gave another shrug. "I have a lot to make up for. Not sure if this will really make any headway for that, but if nothing else it might clear my conscience."

After a moment, Izuku stepped forward and hugged him. "I forgive you, Kacchan."

Though he'd never know it, Bakugo struggled to hold the twisted grief and guilt from his voice, tears from his eyes. "Yeah... You're an idiot for that."

Ah... It's not that you don't forgive yourself. It's that you can't.

Izuku squeezed, before he let him go. "I know." He managed another, sweet smile.

Bakugo just flinched, smiling back what little he could. "We're gonna kick his Murderous ass."

When he was gone, Izuku shut then locked the door. His chest felt heavy, lungs slow and stomach churned. With a gulp, he turned around and walked to bathroom to deal with his hygiene. Distracted as he was, it didn't feel like it took him long, although he almost ran his hands under the running water again.

Old habits indeed...

Shutting off the water, wiping his mouth he went to walk to his room only to bite back a scream as his leg protested. Slumping against the wall, biting his lip, he made the rather questionable decision to punch the aching muscle as hard as he could. After some of the sharpest, most intense pain of his life, he let out a long hiss as the limb went gently quiet.

Sighing in relief, he almost managed to walk without waver to his-...
Right. His room.

His hand hesitated, fingers almost re-curling before he grasped the handle and turned it to. With a heavy, pained heart he stepped inside. The sight of his collection made the twisting knot in his chest harder to ignore. It felt like he hadn't seen any of it in months, almost felt like he wasn't looking at it with the same eyes he'd left it with. A heavy atmosphere slumped his shoulders down, the feeling of nostalgia as his eyes trailed over his room was... infected.

"From the way you're looking at all that, I'd say Bakugo isn't the only one who blames himself for what happened to All Might."

Hard to deny the truth when spoken so plainly, especially from the voice of the one you love. "He wouldn't have been there if I hadn't been captured."

As she entered his room, a familiar scenario, she closed the door behind herself. "He just would have found some other way to take him out of the picture. Maybe if he had, All For One would still be alive and we'd all be even worse off."

The insanity of it all... "All For One. Hard to believe he was trying to do the same thing we are now."

Shrugging out of her jacket, Kyoka almost laughed. "Yeah... remember when things seemed more black and white?"

His turn to laugh. "Everything got more and more muddled as things rolled along. It's... hard to tell what side the villains are actually on anymore."

Slipping out of her shoes, he heard her unclasping her pants, and he felt a little warm. "You mean whether or not the people we've been fighting were actually the 'good guys' all along?"

He started unbuttoning his shirt, kicking off his shoes as he did. "Well, yeah..."

Her arms wound around his middle, her cheek against the back of his shoulder as she gave him a squeeze. "Remember what I said, when Sten lost it on that cop? The difference between good and evil?"

His hands went to hers, body relaxed as he leaned against her. "Whether or not you're willing to hurt anyone who gets in your way to win." She nodded. "Really think it's that simple?"

She spun him around, hands on his shoulders. "We're trying to bring down Philanthropy, bring down Endeavor and put a stop to what the 'hero world' has been for a long time." Her expression, that shrug of her shoulders, told she had no clue else to think. "If that's not what separates good and evil, then what does that make us?"

With a tired expression, he shrugged off his shirt and pants, dragging her into bed with him. "The optimistic idiots trying their best?"

She shuddered, holding him close again. "...You think that's all anyone ever really is? Hero, villain or anything else?"

This time, he returned the embrace. "Not sure what the other option is." His fingers ran through her hair, scratching behind her ears.

With a bitter laugh, she closed her eyes. "Scary..." When the blankets were pulled over them, it only took seconds for them to fall asleep.
Trembling fingers, quivering muscles in his face as he hissed in pain. Medical adhesives, made to last and stay strong and, at this moment, Stain just wanted them off. The series of expletives that streamed out of his mouth would have a sailor blush, but he managed to remove the metal and tape. As he panted sharply, eyes watering slightly, he focused on himself in the mirror.

*Not exactly presentable...*

Feeling more than a little self conscious, he stepped to one side and grabbed his costume. Noticing how torn and shredded it was made him sigh. The old thing was more like a bundle of streamers an excited cat had gotten its claws into than a costume. All the same, he didn't have anything else to wear and it was time to gather the troops. What few of them remained, at least.

Slipping into felt like trying not to get one's foot stuck in a pothole, or snagged in roots while running through the woods. Considering his battered state, that wasn't too much of a stretch; or it wouldn't have been if he were almost anyone else. As he dragged the armored hero-wear over his skin he took one breath too deeply, nearly doubling over into a coughing fit. Catching himself on the lip of the sink, he forced his lungs to calm before taking another dose from his inhaler. From the way it rasped, he thought it might be running close to empty.

*Down to the wire in every way... Doubt I'll have almost any time left, once this is all over.*

*Heh... Guess that's how you know this is all so close to ending.*

Once his armored costume was on, he reached over toward his broken sword and slung it over his shoulder. As he stepped out of the bathroom, his eyes were met with the sight of friends. Dabi, as he preferred to be called, and Toga. "The others outside?"

"Just waitin for you." Toga said, adjusting the jumpsuit she wore whenever she went masquerading as Cammie. "...you look awful. You sure yer up for this?"

Stain gave her a knowing look, frowning on one side of his mouth. "I've energy enough to see this through."

She just shook her head, giving that toothy grin of her's. "Not doubtin, just make sure you get through in one piece, yeah?"

Nodding, he decided to leave it at that. "Be careful out there." When she didn't say anything, just turning away to leave, he turned toward the front door too.

The trio wandered outside with Toga locking the door behind them, much to Dabi's amusement. "I don't think anyone's going to find this place. You could probably leave that unlocked." She just shrugged, not really giving an answer as she rang the dinner bell by the door.

"She seem quiet to you?" Stain muttered.

His childhood friend wasn't so sure. "How do you know?"

Stain was about to answer, when he realized that -perhaps- he didn't really know her that well. "I've had difficulty finding silence with her around."

Mercifully, not that Stain would ever know, Dabi did not make the joke he thought of. "I'll just bet..." Opting instead for a subtler gibe, which went right over the other man's head.
Of course, even if he had realized the joke at his expense, Mooney chose that exact moment come barrelling into the area. When he landed in front of Toga, sitting on his haunches, he looked a bit like an excited puppy waiting for dinner. A mutated, enormous, monstrosity of a puppy but a puppy nonetheless. That Toga started petting him like one did little to dissuade them from seeing Mooney like that.

Not a comfortable image, to be sure.

Standing just in front of all of them, Stain cleared his throat. "Any questions before we begin?" They all exchanged a few questioning looks, before unanimously turning back to him in silence. "Then let's begin..."

Lurking just over Shuichi's face, holding their breath and making what they assumed were silly faces, Eri and Yoichi were trying not to laugh. Their efforts were not entirely successful, giggling during those short bursts spent gasping quickly for air. Eventually, the din of their barely constrained laughter was enough to rouse a very displeased Shuichi. He greeted them with a sigh.

"Really?" He said, and their giggling became even more difficult to hold back. "Again?" They lost it, falling over laughing as Shuichi shook his head smiling tiredly. "Thanks for coming by again, guys..."

Yoichi just batted a hand at the air. "Ah, shush. We missed ya anyways."

Climbing up and trotting back toward the floor of the bed, Eri nodded emphatically. "They're gonna send you home today."

At this announcement, Shuichi immediately perked up. "Finally!" He all but shouted, "I thought I was going to go crazy in here!"

Yoichi grinned like a cat in wonderland. "Like I'd let that happen, who do you take me for?"

The lizard boy immediately narrowed his eyes and lost his smile, taking on very serious and displeased countenance. "You're the reason I was gonna lose it."

"Ah!" Yoichi gasped, hand clutching at his heart. "Shu, how could you be so cruel!?" Languishing, though not sincerely in the least, he fell back as though he might faint, back of one hand to his forehead.

Then Shuichi lost his composure and practically shouted, "Because you're ridiculous!"

Eri almost fell over giggling at them, picking up a small backpack and carrying it over to their reptilian friend. "We-" she giggled again, "we brought you some clothes, since the ones you had were all burned."

Now he was smiling, calming down a little. "How'd you guys get a hold of my clothes? I thought they burned up in the apartment."

Shuichi opened the backpack and Yoichi shrugged. "dude, how many times have you slept over and forgotten, like, half your stuff?"

"Hey, that only happened once!" Shuichi remarked, looking a little embarrassed. "I swung by again and brought it all home afterwards too..."

With a wicked grin, Yoichi pointed at the backpack many times. In rapid succession. "Not that
For a few moments, blinking slowly, Shuichi just stared blankly at his friend. "...you had that oversized take-out coffee again, didn't you?"

Simultaneously, he and Eri gave conflicting answers. He said 'no', she said 'yup' and Yoichi, once again, behaved as though the betrayal had shocked him to his very core.

Eri giggled, Shuichi sighed. "I thought you said that was a terrible idea after the fact."

All toothy grin, Yoichi rushed to within about an inch of his friend's face. "Whatchatalkinabout?"

Shuichi sighed. "The caffeinne crash." The other blinked. "You slept for three days and woke up a starving mess?"

The moment that the memory clicked back into this awareness was visible. "Ohhhhhh!" Yoichi said, his grin slowly disappearing. "...oh god what have I done?"

Shoving a palm at his forehead, Shuichi smiled and shook his head ruefully. "Proven that I can't leave you unsupervised for more than a day?"

Yoichi actually considered this, expression contemplative as his eyes gazed up and to one corner. "Yeah, that sounds about right."

Eri stood up straight and saluted, smiling bright. "Don't worry, Cap'n! Next time, I'll make sure he doesn't get another one."

Face stone-cold-serious, Shuichi saluted right back. "Your dedication to the corps is an inspiration to us all, sergeant."

"This is all rather heartwarming," the three of them turned toward the door, seeing a sudden new arrival on scene. An old lady, bent over and walking with a cane resembling a syringe, somehow only slightly taller than Eri. "Which is why I'm so hesitant to pull the little one away, but I'm afraid I must." She smiled, waving a weathered and slow moving hand. "Hello, young Nobunaga."

Undisclosed to the youngsters present, all had gone precisely according to Nighteye's predictions, save for the accelerated timetable. All as he'd seen, sitting in the his office with them all gathered around, sipping tea and considering everything with deceptive calm. "I see..." he said at long last, fingers folded together in front of his face. "When I saw this happening, I didn't grasp the full scope of it." His eyes opened, staring intently into theirs. "This is beyond the scope of anything students like you have a hope of navigating alone."

"Yeah," said Kaminari, speaking up so no one else would have to. "Kinda why we came to you."

Nighteye smirked, despite his tangible desire to crumble into a shivering mess. "Judging from your expressions, those wary postures, I can only assume you're anticipating what I'll say."

Stepping to the center of the room, of the gathered group, Izuku braced himself, facing him with open eyes. "Sir... please?" Nighteye gave no sign that his former protege's vulnerable plea moved him, yet he did hesitate before he next spoke. "The things Philanthropy has done... we can't just ignore this."

Nighteye smirked again. "You learned to better control your emotions, I see." He leaned back in his chair, fingers still folded while he looked his pupil in the eyes. "But still nothing of the big
picture, if you expect anything public to come of this."

Bakugo clenched his fists, Kyoka growled, taking a daring step forward. "Seriously?! You're saying you won't help us?!"

All traces of amusement vanished. "I've said nothing of the sort."

"Yeah? Then what the hell are you saying?" Bakugo demanded as his hands popped and cracked, knuckles going white. "Cuz that's sure as hell what it sounds like!"

Flexing his wrists, forced patience kept Nighteye from snapping vehemently as he stood, palms flat on his desk. "Think, boy. If I had any intentions other than to aid you, police and other heroes would already be here to apprehend the lot of you."

As he spoke, Todoroki's eyes shifted suspiciously to the door and lingered there.

Nighteye ignored him. "Your plan was to make all of this information public, yes? Hold some kind of trial, put Endeavor and his co-conspirators away for life?" Slowly, somewhat ashamedly, they all nodded or confirmed this statement in some inauditory way. "Then you know," his eyes locked on Izuku's and the two of them silently regarded each other in silent understanding. "You know why I can't say yes to this plan."

Eyes slowly wincing shut, Izuku let out a heavy breath, face lowered to gaze at the floor. "...The big picture."

Nighteye almost looked like he regretted something, as he reclaimed his seat. "There's a reason why that is such an important lesson." His index finger rubbed along the length of his cheekbone, thumb obscuring his mouth as thoughtful searched some unseen place for clarity. "Consider: what do you think happens if people hear this story and believe it?"

A question no one wanted to answer, but all suspected they knew the answer to. As it would so happen, Todoroki would be the one to voice such a hard truth. "Destabilization. People losing faith in heroes, society further descending into the chaos as it has been since All Might's... displacement."

The professional spread his hands, palms upturned to them. "Uncovering philanthropy's corruption has the potential to bring about chaos forgotten over the last two hundred years of civilization. They own the world majority of Hero Agencies, if civil unrest should arise from exposing them, it could mean global unrest as people rise up to overthrow them."

Muttering with a smaller voice than one might expect, Kaminari remarked. "Yeah, very rebellion versus the empire..."

Izuku's eyes trailed up, meeting Nighteye's sternly. "Philanthropy has been destroying families, destroying lives just to make sure that there are always villains for heroes to fight." To everyone's surprise, his countenance had taken on an angry edge. "You can't be saying that this should be swept under the rug."

"I'm saying this needs to be handled quietly," Nighteye elaborated, "in house and by people who will appreciate the severity of the situation." With that, he reached for his phone. "You did well to bring this to me, if you don't mind waiting outside I have some calls to make."

With clenched teeth, Izuku was about to take a step forward and speak his mind when a hand gripped his shoulder. When he turned to see who it was, he saw Kaminari, with a worried look in his eyes. Taking a deep breath, Izuku just let it go and filed out of the room with the others. They
gathered again in the lobby, the receptionist watching the news, and collectively sulked.

"He has a point." Everyone looked up when Shoto finally broke the silence. "Just look at the last week, what people have been doing without All Might. Imagine the upheaval if they suddenly lost faith in the entire hero system.

Uraraka gulped. "On top of not feeling safe, everyone would then see that the people responsible for protecting them can't be trusted..."

Shuddering, Mina hugged herself. "It'd be an absolute bloodbath, people just killing each other left and right because they could."

"Assuming everyone had the same reaction." Kyoka chimed in. "It's not like we can say for certain that Nighteye's prediction is spot on."

Raising her hand, Uraraka spoke softly. "Doesn't his quirk work sorta like... I heard that he sees every possible future at once when he activates it, but the one that's most likely to happen is generally the one he sees the clearest?"

Kaminari shrugged. "I mean, it's not like the future is ever completely set in stone. People still make choices and whatnot, free will is very much a thing. There's no way he just sees 'what will happen no matter what' and that's it."

Sighing, Shoto brushed a hand up over his face, tangling his fingers in his hair. "Okay, ignoring the philosophical debate about whether or not 'fate' exists, unless someone knows what's about to happen, they're just going to respond to whatever happens how they felt they should."

Deflating a little, Kyoka crossed her arms and shifted her weight to one leg, averting her eyes from the others with a sour face. "In other words, people are just gonna do what people do unless warned about what's coming."

"So 'fate' might as well be what he sees in the first place..." Kaminari shoved a palm against his face, eyes closed tight. "Awesome. I love feeling powerless in the face of disaster."

Bakugo growled, clenching his fists. "Fuck! We can't just sit here and do nothing!"

"What else can we do?" Kyoka sighed. "We already did the only thing we could think to do, look where that got us."

"What if..." Izuku pondered aloud, fingers at his chin, "what if we only divulged some of what we know?"

Mina blinked. "You mean... leaving out the bit where Philanthropy has been ruining people's lives to maintain this hero thing? That's not really gonna work..."

With a sympathetic look, Kaminari patted Izuku's shoulder. "Without telling them that, there's not really a lot to tell them."

Izuku frowned. "Well... what if we spoke up about how The Nameless One had the Vampires wiped out?"

Kyoka shook her head. "All that would do, at most, would be getting the figurehead guy sent to jail. Endeavor would still be a free man, he's not the one who ordered Aizawa and whoever else to do that."
Looking at Izuku, Bakugo quirked an eyebrow. "You feeling okay? You don't usually miss details like that."

Feeling somewhat bashful, Izuku scratched the back of his neck, not really looking at anyone. "I... haven't really been recovering since I left the hospital. If anything, I'm worse off than I was then. With all the sleep I haven't been getting, the injuries from hero work and lack of blood to drink, it's a wonder I'm even standing.

"Basically, unless we go all in, we've got nothing." Kaminari sighed. "Then Nighteye's prediction comes true and all hell breaks loose." Leaning back, staring up at the ceiling, his head thumped against the wall. "Hate to say it but, we need something dirty on Endeavor himself if we're gonna even think about taking an alternate approach to this."

With a scoff, Shoto shook his head. "Like what? He drove my mother to brink of lunacy and made this," he jabbed a thumb at his left eye, "happen to me. There was evidence, witnesses and no one listened when I spoke up about it." Bakugo's fists clenched again, hearing that. "That's the worst of what he's done, yet no one did or does anything about it. Unless we had video evidence of his horrid behavior broadcast across the nation, there's no way he'd be punished."

Meeting Shoto's gaze, Kaminari's face darkened, looking a little sad. "You think so?"

Shoto's eyes narrowed, his tone remaining the same as it always did. "I know so."

A snore caught their ears, and the group turned to see the receptionist had fallen asleep. The news was still going, something about the Shroud finally being completed. "How many people do you think will be watching when that happens?" Mina muttered.

Uraraka shrugged. "Well, they've been getting people excited about it for a while, talking about how it will improve the quality of the air we breathe on a global scale. It's basically going to clean the atmosphere."

"That is both really cool, and really scary." Mina frowned, arm's crossed. "I mean, what if someone tampers with it and it poisons the planet?"

"Game over..." Bakugo remarked, dropping himself into a nearby chair, while Kaminari just stared at the screen with a serious expression.

Naturally, at that moment, Izuku's phone started ringing. Pulling it from his pocket, he regarded the name on caller ID wearily. "Hello, sir."

"If you're not already wearing it, put on that costume with that ridiculous flower and spider emblem." Nameless's voice said icily. "I want the next Symbol of Peace to attend the news conference for the Shroud's completion."

Every ounce of that statement's weight came crashing down on him at once and Izuku gulped. "I'll be there."

"Make it quick," he could almost hear the man roll his eyes, "it's in two hours." The line disconnected.

When he looked up, the others were looking at him expectantly. "Was that who we think it was?" Uraraka said with a nervous expression.

Izuku just nodded. "Looks like I'm attending the Shroud's big day..."
Recovery girl led Eri away to another wing of the hospital, Yoichi and Shuichi trailing curiously behind. "Where are we going?" She asked, only for her inquiry to be met with a smile.

"We're going to visit another patient, a student at UA."

Eri beamed. "Like Izuku?"

The healing hero chuckled as the crowd of nurses and CNAs wove around them, trying to avoid trampling the elder and children. "Yes, just like him."

With a bounce in her step Eri trotted up beside Recovery Girl. "Who are they?" Then she remembered they were in a hospital, where people came to heal. "Um... they're gonna be okay, right?"

"Hey," Yoichi said, adjusting the old gas mask under his arm, "if they're anything like that Guren guy, I bet they're ready to tear the ears off a Nomu."

Shuichi blinked, giving his friend an odd look. "What's a Nomu?"

He shrugged. "You know, that big purple thing with the beak and teeth? Isn't 'High End' a Nomu?"

While Shuichi puzzled that out, Eri turned around. "I thought Nomu was that monster's name."

Then she saw her.

Walking through the crowd, clad in a black jumpsuit, was a shapely woman with voluminous, long, blond hair. As she sauntered on by, their eyes met. Something about her eyes, something about that smile, looked familiar as she waved to Eri. Nervously, the little one waved back, then they vanished from each other's sights.

"Who the heck was that?" Yoichi said, noting that Eri's smile had vanished.

Shuichi scratched the top of his head. "I think that's Cammie? She's been around for a while, since the UA sport's festival, I think."

"Indeed she was," said Recovery Girl, "shame she didn't make it into the finals back then. She showed a lot of promise."

Walking up beside Eri, Yoichi nudged her. "You okay?"

She just nodded, not saying anything and taking his hand, holding tight. Frowning at her sudden skittishness, he turned to their reptilian friend and gestured something. While it took a moment or two for him to catch on, Shuichi did eventually walk up beside her and take her other hand.

It didn't take long for Eri to return to her happier self after that. "Hey..." she said, looking up at each of them. "Can we be friends?"

Both boys exchanged a look, then they burst out laughing. "Eri," Shichi said, once he'd calmed down, "we're already friends, you goof."

She practically bounced as she walked along, smiling up at him. "We are?"

"Sure we are." Said Yoichi, giving her a playful shove, though not enough to actually move her. "If we weren't, do you think we'd like hanging out with ya so much?"

Eri gave a self conscious laugh. "Maybe not..."
They rounded another corner together, then through an open door. "Once she's on her feet, it's back
to UA." Recover Girl walked up beside the girl's bed, then put a hand to her forehead and pushed
her hair aside.

"Momo!" Eri gasped, running around to the other side of the bed and squeezing her arm with both
hands.

Recovery girl put a finger to her lips. "Shhh, she'll be up soon." Then she reached forward and
removed the oxygen mask.

Yoichi scratched at the side of his head, onlooking with obvious skepticism. "I dunno... she looks
like she's been out for a while."

The elder turned and gave him a daring smile. "Watch and learn, young one."

As the two boys exchanged a look, she leaned forward and kissed the girl's forehead. Then Momo
started glowing, her upper body lifting slightly off the bed. Her head lilted back, mouth open and a
cloud of dust spiraled forth. The boy's jaws dropped, and Eri's wide eyes seemed to catch some the
light around Momo, glowing on their own.

"How did you do that?" Eri breathed in awe, watching as Momo gently collapsed back onto the
bed, the dust vanishing into the ventilation.

Recovery Girl smiled. "I just used my quirk, same as I always do." As Momo's eyes fluttered open,
she added, "welcome back, Yaoyorozu."

Eri felt the words sink in, echoing in her head a few times more. Quirks can be used to heal
people?

Gingerly sitting up, propped up on her Elbows, she smiled nervously. "Thanks for bringing me
back..." Then she saw Eri, still holding onto her arm. "Eri," she smiled, "were you worried about
me?"

She nodded. "I didn't know anything happened..." She sniffled, wiping at one of her eyes as she
smiled. "Glad you're okay though."

Momo just leaned over and hugged her. "Don't worry, I'm not going to get hurt by a little dust. It
just made me sleepy for a while, okay?"

Recovery Girl shook her head. "Adorable, the pair of you. If I'd known you two were so close I
might have tried harder to stop you from worrying, Eri."

Eri just squeezed Momo. "She and Izuku saved me..."

Patting the child's head, Momo looked a little shy. "It wasn't just me and him... we had a lot of help
from our friends."

Nodding, Eri released her, peering out the door. "Where are they anyways? I haven't seen any of
them since things got scary at that hotel."

Momo reached for her phone, finding an ocean of messages waiting for her. Kyoka and Izuku had
sent her rather emphatic messages telling her to 'get well soon', saying they missed her and would
be by as soon as she woke. Kaminari had made a promise to bring her favorite food by, along with
some of her clothes if she didn't already have any.
Mina's message was the longest, promising to fill her in on everything that had happened after or during the attack on the hotel. The rest was her expressing worry, hoping to hear from her, messages sent several times a day to see if she had woken. Todoroki had sent a brief but meaningful message saying, 'I miss you, be okay' which made her smile. Uraraka had sent well wishes, asking Momo to please get better soon as she valued their friendship. Even Stendhal had chimed in to say 'get better quickly. You are a better hero than some professionals, so try not to stay down too long'.

She had to admit that last one moved her a little. Who knew Stendi thought so highly of her?

However, the message she'd received from her mother almost dashed all those other feelings away. "Call me when you wake up." Momo's heart skipped a beat, stomach in knots as her grip tightened on her phone. What did she want? Was she disappointed? Angry that she'd been taken down yet again?

"Momo?" Her eyes fluttered, snapping to a worried looking Eri. "Is everything okay?"

Forcing herself to smile, she buried those worries as deeply as she could. "Yeah, of course." Then she patted Eri's head. "Everything's going to be just fine, alright?" Eri smiled, then the power went out and Momo looked out the door, "What's going on?"

"The hell?" Yoichi said. "This again? I thought they fixed the power lines."

Shuichi peered out the door, "they did, look." Outside the room, staff moved about in a hurry, some far too quickly for comfort. "I think they're scared."

"As well they should be," Recovery Girl said seriously, "some patients won't last very long without life support. This is an emergency if they can't get the backup power on."

Something shook the entire building, rattling the windows and knocking down anything even remotely unsteady. Outside the room, several people nearly fell over. Shuichi had to leap to the aid of an older woman, catching her before her bones could crash against the linoleum floor. "What the hell was that?" he shrieked, helping the lady find stable footing again.

"You're asking me?" Yoichi's voice cracked, fingers gripping at the old gas mask he'd been carrying. "I dunno! Maybe something blew up!"

"Everybody stay calm." Recovery girl and Momo said together.

Naturally, that was the exact moment part of the ceiling gave out and the room above them came down to say hello.

Looking out at the chaos, Stain growled, snatching up his radio and barking into it. "Damn it, Muscular! I said no collateral!" No reply was given, he just snarled and switched frequencies. "Toga, have you secured the target?" By his side, Mooney seemed scared, jittering with fear as they awaited her reply.

The purple monstrosity soon relaxed. "Already outside!" She chirped. "Give em a good show, Imma need one helluva distraction till I find shelter for the lunk."

Dabi sighed, frowning at the now badly damaged hospital. "I think the hero killer has that covered." He turned to Stain. "Shall we?" Gesturing toward the hospital.

Shoving the radio back into his- into Overhaul's belt, he leapt out of the alley they'd been hiding in. "Way ahead of you. Mooney!" The beast looked up at him, head tilted to one side. "Go to the
rendezvous!" The beast leapt skyward as the two of them ran inside, through the sea of scurrying people. Staff trying to help their patients, civilians fleeing for their lives, the odd and clueless hero. "Remember, unless they're more thug than hero, no killing."

With a laugh, Dabi gave a cold smirk. "I'm already going to jail for killing those cops in Tartarus. What's another life sentence for killing a hero?"

Grimly, Stain looked at him with worry in his bloodshot eyes. "...When this is over, we're going to have to answer for what we've done." Even as he pushed his way through the crowd, toward the scene Muscular was creating, he felt his skin crawling. Willingly working with scum like Muscular... why hadn't he just killed him when he'd rescued Mooney?

"And for what we're about to do, no doubt." Sighing, Dabi tried not to get hauled along in the sea of people. At times, he envied Stain for his enhanced strength and agility.

They rounded the bend, finding none other than Kamui woods standing in their way. "Stendhal!" He shouted, oaken tendrils lashing toward Dabi. "There's a villain behind you!"

Dabi laughed as Stain threw himself aside, his friend setting the tendrils ablaze. "Better run, little hero." His old friend gave Stain a knowing grin. "Save who you can from the other attacker, neither of you will last long against me."

Reluctantly, Stain did as his friend suggested and ran toward the sounds Muscular's rampage. To their surprise, Kamui did not object. As he fled the scene, he looked his old friend in the eyes. *Thank you, Toya. Make me proud.*

The look he gave back seemed to reply to what he'd been thinking. *I will.*

Scrambling through the wreckage, he didn't have to go much further before he found several dead heroes. Fists clenched, Stain could taste his burning need to put down the mad dog he'd sent into this mess. Mooney was too valuable, too vulnerable to risk sending in, but he would have been far more reliable than this.

His hand had almost reached his sword when he saw a woman, lying in her own blood, hand clutching a wound in her neck. "Shit!" Searching about, he lurched toward a nearby first aid kit and tore it open. "Here," he set to binding the woman's injury, "it's gonna be okay." He smiled at her, hoping he looked reassuring. "Do you have a name?"

She nodded, partially gargling as she spoke. "Kokoro..."

Tightening the bandages as much as he dared risk, he held her hand. "It's going to be okay, Kokoro."

"Stendhal?"

Over his shoulder, he saw a face he hadn't expected to see. "Iida?" He said, putting a great deal of pressure on the woman's wound. "Good, this woman needs your help."

Ignoring him, the armored boy stepped forward. "Where's Muscular?"

Stain blinked. "Did you hear a word of what I just said?"

Iida growled. "I'm not here for that! I'm here to avenge my brother!"

Blood boiling, teeth grinding, Stain felt a contemptuous sneer about to spread. "So much for all
"That talk, all those years, about competing to be the best hero."

"There are more important things than-!"

In less than a second, Stain was on his feet, blade of his sword at Iida's throat, staring him dead in the eye. "A hero's mission, their only mission, is to protect and aid those who cannot help themselves." Ire stirred in him, memories of screaming for help in that old burning building only for no one to save him or his family. "Forsake this, and you will become the very thing we have been striving to stand against." Memories of fighting dogs in alleyways, fighting just to eat garbage while everyone seemed content to ignore him.

Iida's reply did not help. "That monster killed my brother!" His fingers clenched harder around his sword. "If I don't kill him, no one will!"

For a moment, Stain's hands shoved the blade harder against Iida's throat, just where his jawbones met the muscle of his neck. He could feel that urge, that need to spill his blood building to an inferno. "Is that your choice?" His eyes narrowed. "If it is, you spit on his memory, on your own words back when we first met." Iida raised an eyebrow, his anger sifting slightly. "You said you wanted to be just like him, a hero that was his equal. Do you think he'd forget himself, or the people he protected, to avenge you?"

Wincing, tears barely held back, Iida threw his head back and screamed, fingers raking through his hair, clawing at his scalp as he fell to his knees.

Sighing, breathing to ease the urge away, Stain's trembling hand sheathed his blade. "Help her... Ingenium." The expression Iida looked up at him with was that of a crying puppy, completely unused to compassion. "Be a hero."

As Stain started walking away, Iida- ...Ingenium, knelt by Kokoro's side and tended to her. "S-sorry ma'am... I'm so sorry..."

"Here I thought you'd become everything I despised about this corrupt world, Stain smiled, not quite free of his murderous urges. There's hope for you yet... Ingenium."

He didn't have to go much farther. Just around another bend, over a few more bodies, and there he was. "You're despicable."

Muscular rolled his eyes, chewing on some donuts from a dining cart that had survived the chaos. "I did what you asked."

"I did what you asked."

Stain clenched his fists. "I said no collateral."

Muscular laughed. "I'm the hero killer! What the hell did you expect me to do when I found these weaklings so ready to die?" Gritting teeth from the half-human's mouth was almost audible. "I did the world a favor. No one this weak should be protecting anyone."

The last fibers of his self control were fraying fast. "I will not allow this or anything like it." his furious tone seemed to impress the serial killer. "You said once that knowing who you are is everything," Stain bared his teeth, "I am not the kind of man who can permit this!"

Grinning, Muscular laughed. "That I did, but I'm afraid that I am the kind of man who lives for killing heroes to weak to live. If they can't beat me, they deserve to die."

"We have no idea if they deserved it!" He yelled. "None of these heroes had been vetted! Even if that wasn't an issue, I cannot let you discredit us before we've even had the chance to spea-"
"Yeah, yeah. One sec." Muscular threw another donut into his mouth, and Stain gave up restraining himself. His hands flew, thumbs spearing into the man's eyes, iliciting a delicious scream from the brute. Overwhelmed with rage, Stain began bashing his head against a nearby wall. Impact after impact, one crack of his skull after another and his blood began to spill. Only when the cries faded, when Muscular did little more than sputter and gurgle on his own blood, did Stain relent. He heard the ceiling above him groaning, grinned, then threw Muscular beneath the falling rubble.

"It's more of a burial than you deserve." With that, he stomped away, back the way he came.

Around the next bend, he saw Iida, who was surprised to see him coming back so soon. "Did you stop him?"

Stain just held up his bloodied hands. "I think so." He didn't stop to read the astonishment on Iida's face, he just kept on walking.

"Sten..." Iida breathed, "was it necessary?"

Stopping his tracks, Stain gave his former classmate a sidelong look over his shoulder and grinned. "Of course it was." Then he walked away, leaving the boy with jaw agape.

Further on, finding the hospital abandoned, he saw Dabi standing over an unconscious Kamui as he doused the flames on the hero's body. Dabi stood, dusting off his hands. "Where's Muscular?"

"Dead." Stain said, walking toward the exit. "You coming?"

Grinning, his old friend ran to catch up with him. "I knew following you was a good choice."

They decided to leave it at that, making their way toward where Toga and Mooney would be waiting. It was an abandoned home, burned out with its interior covered with ash and soot. Stepping inside, they saw Toga wearing a garish and baggy costume, tending to an unconscious, skeletal man.

His shock of wild blonde hair looked as though it might have been a lion's mane, and Stain knew it well. "How is he?"

Toga patted the man's chest. "Sleepin like an angel. Don't worry, I didn't take more than we'd need." She bandaged up the man's arm, taking care not to disturb the IV still hooked into his vein.

All the same, his eyes fluttered open, revealing blackened sclera and irises of vibrant blue. "Wha..." he breathed, voice raspy, "where am I?"

Stepping forward, Stain looked down at the sleeping figure and place a hand on his shoulder. "This is only a dream, All Might." The broken hero's drowsy eyes drifted to his, finding his former ward smiling. "Go back to sleep, you'll wake in the hospital and find that everything is as it should be."

All Might smiled in turn, his eyes drooping heavily. "ah... young Akaguro." His head sunk into the pillow, shutting off his view of the world. "Alright... I leave it in you hands."

Stain's other hand clenched, and a stinging in his eyes surprised him. He had to sniffle back what had almost started running from his nose. "I- I won't disappoint you, sir." Of all people, of all times to cry, why did...?

Oh. Yeah, that's right... back then it was him. He who'd come to pluck him from the rubble, only
all too late.

Her body was so heavy... why didn't he have the strength to move her?

Why didn't he have the strength to do anything but run?

Why did she have to die?

Why... why was it getting hard to breathe?

Something crashed through the wall, walking through it like it hadn't even existed to begin with.

"Never fear, for I am... here..."

Heavy footsteps stopped short of him and his mother, his weak little hand reached toward him.

"H-... help..." he barely managed to breathe. How long had he been in the smoke? How long had he been struggling to breathe? "Mom needs..."

The footsteps were replaced by gentle hands, scooping him up and shielding his face.

"Little one... I'm so sorry..."

Roused from his recollections, he felt All Might's hand over his own, as it rested on the hero's shoulder. "No... little one. The only one you need to worry about failing... is you." That smile, as he looked Stain in the eyes, it nearly made him weep.

Stain faltered, not knowing quite what to say. His jaw was slack, voice on the edge of speaking, when All Might surrendered his consciousness. He caught his falling hand, placing it gently back by his side.

"Ash," Stain said, wiping at his face, "if he wakes up... or if anything looks like it's going wrong with him, make sure he gets help."

The last of the 'Volcano crew' frowned, hand on one hip. "I'm not going with you?"

Toga shook her head. "Someone's gotta stay here and keep an eye on 'im, and sadly yer the only one we can spare."

Stain moved to stand in front of a mirror, eyeing his tattered costume over as Ash replied. "Fine by me, I wasn't looking to add another heist to my record before fleeing the country anyway."

The half-human tore at the upper layer of his costume, removing all but the lowest layer and the vest that held his knives. "Shame," Dabi remarked, "I was hoping you'd stick around."

Ash chuckled. "Well, you could always come with."

"If I survive this, my number wont change." He said, if his voice was anything to go by, he would probably be blushing if his face wasn't so scarred. "Gimme a call, and I might just follow."

Rolling his eyes, Stain, grabbed some bandages from Overhaul's belt and set to wrapping them around his arms, careful not to overlap his gloves. Finding something missing from his reflection, he reached for a long, strand of tattered, red cloth and slung it around his neck like a scarf. Then he reached for the mask, the mask of Stendhal, hanging from his belt but stayed his hand.

No. No, he'd had his fill of fools running around in masks. So he turned back to his reflection and
nodded approvingly. Exactly the sort of thing a man named 'Stain' should be wearing. "Toga, Dabi," they turned to him, meeting his gaze expectantly, "are you ready for the grand finale?"

Toga grinned, assuming the shape and face of All Might. "Yes... I am here! Ready to reshape society!"

When Dabi merely nodded, Stain took another, rattling puff of his inhaler. "Then it looks like we've got an opening day to crash." Turning to the door, striding outside, he drew his sword.

See you in the final battle, Guren... little brother.

"Little angel go away,
the devil has my ear today..."
Wake up, Get up, Get out There

AN: The way and feel of the song being worked into this chapter is going to be... different than usual.

The purest form of fanservice for some (Hi Knight), eye-roll material for others.

I'm not apologizing.

-Black

Shoving with all her might, Momo managed to pry herself free of the rubble. "Hey!" She called out, coughing though the dust that had filled the room. "Is everyone okay?"

Shuichi groaned, shoving what was left of a bed off of himself, Eri and Yoichi. "Alive and kicking." Trembling, now hiding his face inside that gas mask of his, Yoichi nodded, giving a thumbs up.

Eri's eyes darted about, her hands clenched in front of her chest. "Where's Recovery Girl?"

Momo glanced about, searching for her. "She was standing right..." She leapt out of bed, shoving an entire dresser off of a pile of rubble. To her simultaneous relief and dismay, Recovery Girl had been beneath it. "Oh no." Her head was bleeding, swollen and bruised black above her temple. "Hey!" Her quirk soon created a smelling salt from her fingertips, waving it around beneath the unconscious teacher's nose. "Wake up!"

Nothing but low, weak groaning from her school's medic.

"Is she okay?" Eri ran to her side, eyes wide and fearful, tears threatening to flow at any second.

Clutching her fist, Momo shoved her own worries as far away as she could. "She will be." And she set to digging recovery girl free of the rubble, Eri soon lending a hand.

By the door, Shuichi's eyes narrowed. "Hey, Yoichi?" His friend wordlessly turned to him, quaking in his shoes. "Do you hear that?"

Slowly, all too eerily slowly, they turned the hall. Stomping, lumbering, panting and growling of some rabid beast was inching ever closer. "Stain..." it breathed with shredded lungs. "Stain... STAIN!"

Shivering, huddling behind the closest cover, Yoichi shrieked as he whispered. "What the hell is that?"

Trembling himself, Shuichi picked up the nearest weapon he could find. "I don't know..." Just a loose section of copper piping.

"What the hell is it!?" Yoichi hissed.

"Still don't know!" Shuichi hissed back as the stomping drew closer.

Finally having recovery girl free, hoisting her onto her shoulder, Momo used her quirk to simultaneously create and put on better clothing. "Boys!"she whispered, snaring their attention. "I need you to get Recovery girl outsi-"
Something threw itself through the wall, bringing more of the building down around their heads. Yoichi shrieked, cowering under his arms as Shuichi and Momo threw themselves over Eri and the collapsed Recovery Girl. The thing that had smashed its way into the room was barely human. Its face was ruined, utterly bent and smashed; his nose was torn off, skin torn away to expose the muscle dwelling beneath as blood poured from its face.

The beast's remaining eye was so bloodshot it had gone completely red, bloody tears rolling down what had once been its cheeks. In the other socket, should anyone have bothered to look, was the shattered remnants of a glass eye. "STAIN!" It bellowed.

Seeing his friends dazed and slow to react, partially buried in rubble again, Yoichi leapt to his feet. "HEYO! GETCHER STAINS! LOTSA STAINS, THIS WAY!"

Without lips to hide them, the monster bared its teeth as it roared, chasing after the already fleeing teenager.

Eyes suddenly agape, Shuichi screamed. "Yoichi, no!"

"GET OUT OF HERE!" Yoichi's shaking legs carried him out of sight, the monster staggering after him with surprising speed.

Swearing under her breath, Momo again shoved her way to freedom. "Shuichi!"

His face jerked to her, then the hall. "Yoichi, he's-!"

"I know." She put a hand on his shoulder. "I'll keep him safe, just get Eri and Recovery Girl out of here, okay?"

Terrified as he was, Shuichi nodded. "I- y-yes, I promise!" He saluted. "I keep my promises!"

She smiled, then raced after the monster and the boy it would likely kill if it caught. "Me too!" It wasn't long before she was out of sight.

Eri grabbed Shuichi's sleeve, looking up at him on the verge of tears. "She can barely run... I saw her legs shaking, she's not better yet!"

Realizing she was right, the lizard boy gulped, then looked to the window. Placing recovery girl on the ground, he tore Momo's mattress from where it lay and threw it out the shattered window.

"Shuichi?" Eri blinked, not sure what was going on.

He just scooped her and Recovery girl into his arms and leapt out the window, Eri screaming all the way down. They landed without falter, right on the mattress, and he placed them both upon it. "I'll be back."

As he spun around, back toward the building, Eri threw herself at him. Her arms clung to his middle, face shoved against his torso. "NO! The last person who said that was Stendhal and he never came back!" Her tiny fingers clung to him in a vice. "You can't! You can't you can't you can't!"

Shakily, he turned back around and hugged her, looking toward the sounds of approaching police sirens. "Eri... that's my- Yoichi is in there, I can't leave him, no matter what." She just clung to him harder. "Please... trust me."

She squeezed harder, as hard as she could, like he might disappear if she let go. "Come back. Just
come back, okay?"

When she released him, he smiled. "I will!" Before bolting back inside, leaving Eri alone with Recovery Girl as the sirens drew closer.

*Please... please be okay. I don't want anyone else to die!*

---

Prophet System, final report: End of scenario impending.

Parameters, converted from original binary: "Calculations: Incomplete

Scenario Thirteen: Initiated

Variants, in descending order of likelihood/Severity: Thirteen F, Thirteen ZZ, Thirteen M, Thirteen E, Thirteen R, Thirteen L, Thirteen X, **Thirteen B**

Parameter One: Plot for the secret weapon is unearthed.

Parameter Two: Errant agents converted to opposing cause.

Parameter Three: the last child assumes opposition's mantle of leadership.

Parameter Four: New Symbol.

Parameter Five: A last decision...

Decision not verified. Parameter calculations incomplete. Likelihood of worst case scenario, Thirteen F, Unknown.

Awaiting further data..."

---

Unrelenting rain pattered against the walls and roof. The last of the storm, before it all cleared up. If only it didn't leave Aizawa's aching head in such an aching state. Groggily, he pulled himself to his feet, having fallen asleep where he'd been sitting on Vanessa's floor. She was sitting at her table, drinking from two large cups, one of water and one of blood.

She didn't say anything, she just gestured to the water at the other end of her table. "Thanks..." Her reply was only a nod, as she kept working at her 'breakfast'. Taking the cup in hand, he walked to the window. "So... is today the day?"

Vanessa nodded. "It is."

Shutting his eyes, breathing tense, he drained the glass of water in one go. "Just like that night..."

Eyes lowered, she winced. " Couldn't be more fitting, could it? Ending on a day, like the night it all began."

He hummed his agreement, walking to the sink for a refill. "Oddly poetic."

Draining her water, Vanessa looked him over. "Are you sure about this?"

He drained his glass again. "I have all I need."

"You know that's not what I meant," and he went for a third cup, "if you kill him, there's no coming
back from that. Your life as you know it is over."

Without pause, he drained it again, then set it in the sink. "Yeah..."

She gave him a sad little smile. "I should've known you'd want it that way... it really would have been a mercy, to kill you back then."

Shrugging, he started for the front door. "Couldn't have it be that easy."

Standing up to follow after him, she put her hands in her pockets. "And if we had, that 'Kiddo' you're so fond of wouldn't have the life he has now."

Despite everything, Aizawa smiled. "There's that." He turned his face skyward and took a deep, last, peaceful breath. "Wouldn't have it any other way."

They walked together in silence, toward the fates what awaited them, and for once they hoped for the same thing.

They hoped to see The Nameless One pay for all he'd done

"It's no use griping about it," said one of Philanthropy's many security guards, "No phones allowed, so hand em over."

Seeing that it was no use, both Bakugo and Kyoka grumbled as they turned in their devices. "Fascists..." She muttered, stepping past the checkpoint at long last.

They were gathered outside the Shroud, under what had to be the most awkward looking canopy ever devised. "Hey," Mina nudged her, trying to be encouraging, "we'll get em back."

"I don't care about my phone, they took my Zune too..." she frowned, staring worriedly after the electronic in question. "Gah, I shoulda just left it at home."

Mina shrugged. "It survived the USJ, it'll survive a news conference."

Kyoka cast her eyes at Izuku, who returned her meaningful glance. "No... it didn't." While Izuku blushed, Bakugo snickered. "I can hear you..." She growled, trying and failing not to blush herself.

Rather than say anything, Bakugo just raised his hands in surrender. "...Wait," he said after a while, "Where's Zappy?"

"Oh," Mina pointed toward an alleyway, "he's just making a call before turning his phone in."

Finding this to be a little odd, Izuku went to see him. "Back in a sec."

He wandered passed the guard, stepping out into the rain again. While the armed and armored security complained, he ignored them, heading toward the alley. With a downpour like this, Kaminari would be lucky not to have his phone fried just from the call alone. As he drew nearer, he thought he heard the blond talking over the din of the rain.

"Yeah..." Kaminari's tone was sedate, peaceful and assured. "Everything's gonna be fine. ...I love you guys, I hope you know that." Then he switched it off.

Rounding the corner, Izuku saw that he'd been on a video, seconds before it flickered away. "Must've been someone important."
Surprised, Kaminari nearly fell over as he spun around to see him. Then he laughed. "Yeah, well... you know how it is, putting things off to the last second."

Izuku shrugged. "Nope. Never really done that."

Rolling his eyes, still smiling, Denki shook his head as he patted Izuku's shoulder. "Anyway, come on. Let's do this news conference thing!"

As they wandered back, Izuku gave a nervous, single and breathy laugh. "You're awfully excited."

"Yeah, just... trying to work myself up for whatever Nighteye's got in store for us, you know? It's scary stuff."

Izuku gulped, nodding as Kaminari turned in his phone. "It'll be okay."

Kaminari laughed again. "Yeah, I know. You overheard me saying that much right?" Endeavor was at the head of the podium right alongside... 'Nameless', standing behind him as they did the final microphone checks. "Hey, Izuku?"

Blinking, he turned and faced him. "Yeah?"

With a smile, Denki playfully punched his arm. "I uh... fuck it, you're my best bud, right next to Lady."

Smiling, Izuku couldn't help but hear the nerves in his friend's voice. "Den... it's all gonna work out. We've got this." He grabbed his shoulder. "Take a deep breath, go snuggle up with Ahsido, I can see her shivering from here." Nodding, breathing deep, he did just that. "Poor guy..." Then it was Izuku's turn to join Endeavor at the podium.

"Last chance to do this in your office," said the cameraman to 'Nameless', sounding hopeful, "we already have the equipment set up there, out of the rain."

Nameless just smiled. "No, I think this will be just fine, can't think of a more fitting place than outside the Shroud itself." He turned to Endeavor, still smiling. "Wouldn't you say?"

The 'hero' nodded. "Indeed I would."

Shoto was at Endeavor's other side, his stone cold demeanor unyielding even when his father started speaking. "Pre-show jitters, Guren?"

With a shrug, Izuku replied as coolly as he could. "First news event."

Endeavor smirked. "The first of many, if you're indeed serious about being the next 'Symbol of Peace'."

Sheepishly, Izuku rubbed the back of his head. "Yeah, ah... if I'd known about the cameras..."

Endeavor held up a silencing hand, shaking his head. "But I approve, I was worried I wouldn't be able to earn my spot as the very thing you wish to become." Confused, the vampire met his eyes only to find that the true Nameless One meant every word. "I look forward to working with you, Guren Fang."

It took considerable effort not to taste bile, speaking what he next spoke. "Likewise." He even managed a small smile, while he was at it.

As the satisfied Endeavor turned back to the crowd, addressing something the camera men were
saying, someone tugged Izuku's sleeve. "Hey," it was Kyoka, "is Den okay? I think... I think just said he loved Mina for the first time? I've never seen her that happy."

Izuku blinked. "Why is that troubling you?"

She crossed her arms. "Come on. I've known him for years, I know when he's nervous."

Gulping, Izuku just said the first thing that came to mind. "Pre-show jitters?" Although his eyes communicated something else entirely different, not quite literally standing in Endeavor's shadow; an honor saved for Shoto, his son.

Understanding, Kyoka nodded. "Okay, I get it. I was scared spitless for my first time on camera too." She offered her awkward, unpracticed smile. "We've got this though, so don't worry."

She went to leave, right as the cameramen started counting down for the beginning of the event, but Izuku grabbed her hand. Startled, blinking, she saw the plea in his eyes as he squeezed her hand. Kaminari wasn't the only one frightened... She stepped closer to him, hand on his arm, just below his elbow, and went to kiss his his cheek, countdown reaching zero.

His face turned at the last second, capturing her lips with his, the broadcast already underway. Endeavor growled, doing his best to ignore them, but she stayed right by Izuku's side. When they parted, her eyes said that she wasn't going anywhere.

His eyes told her what she already knew: exactly how he felt about her. "I love you too..." she whispered, before they both resolved not to speak while the event played out before them.

Stain tapped his fingers against his folded arms, standing on a rooftop near their destination, quietly waiting.

Then his radio sprang to life with a rush of static. "Hey, it's yer girl here." There was something truly disconcerting about hearing that said in All Might's voice... "The Fish and I convinced em, we're in position. Might wanna get yerself and Frankie set up now, we'll be startin the show soon enough, the old pup's computer skills worked like a charm."

With a smirk, he brought the radio to his lips. "That's good work. When the heroes finally find us, keep him alive, long enough for him to tell his story if nothing else."

"Aye aye."

When the transmission ended, he handed the radio to Dabi. "One more thing," he pulled a gun from his belt, a small one, "this has darts in it loaded with the perfected serum. If you encounter your father, just shoot him with this, then the battle is yours."

Accepting the radio and the weapon, his friend nodded. "If too many show up, I might have to start killing them. Not my first choice, but..."

Grimacing, Stain nodded. "Just stay alive, old friend."

"No promises." And Dabi fled from the roof, leaving Stain by himself.

His hand went to one particular pouch on Overhaul's belt, opening it. Inside his fingers delved, procuring the vial, the deciding factor of it all: the perfected Quirk erasure serum. Then his eyes turned to their chosen news building.
At the vibrating of his phone, Stain raised an eyebrow and answered it wordlessly. "When this is over..." A voice he did not recognize. "You will regret every decision you've made up to this point, and there will be no going back." Stain's expression hardened, his other hand clenching into a fist. "Turn back, Stendhal."

Stain sighed. "Nighteye, I presume."

"Correct," the hero said, "and I know how every version of this ends. None of them provide what you seek."

Rolling his eyes, the half-human rubbed at his eyes. "And what do I seek, exactly?"

"Vindication." His eyes widened, jaw dropped at hearing the truth so exactly spoken. "Not just for yourself, your past, but for the system that failed you. You seek to correct the wrongs that were committed against you, against those like you. I'm here to tell you this is not the way."

After a moment, Stain laughed. "I see... and how exactly are you going to convince me not to see this through? I'm afraid it must be done... and nothing must be allowed to stand in my way."

Nighteye's reply was as direct as ever. "By telling you exactly how this ends."

Stain laughed again. "And how's that?"

"Your death... and the deaths of your friends." The smile vanished from Stain's face, replaced with... stunned, cold fear. "You die, drowning in your own lungs and clinging to your heart... like that will somehow change anything." Heart skipping several beats, numbly, he turned in the direction of Philanthropy's HQ. "You die wishing you decided to be anyone else, with what time you had left."

Nighteye's predictions... only the foolish or those brave enough to accept their fate ignored them. He knew in his heart, his bones that this was what would come to pass, should he not heed the warning now. Yet still... "So be it."

His conviction remained, and he crushed his phone before dropping it to the roof.

Drawing in another, bracing breath, he just waited. "I wonder... it's going to be quite the injury, if I die holding my heart. Maybe I lose to Endeavor." He laughed, mostly in bitter acceptance. "All the same, he wont escape this, nor will the masquerade." Turning back toward the city, he saw the large screens broadcasting the Shroud's opening event. "Masquerade... reminds me of something..."

Then the screens switched to show All Might, a news host by his side declaring him back from the dead. "Hello, people of Japan!" She sounded absolutely elated. "We interrupt your scheduled broadcasts to tell you that All Might is awake!"

Laughing, Toga bellowed in All Might's voice. "Yes, I AM HERE! Awake and ready to tell everyone something very important!"

The newscaster giggled, "So we see, but the big question is exactly what that important something is."

Stain smiled. "Ah, I think I've just remembered..." In fact, he could almost hear the music playing, as All Might spoke.

So did Toga. "Why, non other the biggest scoop of them all! The inside story on Philanthropy
itself!

Stain let the last of the air out of lungs, then just about fell to his knees coughing. His entire body wracked, nearly toppling face first to the roof as his lungs ejected what had to be a liter of blood and other fluids.

All Might grinned. **"I'm gonna tell you the true identity of The Nameless One!"**

Hands on his knees, breathing heavily, Stain just started laughing. "Might be a bit cheesy, but I'm not sure I really care."

Standing back up straight, he imagined the chords, the strings building toward the chorus of the song.

Then he started to sing.

"Who am I?  
Am I not unique?"

"Maybe I'm not here,  
at all..."

"Look at the fakers...  
Blinding us with lies,  
The breakers of us all..."

Miles and miles away, one frustrated 'hero' was busy barking at whoever would listen. "Where the hell is that coming from!?" Endeavor demanded.

*(Oh, it's useless...)*

"Uh..." the cameraman ran to his van, checking over the rest of his broadcast equipment. "I don't know, where ever it is it's gotta be some small place, one not affiliated with-

*(What could it mean that we're here?)*

Endeavor growled, "I don't care who they're affiliated with, FIND THEM!"

*(Can we make a difference?)*

In rapid succession, newscrew and heroes alike started running toward Philanthropy's main building. With his eyes wide, what passed for wide in his case, Shoto breathed, "Is that really him? Is All Might back?"

*(If we don't break out of here?)*

"Impossible," Nameless declared, "I'd have been told!"

Without wasting another breath, Endeavor charged through the main building's front doors. Izuku's brow furrowed. "If it's not actually All Might then who-" he and Kyoka turned to each other simultaneously. "Toga!"

Eyes rocketing to the main building, Kyoka looked utterly horrified. "Oh fuck, if that's actually her, there's no way she's just going to drop that bomb and run!"
Kaminari gulped. "She's gonna spill everything there is to spill."

Reaching the front desk, Endeavor tore a handset off the nearest phone. "This is Endeavor! Track down the source of that broadcast NOW! We have no reason to believe that's actually All Might!"

"Wake up, get up, get out there!" Stain spun on his heels, arms splayed wide and face to the sky. "Raise your voice against liars!" Hands to the heavens, fists curled tight, he sang with a wild grin. "Feed your anger like fire!"

From the street below he thought he heard running, looked, and saw a hero charging toward the news building. "This is Starlight Brigadier," she said into a wrist-radio, "about to search the MT news building!"

Stain sighed, shaking his head and still smiling. "Why does nobody want change?" Then leapt off the roof.

Landing beside her, she blinked and he gave a mischievous grin. Sweeping his legs around, he sent her flying from her footing. She raised her hands, glowing blue, and several orbs of light all different colors materialized, swarming around and flying toward the dhampire like bullets. He unsheathed his sword and split them all in two, kneeing her in the gut.

As consciousness left her, Stain caught her before she could hit anything important against the street. Taking her wrist radio, he gently lowered her off to one side, out of harms way. "Just imagine you're out there..." He clasped the radio to his vest, turning up the volume and listening intently. "Swatting lies in the making..."

"Hey!" Stain looked up to see a nearby cop, somewhere between amazed and furious. "What the hell are you doing!?" When Stain grinned, he reached for his shoulder to grab his radio, only for the dhampire to throw a knife at him.

The officer grunted in pain when the blade sliced his shoulder, clattering away. "Can't move fast without breaking..." Fittingly, as he charged forward, he felt his lungs protesting again.

The officer growled, other hand reaching for his gun as he fumbled for his radio. "You little-" He bared his teeth, bringing the handpiece to his mouth. "This is officer-" He blinked in confusion, seeing that the wire to his radio had been severed.

Just in time for Stain to punch him across the mouth.

The officer clattered against the street, gun flying away. As he scrambled for his weapon, Stain stomped on the hilt of his knife, sending it spinning into the air and spiraling blood as it went. Catching the floating fluid with his tongue, Stain snatched the weapon from the air and sheathed it again with a flourish before kneeling on the immobilized officer's collarbone.

As he might to struggle, the officer felt himself passing out. "Wha- ..what are you...?"

Stain just put a shushing finger to his lips. "If you hold on life won't change." As the officer blinked in confusion, Stain gently patted his head, easing him off to sleep before checking that his pulse was steady.

Sighing in relief, Stain tried to stand but fell into another coughing fit. As he stumbled about, trying to keep his footing, more blood, pus and clear liquid poured out of his mouth. He started beating a hand against his chest, trying to force the rest of it out, but it wasn't helping.
"Officer Sagara from car 11-k!" A gun clicked, aimed at the temporarily helpless Stain. "My partner is down! Send backup to-" If only he'd been listening for anyone sneaking up on him, as Dabi elbowed the back of his neck, send the unconscious man to the ground with a splash.

Wordlessly, glancing about for other enemies, Dabi ran to his friend and physically help him up. One hand on his chest as he doubled over, Dabi started slapping Stain's back. When the rest of the blood and ick forced itself free, he sighed in relief. With shaky feet, Stain righted himself giving him an appreciative look along with a thumbs up.

A thumbs up that Dabi returned, and the boys smirked at each other.

Turning their sights to the city, they saw All Might -Toga- going over all the evidence they had, piece by piece in front of documents displayed behind her. It wasn't long before she started talking the vampires and their extermination, bringing up both Izuku and Vanessa and their stories along the way; the best positive and only examples of their kind to show. One rumored to be the next symbol of peace, the other a promising and very active hero.

She left no stone unturned, every last bit of information put on display.

The lobby of Philanthropy's main building had been turned into a makeshift center of operations, where Endeavor and 'Nameless' were busy trying to narrow down where the hell All Might was.

(The fakers, are all sick at heart...)

"Leads, anyone!" Endeavor barked, as the fearsomely armed and armored guards scurried about. Nothing as of yet, every building searched came up with nadda, not that they weren't boosting the signal by covering the live story.

(Their faces hiding their fear...)

While her friends all looked worried, Kyoka just tapped her foot, scrolling through the news on a laptop she'd snagged. So far so peaceful, not one sign of rioting or civilian outrage.

hmm...

(They look down on, all the rest of us.)

Turning her eyes to one side, she saw Endeavor growling out more commands. "Make a list! We'll do this by elimination if we have to!"

(Like they're some special breed...)

Eyes back to the laptop, Kyoka saw that Himiko was reaching the end of her tale, giving center stage to Mooney. As his grisly tale of betrayal, mutilation and horrors was divulged people in the room started exchanging significant glances

(Who's the high lord... Who thinks he's better than us?)

"This..." said one guard, "This is who I've been working for?"

(Ain't it a crime that?)

Another by his side gulped, and Endeavor's ear twitched as he spoke. "I... I'm starting to feel sick..."
"Hey, come on!" Said another, as Endeavor started sweating. "They had their reasons! We're fighting for the greater good here!"

(Who is that high lord... Who'd kill a million of us?)

Another scoffed, and Endeavor's eye twitched. "Yeah, the age old cry of the oppressor." Slowly, he started looking about the room, going ghostly pale.

(And as the bell tolls... Is there no remission for us?)

"Hey," Izuku blinked when Kyoka whispered in his ear, "take a look..." she showed him the news she'd been scrolling through. He turned a nervous questiong eye to her. "Nothing's happening."

Quirking an eyebrow, he blinked again. "...your point?" She leaned in and whispered in his ear, watching the murmuring crowd closely.

When she was done, she leaned away, watching him with nervous eyes, she gulped. "Well?"

Turning his own gaze to the guards, who looked ready to start throwing punches, he gulped too and nodded. "Do it."

Her eyes fluttered, fear relieved in mere moments as she smiled at him. "You mean it?"

"Of course." Turning back to her, he smiled too, giving her a thumbs up. "Still doubt that I trust you?" Gleefully, Kyoka shook her head, then the first punch was thrown, and the room started falling into chaos. "Run!"

While everyone quickly decided what side they were on, Kyoka ran. Thanks to Izuku keeping the fighting off of her, she got up to and and grabbed 'Nameless', dragging him toward the elevator. "Go!" She shouted, shoving him inside and keying the top floor.

The doors closed, and they heard gunfire as 'Nameless' panted against the far wall. "Wh-what do you want with me?" he trembled.

Still facing the doors, she smirked. "It was you, wasn't it?" He froze and she put her hands in her pockets. "You're the one who left all those breadcrumbs, those clues for us to find. Weren't you?" She turned toward him, giving him a sidelong smirk. "I'm also guess that you were the one who called off the hunt for vampires, over a decade ago. That was around the time Endeavor's father died, right?"

He relaxed, breathing easily again and straightening himself up with a smile of his own. "You're a sharp one, Earphone Jack." As she completely turned to face him, her approval couldn't have been more clear. "Exactly what can I help you with?"

"Calling Nighteye's bluff and putting my faith in the common citizen." Pulling a hand from one pocket, she showed him the thumb drive that held all the collected evidence. "Wanna help put the blame on the man who's really in charge?"

He smiled a little brighter. "More than anything."

Once arrived at the top floor, they locked down the elevator by jamming the doors open. Bolting inside the office, Nameless set to work making sure the cameras were running. Kyoka hooked the thumbdrive into the office's lone computer. "Are we rolling?"
He gave a thumbs up, strolling over and sitting in the chair beside Endeavor's desk. "All set."

Sliding over the desk, sitting at the front of it, she was 'standing' a good taller than her ally. "Heya, Musutafu. Earphone Jack here with The Nameless One... or I guess I should say his figurehead, but as far as we know, he doesn't have a name."

He laughed. "Not that I'm willing to disclose, quite yet."

Crossing her arms, she gave the camera her most confident smirk. "Anyway, we're here to make some noise, right along side our symbol of peace. Just in case no one's believing this stuff."

"Wake up, get up, get out there!
There's more to life than their way!
If you live you cannot stay...
Why does nobody want change?"

As Mooney finished telling his side of the story, Toga returned to her place in front of the green screen. "In conclusion, my dear citizens!" She bellowed. "I have one last piece of damning evidence! It's about the Proph-
"Apologies, All Might!" Interrupted the host, "but the CEO of Philanthropy is... confirming your story. In fact he's adding"

Confused, she nodded and let the greenscreen show what was being added to the story. It was the video of All For One, his brother, and the first nameless one.

(Let your voices ring out, yeah!)

It played through every moment it had to show. All across Japan and other parts of the world, people recognized the now dead Villain.

(Take the mask off and be free!)

History buffs and hero fans alike slowly put together that the first Nameless One was none other than the first of the 'Endeavor line'. It wasn't long before that was spreading like wildfire across the internet.

(Find yourself in the debris!)

Then, at the ending quote of The Three Musketeers given, the internet exploded with speculation about All Might's family line.

(If you hold on life wont change!)

The feed flickered away, revealing Kyoka-Girl and Nameless smiling smugly. "As you can see," Kyoka said, happier than Himiko had seen her in a long, long time, "the history of the 'Philanthropists' goes back quite a ways."

Nameless nodded. "Indeed it does. Though it think it would be more apt to call them Musketeers, wouldn't it?"

Kyoka shrugged. "Yeah, maybe... but I like the irony of calling them Philanthropists, considering all the harm they've done."
"I couldn't agree more," he nodded again, "but I seem to remember something you wanted to say to All Might himself?"

When she looked at the camera, Himiko knew her gig was up. "I do, actually." Kyoka knew. "Hey, All Might!" She stood, one hand on her hip, other shoulder forward. "I've done all I can here, the rest is up to you!" She thrust her other hand up, holding it above her head for a moment. "I'm trusting that you know where to stop telling the story, lest you stir up a hornets nest by saying something that comes out too volatile. After all..." Her hand flew down, flashing her peace sign with a grinning wink. "You wouldn't want to embarrass 'yer girl', but I already know I can't stop you." The smile gave then was meaningful, happy and hopeful. "You'll do what you know it right. I know you will."

Then the feed cut out, and Himiko slowly rose to her feet, shaking all over. "Kyoka-girl..." She straightened up, smiling and bereft with joy. "I'M SO PROUD!" Clenching her fist, Toga's chest swelled with her previously proclaimed pride. "She's all grown up now!" Wiping a tear from her eye, Himiko just grinned wider. "What a hero she's going to make, wouldn't you say!?"

Laughing, the newscaster nodded. "Looking forward to that day!"

"Wake up, get up, get out there!
Raise your voice against liars!
Feed your anger like fire!
Why does nobody want change?"

Out on the streets, Stain was beside himself with glee, laughing up a storm. "I knew they'd come around!" Clapping his hands and cheering.

Dabi smirked. "Now all we've gotta do is wait." He crossed his arms listening closely for Toga's final shpeel about the Prophet system, it's true purpose and the rebellion that would doubtlessly follow.

Only... things wouldn't be going that way. "Well..." All Might saluted the camera. "I've said all I can say!" Stain's smile vanished. "I'm not so pigheaded a teacher that I don't know when to listen to my own student!"

Stain took a step toward the screen he and Dabi were watching. "No..." he growled. "No no no!"

All Might howled with laughter. "What can I say? I think the corruption and misdeeds are laid out plainly enough... Now, if you don't mind," she rocketed to her feet,"I HAVE AN ENDEAVOR OF MY OWN TO SEE TO!" With a wink , she added. "Or to put behind bars, I should say! Because as long as I AM HERE no such injustice shall go unpunished!"

Without another word, she rocketed into the air, through the roof, and took off toward Philanthropy. "You heard it here, folks!" Said the newscaster, "Straight from MT News!"

Soon joining them was Mooney, happy as a clam. "Finally... after all these years it's done!" He cheered as Stain trembled with rage, fists clenched so hard his nails dug into his palms. "I'm free! Those bastards will get what they have coming and no more innocent people will be hurt!"

Looking incredibly displeased, Dabi brought a finger to his lips. "What?" Mooney blinked. "What's wrong?"
Dabi pointed to the third individual in their party, and they turned to Stain, slowly, watching and waiting. Entire minutes passed, soon an entire quarter of an hour had passed. "I don't hear it." His palms were bleeding, dripping blood onto the pavement. "No one is rising up... no one is heeding the call..." His body started shaking, eyes turned back to the screen. "Where's the call to arms? Where's the demand for Endeavor's dethroning?"

Turning toward the city, Dabi strained his ears. "No... there's fighting. Definitely quirks involved. Sounds like the heroes are sorting who's with who."

Stain's face fell, body slumping slightly forward and he brought a palm to his face. Shoulders shaking, silently at first, he started laughing. "Of course... it's just the heroes. Some justly minded villains too, I'm sure." His head fell back, facing the sky. "Only those with the will to act in the first place would be so willing!" He screamed, palm still resting on his face. "Nothing we've said has exposed a direct threat to the people, therefore the average person sees no need to act!"

His laughter grew louder, hands thrown out to his sides as Dabi looked at him in worry. "Chizome?" Still laughing, his childhood friend turned to face him. "Are you okay?"

Relaxing, Stain's smile calmed, and he put a hand on Dabi's shoulder. "Of course... I'm just... I wish it hadn't come to this. There really is no going back, once it's done."

Nodding, Dabi's smile came back too. "Plan B, then?"

Hand removed from Dabi's shoulder, Stain turned toward Philanthropy's headquarters. "Plan B... and all the upheaval therewith it." Decisively, he turned to the third in their company. "Mooney!"

The beast blinked. "Yes?"

"Can you carry us, my friend?" Stain's voice went soft, almost imperceptibly quiet. "To our crusade's final destination... no doubt that's where Toga's heading. She has been running low on time as All Might by now. I'd hate to see her perish."

With a nod, Mooney lowered himself to ground and let the others climb onto his back. "Ready?"

Stain looked to Dabi, who nodded, then turned back. "Once more into the breach, dear friends?"

Dabi chuckled. "Once more, old pal."

Mooney grinned. "Let's go kill Endeavor!" Then the trio flew into the sky, toward their journey's end.

"Just imagine you're out there!
Swatting lies in the makin'!
Can't move fast without breakin'!
If you hold on life won't change!"
Neither of them were fans of public transportation at the best of times. Right now, they hated just about every form of it. Cabs had all stopped, busses about the same and the trains were, frustratingly, experiencing delays. Mere moments after the broadcast had started, Aizawa and Vanessa had been transfixed to where they stood. Staring in awe and listening with rapt attention, they watched All Might and Mooney dismantle Philanthropy.

One piece of evidence after another, bit by bit the empire was exposed for the dirty thing it truly was. Even horrors the two of them hadn't dared to imagine were brought into light. Moonfish, mainly. No matter the reasoning given there was no excusing that one.

Nor what had been done to the Vampires.

"Aizawa?" he blinked, turned to her, then saw she was watching the crowd.

The crowd of people now looking at him with something resembling murderous intent.

"I think it might be wise to forgo stealth, just this once."

Nodding, he reached out and grasped her hand. "Lets go."

She leapt into the air, the crowd began clamoring, demanding that he turn himself in. It wasn't long before voices began to disagree, heroes and civilians alike, and then a super powered brawl broke out. As the two of them leapt, climbed and jumped over the city toward Philanthropy's HQ.

As they hurried along, in the streets below, they didn't see terribly many fights like the one they'd left behind. Just a few skirmishes between heroes, heroes who couldn't agree which side was the right one to be on anymore.

"Looks like a civil war down there." Vanessa dryly remarked, carrying them both as fast as she could.

She wasn't going nearly fast enough, not in either of their opinions. "Nothing the city wont survive."

She shook her head. "Not the point. It looks like we're gonna be alone once we get there." Turning over her shoulder, she added one thing more. "Do you think the two of us can take on Endeavor?"

Not knowing the answer to that, he said nothing, holding on as tight as he could.

"Tch..." she scoffed, steeling herself for the battle ahead of them. "Wonderful... nice knowing you, Aizawa."

He gulped. "Let's get there first, then see how dead we are..."

Slow, dragging footsteps slammed on the floor like stones down the side of a mountain. Momo knew she was getting closer to them, and with every step closing the remaining distance she felt her body growing heavier. This was crazy, going into battle mere moments after waking up from a days long coma? What the hell was she trying to prove?
Nothing. She wasn't trying to prove anything. There were lives to save from what or who ever that... thing was. When she heard its breathing around the next corner, she lowered herself and crept along quietly. From the sound of it, that thing was moving slower now. Much slower.

*Is it searching?* Eyes narrowing, she listened closer. *Did Yoichi lose... him?*

"STAIN!"

Perfect. That meant, if she had to fight, it was only her skin to worry about. However, she wasn't about to bet that Yoichi had managed to slip away just yet.

"Yoichi?" she breathed, hoping the faceless one wouldn't hear her. "Where are you?"

She crept around the corner, finding an area that was reduced almost entirely to rubble. Not one wall over three feet high left standing, any that remained were little more than jagged slabs with bits of wiring and metal protruding from them. Towering above them all, turning this way and that, was the cyclops.

*Clearly searching for him...* Momo felt herself relax a little, so she went forward, hoping it had already gone passed him.

A prayer that was mercifully answered. "Yoichi!" She smiled, and his head jerked toward her. She motioned for him to move. "Come on!"

Vigorously, he shook his head, not daring to say a word with that monster so close to him.

Glancing up, she saw it was wandering further away, but not nearly fast enough for comfort. Deciding to risk it, she crept over to him. "It's okay, the others are safe." Yoichi seemed to perk up a little hearing that. "Just leave the rest to me, okay?"

Looking her up and down, Yoichi wasn't so convinced. "Your legs are shaking."

Momo winced. "I can handle this."

He paused for a moment, deliberating something in his head for a few seconds. When he was done, he chanced a look toward the cyclops. "Can you make a gas mask?"

Blinking, Momo nodded. "I can." One sprouted from her face, then she took the straps and maneuvered them into position. "Why?"

Yoichi held up a hand, something like mist swirling from it. "My quirk," he explained, "it's ah... well, it can either be 'sleep' or 'Mustard' gas." Momo decided to make herself some goggles as well. "I'm gonna flood this place with sleep gas, then I'm gonna run. Okay?"

Momo gave a thumbs up. "Don't look back."

Doing as she instructed, Yoichi filled the room with sleep gas. The monster turned around slowly, hissing out another utterance of that word, "*Stain...*" And Yoichi started running.

Leaping to her feet, a quarterstaff pulled from her knee, Momo struck the creature across its face. Bloody chunks of flesh and teeth flew and spattered the ground, but it didn't seem to care. It just swatted her aside and yelled that same word again, lumbering after Yoichi.

Gathering herself up, Momo felt a little dizzy as she started after him. So much so, in fact, that she
fell to the ground again. "Arrrrrgh!" She growled at herself, forcing her body to move.

No, no! She wasn't going to let that thing hurt anyone!

"GET OFF ME!"

When Yoichi screamed, she leapt into the air, lunging forward as far as she could with each step.

Its hands were on the kid's throat, squeezing hard. Popping noises came from Yoichi's neck, and his hands flung forward. A yellow-ish mist sprayed into the monster's face and it shrieked, throwing the teenager aside. As Yoichi slammed into a nearby wall, falling limp, the beast started clawing at its face.

She closed the distance in less than a second, striking the beast her staff so hard it snapped. In retaliation, it lashed out with a fist and slammed her spine into a wall. Seeing the world spin, she let her legs drop to avoid being punched again, and the wall behind where her head had been was smashed like stale cardboard. Thinking quickly, she activated her quirk, and two substances coated her palms. Slamming her palms together in front of her opponent's face produced a series of sparks and flashes, noxious fumes flooding into his eyes and mouth.

Gagging, what had once been a man staggered back, arms thrashing every which way. Shaking its head, snarling, it lunged back at her, fists swinging wildly. She threw herself, weaving around the strike and spinning on her toes. Quirk at the ready, two sets of brass knuckles crafted themselves around her fingers and she felt the thing's jaw crack when she struck back.

Elbow swinging toward her head, she ducked, landing a series of punches in the thing's ribs. Each hit would have been enough to render most men unconscious, but this thing wasn't so weak yet. Bones snapped under her assault, blood spurting from its mouth, and it recoiled. For a moment they just watched each other, Momo refusing to back down with Yoichi gasping for air behind her.

Footsteps were rapidly approaching. "Yoichi!" Shuichi had come back, and for once Momo was grateful that someone hadn't listened to her. "Are you okay?"

"Get him outside!" Momo hollered, and the lizard boy didn't hesitate to listen.

The beast roared, Shuichi scooped his friend into his arms, and Momo met her enemy's charge head on. There was no way on earth that anything was going to passed her, not while she had them to protect. A fist flew passed her face, her own colliding with the monster's skull and rattling it. The beast only staggered back a step before retaliating. Clawing for her abdomen, she tumbled against the wall.

Her world shook, refusing to center as she tried not to fall prone. Her senses returned enough to see her enemy flailing wildly at her. Arm brought above her head, a shield sprang from her skin and the thing battered its limb against it. The first strike dented it, the second shattered it and sent her sprawling across the floor. Tucking her shoulder in, she rolled with the fall and landed on her knees.

When she spun around, she already had another plan. A series of thin, metal strands sprouted from her fingers and she aimed them at her assailant. From her other hand, she fountained a clear fluid that reacted with the strands, producing something like that sleep gas Yoichi had created. The cloud of fumes went right into his face and finally, finally, he started slowing down.

Staggering steps, slipping on the littered floor and falling against a wall. His head caught the wall at an awkward angle, his neck and cheek flush against it as he dragged downward. Blood smeared
against the surface as he came to an uncomfortable rest on the floor, still awkwardly propped up. "Whu..." it wheezed. "Where eh I?"

Standing shakily, Momo realized he hadn't known mangled his face was, as he tried to make sounds using lips he no longer had. "You're in the hospital."

His remaining eye blinked. "Can't see... can't... 'eel"

Approaching slowly, she put a hand on his shoulder. "It's okay. You're okay."

He scoffed, clearly not believing her. "I... dying..."

She winced. "Do you have a name?"

He laughed a throaty, gargling laugh. "Naw... hero killer... 'uscular..."

After uttering those last words his chest deflated, the stopped moving. Her hand moved to his neck, checking for a pulse but found naught but already cooling skin. "I hope this was what you wanted." she withdrew her hand, slow to turn around and leave. "Otherwise this senselessness served no purpose at all, not that it would be much worse that way..."

"Heat lighting flash, but don't blink... Misleading
Tranquility ruse,
You're gonna happen again
That's what I think

Follow the evidence,
Look it dead in the eye,
You are darkness
Trying to lull us in, before the havoc begins,
Into a dubious state of serenity
Acting all surprised when you're caught in the lie

It's not unlike you"

Endeavor watched as all his men decided they were going to kill each other. Those student hero brats were hunkered down against the far wall, near the entrance. Well, all except that 'Feral Hero' brat and the earlobe woman. The vampire was busy trying to stop every side from killing each other, earning no shortage bullet wounds, slashes and burns for his trouble.

While the vampire weakened, slowing down with every injury, Endeavor's patience waned. He strode toward the stairs, yanking a belt of grenades off a dead guard and halfway up the first flight. When he turned around, pins collectively pulled free he saw the battle had ended.

His side had lost, and all he could do was sigh. "Really?" Even as they pointed weapons at him, he just lazily held his finger on the 'dead man switch' of the explosives. "This is how you all choose to go down? Turning your weapons on me?" He shook his head, gazing at them all disappointedly.

Despite some of the weapons being trained on him, Guren stepped forward. "Lets not do anything crazy..." he moved his hands in a calming motion, urging Endeavor to reconsider his obvious course of action. "Just... stop the explosives and come along quietly."
For a moment, he actually looked like he thought about it. That contemplative look he gave as he blinked really made it seem like he might.

Then he started laughing. "No." He threw the explosives right into the center of the room and ducked behind the nearest cover.

Spinning on his heels, Guren grabbed and then threw the closest people to him as hard as he could. "SHOTO!"

At his word, the heterochrome put up the largest, thickest barrier of ice he'd ever made. Izuku tried to leap forward, throwing more people outside, but it was too late. The grenades exploded, shaking the entire building right to the top and the vampire was sent flying outside.

Of course, Shoto's ice wall wasn't enough to protect everyone. Shards of ice flew every which way, shrapnel and stray bits of metal as well. A large hunk of metal, spinning like a thrown hatchet, impaled Uraraka's shoulder, and she fell outside, through what remained of the glass windows, screaming. Endeavor stepped out from behind his cover, feeling the building teetering under its own weight now, and smiled. He saw movement, among the bodies, meaning some had survived.

That just wouldn't do, so he took a deep breath, strode to the center of the room and and unleashed his quirk.

Toga was almost there, right on top of them all when she heard the explosion. As she flew, she saw a body go flying outside, crashing through a van full of news equipment and then through the wall of another building. When she landed on a nearby rooftop, she saw the fire erupt, Kyoka's friends barely taking shelter behind that ice guy in time. They looked remarkably unscathed, considering what they'd just narrowly survived.

Gritting her teeth, she was about to leap down and snap Endeavor's neck, ending this once and for all, when she saw it. The skyscraper was leaning. No, it wasn't just leaning to one side it was toppling! "Oh you gotta be fuckin kidding..."

For a moment, she hesitated, didn't know what she should do and faltered at leaping into battle or leaping in to stop the building. Then she heard civilians screaming and stopped being so indecisive. Swearing under her breath, she flew to the opposite side of the sky scraper, landing in the street. Her options were limited. If she jumped up to try and push it all she'd do was punch a hole through it. Try and grab the base and hold it up and she'd be practically useless. From that angle, even with All Might's strength, it would fall just as quickly.

Standing in the middle of the street, she resolved to do the one thing she could. Bringing her arms back as far as they could go, she clapped her hands together as hard as she could. The thunderous sound produced a shockwave that shattered glass in her immediate vicinity and sent hurricane level winds against the sky scraper. To her relief, it stopped mid fall before continuing its was way back down, but much slower this time.

Of course, that was the exact moment she felt her time as All Might drawing to a close. "Fuck fuck FUCK!" She brought her arms back and repeated the process.

The building stopped, then kept falling and her legs began changing back.

_Gotta time this just right..._

Even with her quaking knees, Toga refused to flee. She still had enough juice to leap clear and far away, but she didn't. She wasn't about to be like the bastards she was here to stop at any cost. So
she put all her remaining power into her arms, drew them back, waited a few precious seconds then released a battlecry as she slammed her hands together as hard as she could.

Wind blew, the building stopped, then it fell.

It was falling entirely too fast for comfort.

"No no no, not now!" She still had her own strength left, damn it! Kicking as hard as she could against the ground, she flew off to one side -any side- and tried to evade the building's fall.

It smashed into the roofs of the nearby structures, then slid down and through their sides, kicking up no small amount of wind. Toga was sent flying through a car by the initial blast of wind, then the shock wave of the building hitting the street knocked her flat once again. Cursing, spitting out blood, she got back onto her protesting legs and started staggering toward the fallen tower.

Limping her way forward, she started yelling. "IS ANYONE OUT THERE!?" no reply. "WHO NEEDS HELP!"

Then she heard people screaming. Well, groaning as loud as they could. She started dragging who she could free of the rubble, ordering others to call for help with phones or start applying triage if they knew how. No one bothered to ask who she was, so long as she was there to help.

"Hey!" Someone yelled. "There's someone inside that building!"

Toga looked up, squinting, trying to see who they were talking about. She had to run -limp- over to where she saw movement, before she recognized the survivor. "Kyoka!" She shrieked, running -limping- faster to reach her.

The Kyoka in question waved. "Himiko!" Surprisingly unscathed, for having just been inside a dropped building. Just a few bruises, nicks and scratches. Aside from a cut on her scalp, nothing looked serious at all. "He needs help!"

It took Toga a few moments to recalibrate her brain. "What!?"

Climbing up the rubble, she arrived to find Kyoka trying to shove a piece of debris off of an incredibly battered man in a suit. He was an older fellow, bleeding from more places than not and beneath that suit she could tell he was frail as hell. If they didn't find him help now, he wasn't going to last much longer.

With a pained grunt, Toga grabbed under the hunk of rubble and hauled with all her might. "Pull!" She tried to yell. "Pull him out now!"

Doing as Toga ordered Kyoka dragged the as of yet un-named man free and hoisted him onto her shoulder. "Okay, let's-" The building groaned, creaking under its own weight. "Oh no..."

Without thinking, Toga dropped the rubble and pushed her friend as hard as she could. "MOVE!" As Kyoka tumbled down the slope of wreckage, she thought she saw the suited man move his hand, and a sort of... shell encased her body. Kyoka would reach the bottom without a scratch, but Toga lost her balance and fell further in to the wreckage.

"NO!" Kyoka shrieked throwing herself back onto her feet, once she'd reached the bottom and found her footing again. "HIMI-

The building groaned again, then the groaning turned into wailing. With a heart wrenching series of crashes, it collapsed in on itself and whatever Toga did or tried to do next went unseen. Dust was
kicked into the air, the city shook, and Kyoka screamed.

Only there was no reply.

Crying, Kyoka screamed louder and fell to her knees.

She didn't move until she felt a hand on hers, gripping weakly. When she turned, she saw Nameless looking at consolingly with his one good eye. "Idiot..." she sniffed, moving to scoop him up. "Worry about yourself..."

Too weak to speak, he merely smiled as he fought to stay awake.

Toward the nearest group of people she went, what luck that a few ambulances had arrived on scene. From the sound of things, more were on the way. "Thank you..." she murmured, "for protecting me." Weakly, he nodded and she passed him off the EMTs, turning back toward the wreckage.

Clenching her fists, Kyoka did the math in her head. If she went in alone, she'd just be running into another potential collapse with no way out and no one who knew where she was. There would be almost no chance of survival if anything went wrong, and something likely would.

On top of it all, she knew. She knew that if she did run back inside, it would spit in the face of Toga's choice to save her life. Her... sacrifice would be for nothing. Drawing in as bracing a breath as she could, Kyoka resolved to run back toward Endeavor likely was.

_Himiko..._

Endeavor, that bastard had a lot to answer for.

The three of them crashed onto a nearby rooftop, one with footprints already embedded therein. The sight they arrived to was semi-apocalyptic. Philanthropy's main building had fallen like a tree, crushing a great deal of buildings in its path. People swarmed around the ruins, both trying to escape and help those in need.

Their eyes were more concerned with their immediate area...

At the base of the building, half dead from the looks of things, were some of Stain's former classmates. Uraraka was badly hurt, bleeding out from her shoulder and barely moving. Shoto looked stunned, shocked but otherwise alright. The psychopath -Bakugo- was dazed, bleeding from his scalp above his right ear and had smoke coming off of his back. Ashido was covered in scratches, none of them serious, all of them bleeding. Kaminari was the only one who looked unharmed.

To make matters worse, Endeavor was stepping from the ruins, intact as ever.

Stain immediately drew his sword. "Lets end him."

"Wait." Dabi thrust his arm in front of Stain, pointing toward the shroud with the other. "Look..."

The entire lower level of the structure was on fire. Burning from the ground up, thick plumes of smoke beginning to drift into the sky. It was only a matter of time, before it came crashing down.

"If you're going to go through with plan B..." Dabi spoke in a dark tone, eyes turned toward his father, "you have to do it now."
Stain hesitated, looking between the Shroud and Endeavor. "I..." His hands wrung at the hilt of his sword. "I can't just-

Dabi reached out and squeezed his shoulder. "You can." Stain stared into his eyes, clearly worried. "We'll keep Endeavor busy." At his declaration, Mooney nodded. "Just do what it takes to end my family's damned regime."

"On it!" Mooney leapt down first, hoping to take Endeavor's head off before a fight could really begin.

Stain dropped his sword, pulling Dabi into a hug. "I'll see you when this ends, Toya. We're gonna make it through this."

Smiling, Dabi returned the embrace. "Meet you there, Chizome." With that, and great reluctance, Stain let him go, grabbed his sword and started leaping toward his objective.

Then, taking the pistol from his belt and priming it, Dabi jumped to the street below.

Kaminari felt like his entire body had been turned into jelly. Extremely pained, heavy, slow-moving jelly. With a groan, he managed to roll himself over. They were outside, in the rain, with no help in sight, and Endeavor was probably walking out of the now toppled skyscraper. Truly, he could think of few scenarios more fucked than this one.

To make matters somehow worse, he heard a certain friend of his whimpering in pain "Ochako!" the collected future heroes ran to her side.

Mina knelt by her side. "We're here, we've got you!" their hands clasped around each other.

Uraraka nodded, tears streaming from her eyes as Bakugo's hands started pulling the shrapnel free.

"No no no!" Kaminari shrieked, she'll bleed to death if you-!

The gravity girl held up a silencing hand, Kaminari watched for Endeavor, closely, hoping he wasn't intent on killing them too. "D-do it." Uraraka said.

As Kaminari tried to see through the smoke Shoto spun around. "This is no time for you to be so daring."

Meeting his eyes, she pointed right at Shoto. "If... if he removes it, will you cauterize it?"

Bakugo's jaw dropped. "Are you crazy!"

Smiling reassuringly, Uraraka looked right into his eyes. "Nope... just don't wanna die. Not today."

Her eyes fluttered, struggling to stay open as she sat up. "Fuck!" She swore, wincing in pain. "Please, Todoroki, I'm begging you... help me."

His shoulders slumped, fists clenched. "...okay." He lurched to her side, gulping back his nerves, going quite pale.

Kamiari stepped between them and the door. "Okay, better hurry! I can hear the bastard coming outside!"

The remaining heroes, exchanged some weary glances, found they had no other ideas, and reluctantly made their decision.
There was a pair of flame jets, shooting toward the guards Izuku had saved, Then screams that died as quickly as they'd started. "Oh no..." Mina breathed.

"Todoroki?" Hearing Uraraka croak his name, he knelt beside her, taking her hand. "I'm gonna make it, right?"

He nodded. "Of course you are." His eyes met those of Bakugo, and the warhead yanked the shrapnel free.

Uraraka bit back a scream as blood fountained out of her wound. Todoroki rushed his hand forward, shutting his eyes tight. He felt his quirk activate, then Uraraka actually screamed and the smell of burning flesh hit his nose. 

I'm sorry!" He started blubbering, squeezing her hand as tears streamed from his eyes. "I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry!

A hand touched his cheek, his eyes bolted open and he saw Uraraka looking at him with a weak smile. "m-..." she breathed, eyes fluttering shut. "my... hero..."

Her hand dropped, Shoto caught it, his heart hammering in his chest. "Ochako!" He wasn't there in the thick of battle, he was back on the floor of his childhood home looking at smoke pouring off the wounds of someone he loved; looking at the smoldering, ruined flesh that was Toya's body.

N-no... I- I didn't-

Smoke billowed up, steam from burned fat and blood thickened the air.

This wasn't supposed to-

A pungent smell of seared flesh, almost like rotten pork, filled his nose and made him want to be sick.

I'm sorry!

Then he was in the kitchen, behind his mom, watching as she spun around, kettle in hand.

No, no wait! Not again!

He slapped a hand across Shoto's face, as hard as he could. "GET IT TOGETHER, ICY HOT!"

Stunned, nearly falling flat, Shoto tasted blood on his lip. The sounds stomping footsteps overwhelmed his ears.

"Fuck..." Bakugo spun around his heels, standing between Shoto and the unseen Endeavor, soon joined by Mina. "You picked one helluva time to go ptsd."

Shoto didn't hear him, he was just staring blankly at Uraraka, apologizing under his breath over and over.

As fate would have it, a flash of light came from inside the building. Leaping to, Kaminari tackled Mina, sending them both flat as could be. Bakugo was not so yielding. He cupped his hands together, aiming his palms at the building and unleashed as big an explosion as he dared with the others so close. His attempt to deflect, disperse the flame was only mostly successful.

Flame burst in almost every direction, no small amount of it spearing right into the Shroud's lower
level. Several small explosions sounded off from inside the Shroud, doubtlessly igniting something important and volatile. Thankfully, he'd deflected most of it away from Shoto and the others, shielding them from further harm.

Unfortunately, his palms and chest were not so lucky. "F**K!" He screamed, nearly falling to his knees. He managed keep himself standing, but unable to stop Endeavor from kicking him in the ribs sending him sprawling to the ground.

"Pitiful..." the 'hero' rolled his eyes. "This is the best the next generation has to offer?"

Rolling to his feet, the only one left standing for the moment, Kaminari gulped. "No, but you're stuck fighting us for now." He flexed his wrists, dreading the fact that it was still raining cats and dogs. An electricity quirk in the rain that he had almost no way to aim. "You know... this didn't have to go this way."

Having heard someone land behind them, Mina chanced a look over her shoulder. Concealed by shadow though they were, the silhouette looked vaguely familiar... Furthermore, out of the corner of her eye, she saw Stendhal, leaping toward the Shroud.

What the hell is he...? Why isn't he helping us?

Shakily, she climbed to her feet, eyes everywhere. Flitting between Kami, the wounded Bakugo, Uraraka, Shoto. Where was Izuku? Where was Kyoka? Mild panic set in as she realized that most of her friends were either missing or too hurt to defend themselves. Although, rather than running, screaming or doing anything so instinctive, she chose to bear with it and stand where she was, as still as she could.

Paying this no mind, Endeavor ruefully shook his head. "Once the secret was out, there was no other way it could end." He cast a glance to his son, watching as he kept muttering, whimpering and apologizing to the unconscious Uraraka. "Pity he has to die too. I had such high hopes for him but..." he clicked his tongue, shrugging. "He's been nothing but a relentless disappointment. Not that it matters now."

Looking at Endeavor's eyes, it was at that exact moment that Kaminari realized where he was. This man had, in swift decision, destroyed his company's headquarters and killed easily over a dozen of his own employees and hadn't cared that he might killed his own son doing so. Right now, Kaminari was standing in the open, with an extreme environmental disadvantage, against a man who had nothing left to lose and just wanted to see how many people he could take down with him before it all ended. Any fight that could -and would- ensue was going to be vicious, bloody and utterly, inhumanly merciless.

You know... I think I miss All For One. Scary as that was, I suspect a higher body count from this guy. All For one had feelings. But Endeavor?

Laughing nervously, he stepped a little closer to Mina, placing himself in front of her. "So..." he gulped, "no chance we can... just talk?"

Slowly, too slowly, Endeavor turned to face him with a wicked, sadistic grin. "No."

His fist flew faster than Kaminari or anyone could reasonably expect from a man his size, sending him flying right into Mina. Something crashed to the street in front of them, over them, and he forgot to breathe when he recognized it. "You..." Mooney hissed at Endeavor.

Rolling to one side, slippery as the street was, Kaminari managed to get back to his feet. "The
beginning is the end and..." Endeavor said, and Mooney started twitching. Violently. His head was jerking, shaking hard, jaw spasming.

Gulping, Kaminari readied his launcher, preparing to fire it at Endeavor. He just hoped the rain wouldn't complicate his 'lightning rod' trick, that his quirk would still seek the projectile instead of arcing aimlessly through the rain.

"What does it do Mooney?" Endeavor grinned.

Twitching of Mooney's jaw and neck, his arms now, was joined with the snapping of bones. Muscles constricting so tight the creature was breaking its own skeleton. "Keeps..." he hissed, voice straining as hard as his body, "coming... round again!"

Not liking where this was headed, Kaminari decided to make his move now. He sprang forward, fired the projectile right at Endeavor's shoulder and prepared to let him have taste of lightning! He fired, felt the energy crackling between his fingertips, and leapt forward.

For a man so large, he moved with speed and grace unparalleled by most. A thing of envy to any aspiring acrobat or athlete.

The projectile missed, then Kaminari's hand and quirk missed. The only reason he wasn't immediately turned to bacon was because Endeavor was too busy dodging gunfire to burn him. Instead, he kicked him savagely aside, unleashing a jet of flame at the yet unseen opponent, forcing Mina to fall flat again. The newcomer screamed, clutching his burning arm and dropping the gun, its pieces clattering away.

As Kaminari tried to stand, Endeavor turned back to Mooney. "The beginning is the end, and...!"

Something clicked in Mooney's head, his eyes went dull and body still. "KEEPS COMING ROUND AGAIN!"

Eyes hungry like a predator, Mooney started stalking toward Kaminari on all fours. "Oh..." Kaminari gulped. "Okay..." His hand quickly went to reload his launcher and Mooney roared.

Last time he'd fought this man-thing, he'd had the help of quite a few other people. Some of them were here now, but they were all down for the count or near enough to it. It was just him and Mina, and she was having trouble standing. How much blood had she lost?

Mooney pounced, he threw himself as far as he could to the side, not caring about the landing. If that creature grabbed him, he was done, game over.

His body clattered against the street, Mooney landed gracefully on all fours. Kaminari aimed the launched right for his eye and fired. When the projectile lanced into the yielding orb, Mooney screamed and he flinched. Never had he thought that he might regret such a well aimed shot... No matter, he flung his hand forward and let Mooney have it.

Enough electricity to fuel six city blocks went from his hand right into Mooney's head. While the creature spasmed and flailed, he did not fall. "Go to sleep go to sleep go to sleep go to sleep go to sleep go to sleep go to sleep!" Kaminari started desperately chanting, sending arc after arc into Mooney's skull.

While Mina shoved herself to her feet with a spinning head, Endeavor strode toward the one who'd shot at him. Following the smoke and steam, he soon drew near but the newcomer had one last surprise up his sleeve: a quirk that allowed him to sprout jets of blue flame from his body.
To no one's surprise, Endeavor simply walked through the flame and grabbed the boy by his throat. "Toya." Said he, tone reeking of impatience.

Behind him, Shoto's ear twitched and he slowly turned around, in time for Dabi to say, "father..." choking on every syllable.

The heterochrome climbed onto his feet, his father spoke. "You know, this is..." Looking into Toya's eyes, those fearful, hateful orbs of his, Endeavor sighed. "Nevermind." With his hand on his throat, Endeavor's palm sent forth burst after burst of flame into Dabi-Toya's throat and skull, until all that remained was a charred, featureless hunk of flesh and bone where his head used to be.

Shoto felt a scream lancing through his heart, but didn't so much as squeak. He just reached out, jaw slack, glassy eyes and felt his entire being shiver with cold grief.

Endeavor just sighed. "I hate awkward silences." Then tossed his son's body aside.

Mina's jaw dropped, and she recoiled in horror. "What!?" For a moment, finally finding her balance, she didn't know what she should do.

A murderer and a mindless beast, neither bearing concience nor any care for those they were now - clearly- trying to kill. Yet she was still hesitating. If she held nothing back-

A scream split the air, utterly disrupting her thoughts and sending terrible shivers through her skin. Her head snapped to see the source of it: Shoto, quivering with grief, rage, regret, probably dozens of other feelings he couldn't even name. All the same he threw himself at his father, his right arm creating an avalanche of jagged ice, and it was flying right at his father.

Endeavor rolled his eyes and raised one hand, countering with an onslaught of flame. Ice flew from one, fire the other, water and steam was all that reached the middle.

Then Mina saw what Kaminari had been dealing with.

In the time Endeavor had decided to ignore him, the blond had been frantically trying to subdue the hungry rage monster Mooney had become. Electricity arced from his hands and fingers toward the projectile impaled in Mooney's eye, and through the water that fell around them. Sparks here and there found their way back to Kaminari's body, making keeping this up more and more difficult.

"Come on, Mooney..." he begged, whispering mostly to himself at this point. There was no way the monster could even hear him any more. "I don't wanna hurt you, but I can't let you hurt anyone else." His other hand went and reloaded the launcher on his right arm.

Then the launcher in Mooney's eye popped free. His seizing muscles had finally shaken it enough to just slide from the wound, and Kaminari's quirk went everywhere at once.

"Shit!" Feeling the jolt hit him, he was staggered back raising his left arm to fire the second launcher at Mooney, but the beast wasn't having it.

Teethe lanced forward, shattering the launcher and slicing Kaminari's arm and head, tearing free bloody strands of skin and flesh. Kaminari yelped, screamed really, his left side wrenched back, and he raised his right hand again to fire his only remaining launcher.

As luck would have it, he got another direct hit. "Sleep sleep sleep!" He begged, hissing in pain as his hand reached forward and continued the electrical assault.

Only it wasn't enough.
Mooney, very slowly, very shakily raised a limb and took a step toward him. "No, bad!" Kaminari's eyes widened, other hand brought up to amp up the number of volts being sent into his enemy's body. He winced, feeling the his quirk jolting him through his own blood, arcing on his skin through the red fluid to the water. "Don't eat the hero, the hero wants to help yo-" he winced, staggering a bit as his head began to throb.

Sensing weakness, Mooney's body tensed, preparing to pounce again.

"Mooney!" Kaminari's face twitched with pain and fear. "You're trying to be one of the good ones, remember? I'm not your enemy!"

The words never reached him. The projectile fell free once again, and he closed the distance between them. His hand reached forth, clawing the launcher off of Kaminari's arm and damn near taking the hand with it. Yelping, grunting in pain, Kaminari ducked under Mooney's jaw and barely avoided having his shoulder torn into by the beast's teeth.

"STOP!" In a desperate attempt to finish this, he reached out and grabbed with both hands, shocking Mooney as hard as he could. He heard Endeavor say something, and then saw a few bursts of light. His heart stopped when he saw the body fall, and Mooney kicked him.

The light nearly went out when he was sent flying, and very nearly broke when he slammed into the newscrew's van.

Sliding down the side of it, his feet barely caught the ground as the world refused to stay still. Shaking his head, he saw Izuku. He was emebbed in a brick wall, barely moving at all. Only the rise and fall of his chest told that he was even breathing. "Izuk-!"

His voice called out to the unconscious vampire, but the only given reply was teeth piercing his left shoulder. He screamed, shoved against the van as Mooney's teeth impaled the vehicle behind him. He reached out to try and shock Mooney through his own teeth, but the beast was wise to his tricks now. Teeth retracted, then struck out again and slashed down the length of his right leg as Kaminari stumbled.

Falling to the street with a splash, the blond felt incredibly dizzy. His only consolation was that Mooney was looking shaky too. He'd actually managed to weaken him, through all his efforts. But it wasn't enough, and the beast was still looking at him like he was dinner. "Mooney..."

Once more, the creature lowered itself to the ground, preparing to pounce. When he jumped, Kaminari closed his eyes and shielded his head with his bleeding arms. Only, when Mooney crashed to the ground, something was incredibly wrong.

Toppling the van, screaming in agony, Mooney thrashed about and wailed. Something was sizzling on his chest, almost like-

Looking up, he saw Mina, palms outstretched and looking like she was going to be sick. Paler than ever, shaking all over, she kept creeping forward. "Please just stop..." she breathed, not wanting to hurt the poor thing anymore.

But Mooney wasn't thinking clearly enough to hear her. So he kicked the van, sending it flying right at her. Yelping in fright, she threw herself aside and almost made it out of harm's way.

If only she didn't have horns growing out of her head.

One snagged, snapping off almost at the base of her skull. Her neck was pulled at an awkward angle and for a moment all she could see were stars.
"Mina!" Kaminari tried to stand up, but his leg wasn't making that easy.

Furthermore, Mooney saw him as easy, wounded prey and pounced on him. Hands grabbed his shoulder and leg, pulling him off the ground, and his torso was brought into Mooney's mouth. Teeth spearing into his body, he gagged out a scream and Mina shrieked.

Never had he heard anyone make such an anguished, angry sound and the Troll girl was ready to back it up. Both her hands speared forward, acid blasting into Mooney's flesh and eating into him.

Dropped like a rotten fish, Kaminari tried to stay awake. Mina just kept shooting more and more acid into Mooney's hide, watching him writhe and sizzle. Tears were flowing from her eyes, her face was so pale she almost lost her pink hue. Mooney thrashed about, scurrying wildly in any direction he could to escape. When he realized that Mina wasn't going to relent, when the pain no longer blinded him, his teeth lanced out. Stabbing through the left side of Mina's abdomen, just under her ribcage, he staggered her enough to make her stop for a second.

Crying out in pain, she splashed acid onto the teeth that impaled her, and watched the bloody, prehensile things recoil. Falling to one knee, vision blurry, she saw Mooney flying through air, right at her. Both hands raised, she held nothing back and Mooney's head paid the price. A heavy, limp, purple body crashed into her and they both toppled to the street.

Mooney would not be getting up again. However, with her injuries and the body now stuck on top of her, she wasn't going to be doing so either. As she tried her best to stay awake, shoving at Mooney's corpse, she only hoped the others wouldn't need her anytime soon.

Yet another prayer that would not be answered.
The van crashed straight through, smashing the ice to shards and deflecting the flames. Water followed in the vehicle's wake, rain ripped from its original trajectory. Wind from the projectile vehicle tore at them, their clothes, father and son struggled to remain standing through the rush of air. Larger size afforded Endeavor enough stay with gravity to keep his footing. Shoto was not so lucky.

He spun and rolled across the street, scraping up his face and arms as he went. Seeing his advantage, Endeavor raised his hand and unleashed an inferno upon his son. It was by the skin of his teeth that Shoto managed to throw an ice barrier between himself and the flame. An ice barrier that was melting faster than he could keep it standing.

This- this was actually happening. His own father was trying kill him. He always knew the man was a monster, known measures he'd taken to create him in later years. Why was this surprising him? Maybe it was the fact that Shoto had been his goal from the beginning, living vicariously though him in his twilight years was a pathetic goal, but Endeavor's pride was a demanding thing. That it had been so rattled, cast aside far enough for this? What kind of retribution was Endeavor expecting?

The ice in front of him started to crack, Shoto felt his fear getting the better of him and then part of it shattered. The flame burst through and ran up the length of his right arm, making the poor boy scream. In some last desperate effort to protect himself, Shoto covered his body directly, coating himself entirely and hoping he wouldn’t just boil alive.

With a roll of his eyes, Endeavor stomped over to him. "You're just prolonging the inevitable." As he strode over to shaking lad, he saw him preparing to throw another glacier at him. Not something he'd allow. "Just... stop." He raised a hand, and another wave of hellfire washed over the street.

It stuck with such intensity that Shoto was knocked off his feet, back slamming against the street shattering the ice around him.

"See? Pointless." As the world spun in his son's eyes, he just raised both his hands. "What a waste it was, letting you use my quirk like that."

What happened next, nearly no one saw coming.

A near deafening boom erupted behind Endeavor, rocketing him forward and sending his face to the street. Tasting blood, feeling a few loose teeth in his mouth, Endeavor snarled as he got back to his feet. "Like cockroaches, I swear." Turning around, he saw Bakugo staring him down with anger blazing in his eyes, palms bleeding but still raised toward him. "Everyone and everything around your class burns and dies while you refuse to submit to death. What stars were you all born under?"

"Shut up." Endeavor actually balked. Who did this whelp think he was? "You're so full of shit the sewers have gotta smell like a damned flower garden in comparison!" Bakugo's twitching lips bared his teeth, eyes bulging and veins visible. "Killing your fucking kids, your own fucking kids!" Bracing his arms, he fired off another monstrous explosion at Endeavor, sending him flying.

A situation the 'hero' was not in often enough to handle with grace. Skidding across the road, back slamming into a nearby car he had to vigorously shake his head to stave off the disorientation. Still it wasn't long before he was standing, staring down the upstart and growling.
Bakugo had placed himself between father and son, his palms dripping with blood and aimed still at Endeavor. "I have done some shitty things... outright unforgivable if I'm being honest." Behind him, a boy with a scar over his left eye, a terrible burn that served as a permanent reminder of his father's cruelty, regained his senses. "but you? Even as you're about to kill you spout garbage about his quirk being yours!? What is he allowed to call his own, you... FUCK!?”

Shoto's jaw dropped, eyes fluttering as he stared at Katsuki's back. Endeavor finally retaliated, and Bakugo split the air with another explosion, sending the fire away. Endeavor snarled again, and chose not to use so relenting a tactic and filled the air in front of him with fire in a continuous stream. "He only has that quirk because of me! I created him! Gave him the powers of both his parents! He had no right to be so rebellious! He only has what he has because of ME!"

His palms split, spurting blood with every explosion, but Bakugo held his ground, ignoring the pain as he stood his ground. Explosion after explosion and by sheer force of will he continued to protect Shoto. "That doesn't make it yours!"

With one hand, he cut loose and devastated the street, the buildings and all that was in front of him. Endeavor was toppled through the car, Bakugo's left side was scorched, hand, arm and face burned to a blistering crisp while his hair and clothes smouldered.

He hadn't flinched, dared to move, for if he had then the one he was protecting would have felt the touch of that searing flame. "It stopped being yours the moment he inherited it! IT'S HIS! JUST LIKE HIS LIFE, YOU BASTARD!"

Despite the pain, despite the weakness of his flesh, Bakugo threw his hands behind him and launched himself forward with his quirk. Spinning through the air, propelled by his explosions, he brought his boots down on Endeavor's head. Hands thrust down, he blasted him into the ground, forcing him to kneel, backflipping to secure footing before rocketing himself forward and driving a knee into his face.

Endeavor raised a hand to scorch Bakugo to dust, but the blond blasted it away, wrenching something in the murderer's wrist. "You refuse to see your own kids as anything but tools to get what you want!" Another blast, another splitting of his own skin -practically down to the muscle- and Endeavor was smashed into a brick wall. "And now that they don't work they way you want you just FUCKING KILL THEM!?"

As he screamed, Bakugo's own life flashed behind his eyes. The moment he'd found out Izuku was quirkless, casting him aside. All those years spent tormenting him, punishing him for daring to dream above his station, burning off half his face when he actually became a challenge. Hating him, wanting to kill him for finally growing a spine and fighting back. Only changing when he saw the monster he was becoming, hearing Aizawa announce that he was almost a murderer. Only changing when he saw the monster he could have been, right in front of him, hurting his own son; Hurting another 'Deku'.

A monster he was now trying to blast through a brick wall, explosion after explosion tearing at his costume, breaking his bones. "FUCK YOU! FUCK YOU! FUCK YOU!"

He lashed out, both palms forward to send him across the planet, and Endeavor grabbed the left side of his face. In a split second Bakugo hesitated, realizing what was about to happen, then they both used their quirks. Endeavor was sent through the building in its entirety, Bakugo fell screaming to the street, his bloodied, charred hands clutching at his eye and skin. Vocal chord tearing from his wailing anguish, the warhead fell, fingers trembling over the smoldering, steaming mess his face had turned into. Blood drenched his cheek, neck and shoulder.
Tried though he did to open his eye, to see through the pain, he couldn't. It had either been seared shut or burned to some gelatinous fluid that had drained onto his body. Either way, he was too scared to find out which. As he lay there, trembling and groaning in all his agony, Endeavor climbed out of the building. "All that..." he laughed, "just a few broken ribs." He cackled, stomping his way over to Bakugo, stepping through flames and smoke. "I've battled on without use of either arm. With a fractured vertebra and shattered collarbones. You honestly you could afford to pull your punches in this fight?"

Bakugo couldn't answer, he could barely even see with everything so blurry. He just lay there, desperately trying to come up with some plan when his hand hit something. It was little more than a pebble, a metallic pebble. He gulped, and hid the pebble in his palm, placing himself on his back and staring Endeavor down with his one good eye.

"It's almost a pity you have to die now," Endeavor mused, "more of a waste than that failure of a son of mine." His hand outstretched, palm facing Bakugo, and he readied his quirk.

Then the flames around him started swirling. Throughout his battles with his sons and Bakugo, fire had accumulated on the ground, burning whatever flammable matter was littered about. Now it was slowly spiraling, moving along some unseen path, all toward one spot. The rain was doing it too, turning to ice in a spiraling pattern like some kind of freak snow storm and Endeavor knew exactly what that meant. Slowly turning around, he saw Shoto, standing at the center of it all, an ocean of flame dancing slowly in the air to his left and the beginnings of an ice storm at his right.

Shoto's eyes were blazing with rage, tears flowing from them and his jaw was trembling as a memory echoed in his skull.

A memory of him and his mother, sitting on the couch together.

"yes, that's right," All Might's voice said, calmly as he adressed the interviewer, "children often do inherit quirks from their parents, or develop similar power sets!"

Shoto was leaning forward, smile wide on his face and his mother hummed with light laughter, putting her arm around him.

"But the most important thing to remember is that a quirk is what you make of it, regardless of your history!" All Might pointed right at the camera, right at him. "You decide how you use it!"

It was during one of the most strenuous weeks of his life. His father was pushing him so hard, making him train so much his nails had all fallen out. This was one of the few breaks he'd been allowed to have, even then it was only because his mother had begged for the four year old to have some peace, lest he die of exhaustion.

Endeavor had only agreed when he saw that he might lose to All Might by accidentally killing his own son.

"honey..." his mom had said softly, "Do you really still want to be a hero?"

He remembered nodding.

She stroked his head, fingers weaving through his hair. "Just remember... be true to yourself." In all this time... he hadn't realized how much he'd forgotten. "You are not a prisoner of your lineage. It's okay to use your power, to become who you want to be."

Just as soon as it had started, it faded and Shoto's quirks flared along with his rising feelings. Anger, regret, mourning, determination and hatred. Hatred for his father, but stronger than that was
the hatred he felt for himself. By rebelling, refusing to use half of his own quirk, he'd just given his
color control over him in another way. The influence he'd been trying to escape had trapped him
even further, pushed him down and squandered his identity to such a degree that helping Uraraka
had left him shocked to move. He’d buried his trauma instead of facing it head on, and when he
needed to be strong he'd let his own brother die.

A brother who had protected him every chance he could, until Endeavor had driven him away. So
with blazing eyes and flaring quirks, his voice seethed with tempered fury. "You..." Endeavor felt
something shiver in his chest, and he took an involuntary step away. "Attack my friends, hurt my
mom... killed my brother." In an instant, the flames stilled, drawing back as the ice tensed. "No
more."

Ice and flame struck like lightning, elements crashing down on a mere mortal. Some primal force
unlike anything Shoto had ever unleashed struck like a hammer of the gods, and Endeavor was
brought to his knees. Ice under his feet, Shoto raced forward and threw himself into the air. Right
arm coated with ice, he made a hammer out of the densest ice he could lift and smashed it against
his father's shoulder.

His shoulder blade fractured and Endeavor growled in pain. He raised a hand to retaliate, quirk at
the ready, but Shoto just snared control of the flame away from him and cast it aside. Then, with
his icy right hand, he reached out and coated his father in ice, all but is head. Fists curled, roaring
with every swing, Shoto vented a lifetime of rage, fear and grief into his father's head, punch after
punch after punch. Blood flew his father's lips, nose and skin, teeth knocked free and clattering
away as Shoto screamed, beating the man who'd hurt him and those he loved for far too long.

Until Endeavor's entire body ignited, shattering the ice and sending Shoto off his feet.

Staggering back, shaking his spinning head, Endeavor clutched at what remained of his icy prison
to keep his balance. With another roar, Shoto lurched back to his feet, right hand flying toward his
father's face. Quirk at full tilt, Endeavor first blocked the ice then swatted the hand away before it
could grab him. Still gripping the remnants of his icy cage, his kicked back with one foot and split
a shard of ice from it.

His wrist twisted, fingers grabbing his son's much smaller wrist, and he brought the icy blade
forward; through his son's abdomen. While Shoto gasped, shocked from the pain, staring down at
his wound and staggered backward, he made some sort of surprised vocalization before Endeavor
shoved him. Falling back, Shoto landed on what was left of that car his father and Bakugo had
destroyed. His hand clawed at it, barely finding purchase and holding balance as he gagged on his
own blood, now dripping from his lips.

Seeing all of this, Bakugo braced himself and tried to use his quirk again. Nothing happened. In
disbelief, he looked at his palms. Too burned, too wounded to sweat, either that or there was too
much blood and water mixed in with it. Refusing to relent he dragged one palm across his forehead
and forced his aching form to stand again.

"Finally..." Endeavor smiled, looking almost proud of his son as he reached for the right side of his
face. "You finally did it, in the end..."

A roar called his attention away, and Bakugo's quirk launched him forward like a missile. Palm
torn open down to the muscle, he forced his useless hand to curl into a fist and he gave Endeavor
the meanest right hook of either of their lives. Then, with his other hand, he drove his palm forward
and smashed something against the murderer's throat with a final use of his quirk. The object
shattered, and Bakugo felt it cut into his skin, his entire palm stinging as Endeavor grunted,
surprised and in pain.
With a roar, Endeavor elbowed the warhead's wounded face and sent him falling back to the street. His hand massaged at the little cut, a snarl baring his teeth as he turned toward Bakugo. "I think that's enough from you, little fool." He raised his palm and went to incinerate him.

Nothing happened.

He tired it again, then with his other hand. Then he tried to cover any other part of his body with fire and still, nothing happened.

"What's the matter, you bastard?" Bakugo said weakly, grinning up Endeavor. "Can't get it up?"

Quivering on the edge of insanity, Endeavor spoke with a eerily quiet voice. "What. Did you. Do?!"

Snickering, Bakugo held up something that looked like a bullet. "Few weeks ago... Kirishima said something about a criminal shoot these at him. Cost him his quirk for a while, but from what my friends tell me? You just got a permanent dose of it, you waste of skin." Endeavor's hands twitched, raising and slowly reaching toward Bakugo. "Don't worry, happens to lots of guys. One out of five, or twenty percent if you-"

"SHUT UP!" Endeavor lurched forward, hands gripping the former warhead's throat and aiming to snap his neck. Bakugo gagged, his feeble attempts to resist amount to nothing in his weakened state; nevermind against someone more than twice his size. "DIE! DIE! DIE!"

Something the size of a soccer ball shattered against the back of Endeavor's skull. Stars danced in his eyes as ice clattered to the ground around him, his hands releasing Bakugo. He fell, then was shoved by a pillar of it so hard he felt a rib impale his lung. As he lay on his back, rolling about for any kind of weapon, he grabbed a pipe as he forced himself to stand.

Before he could even swing fire engulfed his entire body, then Endeavor screamed in pain.

Standing on his own two feet, staggering forward, Shoto just watched as his father screamed. He'd seared his own wounds shut, enough to get himself moving again, but he still tasted the blood coming up his throat. While Endeavor thrashed about, Shoto felt years worth of anger just rolling away. How pointless it all felt now... He raised both hands, used his quirks together, and water spouted from his hands to douse the flames.

Shaking, too shocked to feel or think very well, Endeavor smiled and took a shaky step toward his son. "Th-thank y-"

Then his son punched him and the lights went out.

Endeavor fell to the street, Shoto to one knee and clutching at his wound, trying not to black out. "B-" he managed to speak, but it nearly knocked him out. "Bakugo?"

The former warhead forced his eye to open. "Yeah?"

Shoto gave up on standing, falling back and staring up at the sky as it rained. "Just checking..."

Bakugo chuckled weakly, trying to look at him. "Afraid I kicked the bucket?"

The heterochrome gave a mirthless, single chuckle of his own. "I wouldn't surprised if we all just died right here." He turned over, looking toward the others. "Ashido?"

Mooney's body fell aside, finally freeing herself and gasping for air. Propping herself up against
whatever was handy, she gave the shakiest thumbs up of her life. "H-here."

Bakugo rolled onto his front, dragging himself toward the others. "Uraraka."

"m'okay..." she waved, "really loopy, n'groggy too... was in a lotta pain bu'now I jus... everything is all swirly..."

Somewhere else, near the ruins of the newscrew van, Kaminari grunted as he pulled Izuku out of the wall he'd been stuck in. "Probably in so much pain her brain flooded her system with dopamine and serotonin... lucky." Shoving Izuku onto one side, he saw there was a hunk of metal embedded into his skull. "Alright, bud... one sec." Grabbing it, wiggling it a little, he yanked it free. "Holy-" Kaminari looked at what might as well have been a dagger, dripping with blood. "No no no! Hey, hey!"

Hands on Izuku's shoulders, putting him on his back, Kaminari put his bleeding left hand against Izuku's lips.

"Come on! Come on, you self sacrificing lunatic! DRINK!" He didn't have to wait long.

Mere moments after the blood trickled into his mouth, Izuku's jaw clamped down on Kaminari's hand.

While initially the blond yelped in pain, he soon smiled. "Oh thank god... there ya go, pal." Slowly, very slowly, Izuku's wound closed and his eyes fluttered open. "That's it, buddy." Kaminari let himself relax, feeling ever so slightly more light headed than he should with his injuries.

As he fell over, Izuku caught him, forcing his mouth away from Kaminari's hand. "Den!" He shrieked. "What the hell happened to you!?" In his arms was a bleeding, very wounded Kaminari, and he didn't look like he would be going anywhere any time soon. In fact, everyone looked awful. "Holy fuck..." he breathed, scooping up his friend in his arms. "What-?"

His jaw dropped at the sight of them all. The corpses, his wounded friends, the toppled skyscraper. He didn't know where to start. "I'm so sorry..." he almost started crying. "I- I- I should've-"

"Wasn't yer faul' er nuthin," A very, very loopy Uraraka waved a flip-flopping hand back and forth, "we totally had it handled... bad guy'z taken care'uv..."

Izuku didn't listen. He brought Kaminari over to the others, then dived toward what remained of that checkpoint they'd gone through minutes ago. He was digging around in the rubble for a phone that hadn't been smashed to bits. The only one that wasn't metallic mulch was Ochako's.

Running to and kneeling at her side, he placed the phone in her hands. "I need to call for help, can you enter your code?" Nodding and giggling, Ochako did exactly that. "I have six wounded at Philantropy's headquarters!" He managed to keep his voice level. "Possibly in critical condition, send help immediately!" Wait, only six? Where- where was Kyoka?

His head lurched about, searching frantically for her but she was nowhere in sight. No... no she couldn't have still been upstairs when the building fell, she just couldn't be! Not-

Ochako put a hand on Izuku's, trying to get his attention. "Sev'n. There's sev'n!"

Blinking, as the other end hung up to take more calls, he stared helplessly at Ochako who seemed very worried all of a sudden. "W-wha...?"
She pointed toward the Shroud, flames still climbing up it, toward the top. "Sssten..." she mumbled, "Saw 'im go runnin in.. he prolly needs 'elp."

Mina's eyes went wide. "Oh my god, she's right." Izuku turned toward her, seeing her fear clearly. "Midorya... before the fight started, I saw him go inside that tower! With all that smoke he can't be doing very well! He's probably worse off than us!"

With a shaky laugh, Kaminari held up one hand. "Kinda doubt it..."

"I'm serious!" Mina insisted. "He's been coughing up a storm lately! I... I think something's really wrong with him. All that smoke can't be doing him any good."

Ochako bit her lip, not saying anything. She knew full well that Mina was right, but didn't think it was her place to say. She just looked up at Izuku and hoped he believed Mina.

Of course, the vampire already knew she was right. "...Okay." he put Ochako's phone in her hands. "I'll-" he really didn't want to leave them. "I'll be back!"

"We're not going anywhere..." Mina groaned, trying to make herself more comfortable, tearing at her leggings to try and bandage herself up.

Taking in a deep breath, Izuku braced himself. It had only been two days since he'd seen him last, when he'd killed Overhaul. Not much time at all for things to have changed, emotions to have shifted or healed or to even begin processing them. All the same, there was no one else available to even try and go in after him. An action that would leave his wounded friends alone, without help until someone else hopefully arrived.

Fists clenched, stuffing down his guilt, he stood up. "I'll hurry." Then he leapt into the air, fingers sticking to the wall of the Shroud. Wasting no time searching for an entrance, he smashed a window in and threw himself inside.

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*Minutes ago...*

Stain hated himself with every leap. Propelling through the air, and hoping the others wouldn't need his help he dove inside the burning structure. Holding what little breath he could, he dashed through the flames and smoke. Inside the tower was a single room, divided by catwalks, ladders and terminals and all manner of controls. The objects he sought were at the top level, according to the map burning before his eyes.

*Naturally...*

Grabbing hold of a ladder, he started his frantic ascent. Time was working against him now in more ways than one. His lungs wouldn't last long in this place, and if the Shroud collapsed before he could complete his task then it was all for nothing anyways.

Up the ladders he went, forgoing them completely and jumping where he could. He hit his face on a railing, crying out in pain as he clutched at it, already feeling himself entering freefall. Panting from adrenaline, he hauled himself onto the catwalk, then ran for the final ladder.

Once he'd arrived at his destination, he found that construction wasn't quite complete. Cursing under his breath, he grabbed at the various cables, control panels and tubes, trying to make sense of it all. Instructions left behind by the fleeing crews helped a little, but he didn't have time to really read them. So he gleamed what he could and prayed that he'd get the rest of it right. Sparks flew, metal creaked and groaned below him, the Shroud's central mechanism started protesting against
the heat.

Stain ran to the main control unit and activated it, hearing the Shroud struggle to come alive. Through all the creaking, groaning metal and hissing of faulty valves, it started. Now all he had to do was assemble the main injection unit for the interior filter. Once that was done... it would be okay for him to die.

Somewhere below, glass shattered. "Sten!" Stain gulped, frozen for a moment with fear hearing that voice. "Where are you?"

He didn't answer, just kept working furiously to complete his mission.

Then Guren's tone changed, "Sten!" he sounded relieved, happy even, then he jumped and climbed his way to him in mere moments. "Thank goodness, you're okay!" That smile... it was enough to twist up his stomach. "Come on, we have to go."

Stain ignored him, turning back and continuing to assemble the machine.

"Sten, it's over." Guren spoke softly, taking a few steps closer, and Stain sighed. "Endeavor's down. We won, you and... the others are heroes." His hand placed itself on Stain's shoulder, squeezing affectionately. "Philanthropy won't recover from this one. We won."

Slowly, task completed Stain turned around, his expression utterly devoid of joy. "It would be you..." he said, gently taking Guren's hand and removing it from his shoulder. "Of all the people, all the heroes who could come to try and stop me... it just had to be you."

Guren lost his smile, looking at him with quiet worry. "Sten, what are you talking about? Endeavor's down, out. The others are really hurt, we need to get them help, now!"

"I can't leave yet." Stain patted Overhaul's utility belt. "This isn't over until I make sure this pustule of a society is cleansed."

"...You're not."

"I am..."

Sounds of the crumbling facility reigned over their conversation for a few moments longer, neither having the will to speak. "Sten... do you have any idea what this will do?"

He nodded, backing away from Guren. "The world will be made quirkless again. No More society of heroes, no more abuse of this power!" He clenched his fist, holding it up before him with his signature, wild grin. "A fresh start where this kind of thing won't be possible anymore! Think about it! Weapons technology has practically disappeared in the last two centuries!" Guren backed away from him now too, wearing a look of total disbelief. "The playing field will be completely leveled, no one will stand above anyone else in terms of power anymore! We all really will be equal then!"

Jaw dropped, Guren shook his head vigorously. "That's- no! That's not what will happen!" His face twisted, pleading with his surrogate brother. "Do you have any idea what the world was like back then? Two hundred years ago, when quirks first arrived, the world was in chaos! It took over seventy-five years for civilization to claw its way back up!"

Stain scoffed. "A civilization where the most affluent control everything!" His smile had vanished, replaced with his righteous fury. "This facade, this 'war' between heroes and villains is nothing but a masquerade! A show with flashing lights and shiny outfits, for everyone to stare at while the
people funding the war -giving troops to both sides no less- profit off it like it's some big show!"

Guren closed his mouth, unable to say anything just yet. So far, word for word, Stain was absolutely right. That was all this had ever been, right from the beginning.

"The toy lines, posters, costume replicas..." Stain shook his head, fists clenched. "Its obscene! Profiteering off of literal loss of life. Heroes and villains kill each other on a daily basis, and we just treat it like some serialized tv show. Hyping up the next big hero, dreading the rise of the next villain." He looked out the window toward the city. "Overhaul was right about one thing... the world is sick, but its not quirks that are to blame. It's what we've done to them."

Stepping forward, Guren spoke softly. "We've taken down Philanthropy already. They were the cause of it all, them and The Nameless Ones! There's no need to do this! All we need to do now is find The Prophet System and destroy it, then all this ends!"

For a moment, Stain lowered his head, shoulders shaking. Guren thought he might have been crying, but then he reared his head back, laughing. "REALLY!?" He thrust arms to either side, face somewhere between a grin and something vicious. "Tell me this one then: how has Philanthropy kept this war going for over two centuries using that Prophet System when it was only made a decade ago!"

Guren's eyes fluttered, taking a step back. "Ah- I-"

Stain scoffed again, hissing as he did. "Didn't think that far ahead? Allow me to explain." He walked to the window, looking out toward the city. "Simple, honest prejudice." He spun back around, hand slamming into his own sternum. "People with unseemly quirks, quirks that 'appear villainous' are outcast! People like Shigaraki, people like Twist who was more of a hero than some of our classmates will ever be!"

He had no words, no way to say he was wrong. But... "Sten... that's- people aren't so quick to judge as you think! I mean... sure, sometimes quirks scare people but on the whole people aren't so closed minded as all that."

Stain laughed. "Right. So long as the mutant-type quirk still leaves them fuckable, I suppose?"

Guren blinked. "I- What? Where the hell is that coming from?"

"It's no secret that the most popular heroes all have a few things in common." Stain raised fingers, one after the other. "Powerful quirks, decent PR agents and looks." Another round of blinking for the vampire. "Just look at the top ten! Not one, one of them bears so much as a blemish! It's so holywood it makes me wanna gag..."

Scratching the back of his neck, Guren looked a little awkward. "I don't think that's as big a thing as you make it sound."

Stain gave him a very, very impatient look. "No? Tell me one thing more: what happened a good, lets say, two thirds of our class?" Guren blinked, expression sinking. "When was the last time we spoke to any of them? Tokoyami? Sato? Shoji? Hagakure? Ojiro?" Slowly, but surely, Guren felt his heart sink and it left him nauseous. "We know they decided to transfer out for their last year, but does anyone know why? Does anyone care?"

A point Guren painfully conceded. "I don't know..."

Shaking his head, Stain returned to the injector. "It's simple prejudice. Not looking at things we
don't want to care about. People that seem less 'human' than others thanks to their quirks or other differences being ignored or neglected until they have no choice but to become what society sees them as just to survive!"

"Just like you?"

Stain faltered, not replying for a moment. "...Who told you?"

Guren frowned. "Overheard some of it at the diner, when you were talking to... Knuckles?" Stain looked away. "In any case... all this will do is make things worse."

Stain glared at him. "You can't possibly know that."

"Nighteye said as much..." Guren's expression was serious, but still gentle. "I thought he was talking about what would happen if we exposed the truth about The Prophet System, but now I think this is what he really saw."

Stain blinked, skeptical as ever. "Meaning?"

"If you make the world quirkless... I think another war like we had two hundred years ago will happen." Guren warned, looking very, very scared. "Only this time it won't be fought with quirks. It'll be fought with weapons, as terrible as we can make them. You remember how scary things could be back then? Nuclear weapons and whatnot? What if it all descends back to that? What if all you accomplish by doing this, is just making everything worse?"

Stain hesitated, thinking this through for a moment more, looking out toward the city. "People wouldn't have any reason to hate each other...our prejudices would..."

"Would just find other sources," Guren pleaded, "Before quirks it was... skin color, religion, gender roles, politics. Okay, people still hate each other for the last two, but that's the point!" He stepped forward, putting a hand on Stain's shoulder. "If you go through with this, nothing you want to change will." Stain, despite everything, despite his convictions and hatred, seemed to grow smaller. "Please... let's just go before we make things worse."

He felt his little brother's fingers tightening on his shoulder, desperately, as though he might run away again. It was enough to pull at his heart, put water in his eyes. Stain... someone, looked up, into Guren's eyes. "Brother, I-..." he looked away again. "I- I don't know what else to do."

His other hand was on the other shoulder now. "Me neither," Guren was smiling again. "But we can figure it out, right? We're gonna be heroes soon, for real. Then we can change this stupid system, make people aware of problems like this." He winced, guilt clouding his smile. "You know... you're not wrong about any of it, but... that doesn't make turning everyone quirkless the right choice. It's possible to be right about everything and still mess it all up."

Guren sniffed, holding back tears of his own.

"Or you could be like me," he said, "just make stupid decisions that hurt the people you love, being wrong about... everything." The half human blinked, not sure what he meant. "I did it again. Just ran from the problem instead of... doing anything." His grip on his big brother's shoulders tightened. "I should've-...I'm sorry I didn't tell you about your family and Aizawa. I kept making excuses to myself, thinking it- that I-"

He pulled Guren into a hug. "I forgive you." He heard the startled little breath he made, on the verge of tears."Can... can you forgive me?"
Guren's arms wrapped tightly around him. "Of course!"

It broke his heart to hear that kid so happy. Taking a step back, arms leaving each other, he thought about it. About all of it. Then, reaching behind himself, he unlsung the sword from around his shoulder, and drew it. Guren blinked, his happiness vanishing. The involuntary step he took back... it made Stain want to cry. Instead he smiled and said, "the hero you're going to be..." then he threw the sword away. "It's going to put all of them to shame."

Guren couldn't help the grin that followed, as Stain removed Overhaul's belt.

"Take it." He said, hands and voice trembling. "Before I change my mind, just take it!"

Leaping forward, Guren did just that. "Okay, I've got it!" he put it on, securing it around his waist. "It's alright. It's not your problem anymore, it's mine. Okay, Sten?"

Sten... yes. Yes that sounded right, and it had him smiling in relief. Maybe- maybe it would all really could work like this. Maybe with what little time he had left, Stendhal could come back. He and his little brother could be a team again, cleaning up the street, making the world a better place. Maybe his last bit of time alive could be something brighter than these last few weeks. There was still a chance to- to...

What was that sound?

Something below them exploded, shaking the building to its very foundations. Sten lost his footing as the structure lurched about, then Guren fell over too. The entire Shroud was tilting, smoke billowing up and swallowing them. They tried to stand, another explosion rocked the structure and their catwalk fell. They crashed into one, then another in a cascade until then Shroud tilted to one side, then toppled like a tree.

Walls sundered, turned to dust and shards of metal as they flew, crashing through surface after surface. Stendhal finally felt the world fall still, the fire from the Shroud swallowing up whatever building they were in now and he tasted smoke. "No! Not n-" He tasted the blood before he felt his chest heave, his lungs forcing him to cough out the smoke and all the rest.

Then he heard a small voice whimpering in pain.

"Guren! Where a-" He fell to his knees, gagging on blood, pus and what he hoped was saliva.

No! No, he needs me!

Stendhal curled his fist and hit his rebellious lungs through his own bones, as hard as he could.

Work! WORK DAMN YOU! I AM NOT GOING TO LET HIM DIE HERE!

Enough of it worked its way clear, for him to force his body to stand. "GUREN!"

No reply.

"IZUKU!"

...

No.

NO NO NO!
He ran, eyes scanning everywhere, ignoring the protests of his own body as he searched. Time seemed to lose meaning as he tore through the rubble, eyes refusing to cut through the smoke, watering in protests he ignored. Blood poured from his lips, breath hissing through his teeth as his lungs burned, the smoke tearing more holes, aggravating the silica that had embedded itself into the organs. He ignored it all, his heart rate climbing exponentially with each passing moment. Guren... GUREN!

"Nnnng..."

Stendhal spun around, toward the source of that little groan. "Guren!" No reply. "Little brother, where are you!?" he ran forward, back toward the Shroud where the smoke was thickest.

Then he saw him, pinned beneath a still girder that was still very attached to the structure it was a part of. Guren's legs were pinned, crushed beneath it as the fire reached ever toward them both.

"Izuku!" he kneeled by his side, slapping his cheeks a few times. "Wake up! We need to-"

Another lurch of both buildings, and Stendhal dropped over the ledge, barely catching it in time to avoid falling into the fire. It felt like smoke had filled his entire chest cavity, his fingers refused to function. All the same, screaming with every iota of movement, he forced his arms to drag him back up. Then, coughing and gagging for air, his fingers gripped under the girder and started hauling.

I know...

The buildings groaned, shaking again, threatening to collapse under their own weight but Stendhal ignored it.

I know you'd want me to run. To leave you here. You're just like that... a hero through and through, it's what you've always been in your heart.

Smoke surrounded him, crowding into his mouth, and he kept on screaming, kept on lifting as hard as he could.

That's exactly why I can't do that. All my life... I've seen things through the stained eyes of a killer. A murderer through and through, it's what I am in my heart. It's what led me here. Led me to becoming Stain.

The floor beneath him cracked, more of it behind him creaking and cracking as it started to crumble,

It's what led me to getting so much of my own life so wrong... why I isolated myself and took to the streets... if I can do one thing right before I die, let it be this. Let me save him.

Then, summoning the last of his strength, Stendhal did the impossible. "HE'S MY LITTLE BROTHER, GOD DAMMIT! HE'S MY FAMILY! NOW MOVE!" With one, final haul, he shifted it off of Izuku.

Grabbing his little brother, as his legs started to slowly heal, Stendhal dragged him toward the closest window. So little of his strength remained, but he kept on pushing, pulling. He felt his limbs giving out, then a hand grasped his. "Sten!?"

It was Guren. "Come on!" He pulled him to his feet, nearly falling in the process, then they carried each other toward the window and jumped.
"You die drowning in your own lungs... regretting every decision you've ever made, holding your own heart in your hand..."

The shroud collapsed into the building as it crumbled into the flame, their bodies shattered the glass and fell to the street. Landing with a clatter, both were stunned and couldn't really move for a few moments. Looking back where they'd been, Izuku shuddered in relief. They'd made it. Both of them had made it out!

"Holy hell... Thank you, Sten." Smiling he turned toward him. "You saved m-

His heart sunk.

Lying on the street, chest barely moving, Stendhal's face was more blue than not. Blood trickled down from his lips, and his every attempt at breath was a short, rasping squeak. "G-Gur-ren..."

Izuku crawled over to him as quickly as he could. "Sten!" He pulled him upright, helping him sit up. "Hold on! There- there's gotta be-

He almost forgot what he had to say, when Stendhal grabbed his shoulder. His fingers weren't gripping very hard, but it was all the strength he had left. "Sor..." he gasped, barely air at all as blood spurted from his mouth, the weakest of coughs forcing more free. "I... sor...ry..."

"Save your strength, okay? Where's your inhaler?"

Weakly, Stendhal raised a hand, reaching toward a pocket and Izuku tore it free.

"Here!" He pressed the lever but nothing happened. Empty. "OH COME ON!" He wanted to smash it, wanted to throw it, but saw that Stendhal was crying.

Actual tears ran from his eyes, as he smiled at him. "Th-" Izuku felt his heart breaking. Not again. Not again, he couldn't lose someone he loved! Not like this, not again! "Thank...you..." his grip on Izuku's shoulder tightened, as his eyes started to close. "not...a...vil...lain...cuza...you..." he took one last breath, haggared and rasping and forced out the last that he could say. "thanks... Izu...ku..."

No.

No he refused to let it end like this. "Trust me, okay?" Stendhal couldn't answer, his hand was still on Izuku's shoulder, but his eyes were closing. Izuku leaned forward and bit Stendhal's throat, taking as little blood as he thought that he could get away with. Once that was done, he used a claw to open his wrist and placed it to his brother's mouth. "Come on... come on, drink!"

Stendhal's hand fell from, Izuku's shoulder, the open wound pouring into his mouth and went limp.

"Sten?"

He heard sirens, the ambulances arrived for his friends and someone landed nearby but he didn't look to see who it was. He just heard a feminine, heartbroken gasp as someone fell to her knees and Aizawa's voice. "No... No..."

Izuku gave him a little shake, making sure his wrist was still bleeding. "Sten, come on!"

He didn't see it, but Vanessa was... devastated. All her strength and will to do anything just slipped away as Aizawa, fell against a nearby wall, hand on his face.

"Sten!"
No reply was given. Just a limp, motionless body in his arms. First his lips started quivering, then his vision got foggy and Izuku broke. He started sobbing, in loud, ugly cries of misery as he clutched at Stendhal- at Chizome's body, hugging him as tight as he could. He just cried, wailing at the top of his lungs cradling his brother in his arms as he rocked back and forth.

"I'm sorry... I'm sorry! I'M SORRY!"

He just kept right on shaking, the tears indistinguishable from the rain, and holding him. He couldn't let him go. They'd just take him away, burn him, bury him. Not him, not his big brother, god dammit! Not one of his best friends!

Not this again...

Not this empty hollow void again... he barely survived it the last time...

Give him back. Give mom back. Give any of them back! Take him if you had to, but put them back!

The world wasn't how it was supposed to be without them.

They were the ones who made it what it was...

What was the point of being a hero, if you couldn't save the most important people there were?

Izuku sniffled, petting Stendhal's messy hair and felt the wind tickling his ear. Damn it... DAMN IT!

The wind tickled his ear again, brushing past his hair and he smelled... blood. He smelled blood on the wind.

Confused, Izuku looked around. Where had that come from? There- there wasn't anyone nearby who-

He heard a rasp, a cough and felt stirring in his arms. In disbelief, Izuku lowered his brother's body and saw him gagging, coughing. He was breathing! "Stendhal!"

He rolled away from him, trying to breathe, but his lungs were too full of blood. He tried to reach behind himself, his arm batting uselessly at his back. Raspings, chest heaving, he was drowning again! Izuku leapt forward and clapped on his back. Again and again until the fluids pooled out onto the street. Then, breathing clear for the first time in weeks, Stendhal fell onto his side and grabbed Izuku's hand.

"I love you..." Hearing his big brother say those words, Izuku thought he might start crying all over again. "Little brother..." he breathed in long, heavy gasps. "I love you, Izuku."

No longer caring to fight back the tears, Izuku closed the distance and pulled him in for a hug."I love you too, Chizome..." in between happy sobs, as Vanessa started getting up, he whispered, "please... don't ever do that again..."

Crying himself, smiling as he wrapped his arms around Izuku, he looked at his aunt. "...I promise." Then she knelt, and wrapped both her boys in the tightest embrace she could get away with.

Aizawa just sighed in utter relief and let himself drop to the street.

Crisis averted.
It was all over, and the heroes had won.

"Blackbird singing in the dead of night...
Take these broken wings and learn to fly...

All your life...
You were only waiting for this moment to arise...

Blackbird singing in the dead of night
Take these sunken eyes and learn to see

All your life...
You were only waiting for this moment to be free...

Blackbird fly, blackbird fly...
Into the light of a dark black night."

Stain just said 'I love you'. The one thing Stain should never say.

Stain is dead.

Long live Chizome Akaguro.
Epilogue

Eventually, everything ends...

It was with heavy footsteps that Momo finally made it back outside, finding the others. They were all crowded at the entrance, gathered around Yoichi. Scaly, green hands pulled the gas mask off his face, unveiling the crushed larynx hiding just beneath the hood of it.

To make matters worse, Recovery girl was showing no signs of waking.

Shuichi looked like he was either about to cry or scream. Perhaps both. "Yoichi..." His face had gone pale, his throat was bruised and red was trickling beneath his skin. The lizard boy forced himself to smile. "You're gonna be fine buddy, not a scratch on ya."

The blond seemed like he laughed, but without much sound coming out of him it could have been anything. His weak little smirk as his eyes struggled to stay open seemed to put the other boy at ease.

Momo knelt by his other side, trying to think of what to do. Emergency triage wasn't one of her specialties, not by almost any stretch.

Yoichi just shook his head. "Y-... you suck at... lying, Shu... but I still love ya..."

Eri tip toed over, looking between them all with fear in her eyes. "Is he... dying?"

Shuichi lowered his head, fighting to hold back tears and Momo didn't speak very loudly when she did. "Help will get here." A statement that did not assuage the child's worry. "It wont be long now, everything will be fine."

Yoichi gave a very unconvincing thumbs up. "Y-yeah... I'm all good..." It didn't help that he was partially gurgling as he spoke.

Eri looked out toward the rest of the city, down the road. No sign of any kind of help getting any closer, and all the sirens still sounded very far away. Then she looked back at her friend and saw him struggling to breathe, the clear worry on everyone's faces and made up her mind. She walked up to him, gulped back her fear and put a hand on his chest.

"It's not just to hurt people..." Closing her eyes, her horn started to glow. "My quirk isn't just for hurting... it isn't just for killing..." Shutting her eyes tight, she concentrated.

A white, almost angelic glow that spread to the rest of her body and then to Yoichi's. As he, Momo and Shuichi blinked in wonderment Eri stretched her other hand toward Recovery Girl and the light stretched out and enveloped her too. The three of them floated slightly into the air and the clock seemed to dial back on them all. A bleeding scalp was wound shut, the blood disappearing from her skin, and a throat simply rekindled like it had never been broken.

Momo blinked, jaw dropped in amazement as they lowered back to the ground. Eri's horn had shrunk down to almost nothing, and when her feet touched the ground, she fell forward with closed eyes. Shuichi leapt forward and caught her, lowering her gently as he exchanged looks with the others.

When next she spoke, Momo's tone was almost reverent. "That was amazing..."
Rubbing at his throat, Yoichi just nodded as Shuichi murmured. "Beautiful."

Looking up at Momo, Yoichi finally said something with his usual tone. "Did you know she could do that?"

Momo shook her head. "I don't think anyone knew."

Shuichi sat on the floor, Eri's head resting on his leg as he patted her sleeping head. "So... was that a healing quirk?"

Giving this some thought, Momo placed a hand over her mouth. "Well... healing quirks usually leave some sign of what they've healed. With her quirk, it's like the damage was never even there." She rubbed some of Eri's hair out of the way, looking closely at her horn. "Her horn shrunk too... kind of like she was just rewinding time, back to a point where both of them were okay."

Recovery Girl murmured in her sleep, no longer looking quite so uncomfortable. "Well, whatever it is?" Shuichi smiled, stealing a glance at Yoichi. "I'm glad she's on our side."

Momo couldn't help but smile too. "Yeah... we're lucky to have her around. Aren't we?"

Then, finally, they heard the sirens getting closer. Little did they know it, but the struggles of that night had come to an end and the cloudy skies above, finally, had begun to clear.

The storm was over.

Groggy mind, heavy eyes and aching everything in a rocky, too-fast-moving ambulance. Just about the perfect recipe for motion sickness, and Toga was not thrilled about any of it, being in the ambulance least of all. Somewhere, she couldn't tell where they were, someone was wiping the dust and residue from an entire building off her head. Every time the cloth made contact with her skin she would flinch, the pain radiating down her neck.

It wasn't every day someone dropped an entire sky scraper on her.

"Hey," said an emt, their voice distorted like she were underwater, "I think she's awake." Then the blurry, wavy specter of a medic was in front of her. "Can you here me?"

Toga flipped them off.

To their credit, they laughed bemusedly. "I'll take that as a yes." Putting a blanket over the wounded girl, they smiled warmly. "You did a brave thing. Saved a lot of lives today."

She knew.

The ambulance came to a rickety stop and Toga flinched again. Had her mouth not been covered with the oxygen mask, her cursing might have made her attending emt blush. The manner in which she was wheeled out of the ambulance wasn't much better, jostling and jerking side to side as it made its way out. Into the hallways they went, through the main lobby and passed a crowd of people gathered there.

As she was taken to her room, others were taken from the lobby to where they'd be staying for various stretches of time. A young man with spiky, ash blond hair had hands wrapped in bandages and more if the same on the left side of his face. The redhead man of the same age by his side looked somewhere between mortified and relieved. Had he know the battle his boyfriend has survived, he might have looked worse.
A pair of youngsters with fresh stitches and no small amount of painkillers slept on the lobby couch. One had pink skin, hair of almost the same color and a single horn growing out of her head. Arms wrapped around each other, the lad with white and white hair and different colored eyes draped a blanket over them before sitting in a nearby chair and closing his eyes. Before he fell asleep, he reached over and shook his white haired friend awake.

When he saw who the heterochrome had woken him for, he smiled, revealing two slender, white fangs and leapt to his feet. A few steps forward, exclaiming in relief that she was okay, and he wrapped his arms around a slender girl with purple hair. When she hugged him back, both her arms and earlobes wrapped around him as she beamed with happiness. Toga wanted to wave at Kyoka-girl, but decided not to interrupt their little moment.

Then Kyoka saw them anyways, kissed her boyfriend as fiercely as she felt she could get away with, then ran after her friend. Further down the hall, asleep in her own room, a brunette fresh from surgery had a left shoulder wrapped like a mummy. She slept so peacefully that Toga almost nodded off looking at her. Another few rooms later and she saw a tall, lanky boy with lean muscle looking at an X-ray of his lungs. Clear as the day he was born, and she recognized Sten's voice, but couldn't make out the words. When the doctor left, a tall woman with glowing blue eyes practically tackled him as she wrapped her arms around him.

Closing her eyes, Toga heard Kyoka saying something but never made out the words. It was time for a nap, whether she could have kept her eyes open any longer or not. The world seemed to be in better order than usual, the perfect time to leave it be.

Kyoka watched as Toga was taken to the operating room, a clenched hand in front of her chest.

"So you really don't feel any different?" Vanessa said, somewhat skeptically.

She didn't see it, but she heard Stendhal shrug. "Not really."

Vanessa hummed thoughtfully. "Well... it usually takes time for the changes to take effect. Although, no one I've ever heard of has turned a dhampire before. This could very well be a first for the history books."

Footsteps approached the door and Sten grunted in agreement. "Doesn't matter to me, I'm just glad I can breathe again." Then he saw Kyoka. "Uh... hey."

She turned toward him, saw his face and her eyebrows jumped. "Jeez," she said, "you look like you haven't slept in a month, Sten."

He laughed a bit sheepishly. "Well... kinda got into a fight with a building. Turns out? That's not an easy fight to win."

"Don't I know it..." Kyoka muttered, rubbing the bandage on her head and staring after Himiko.

Looking after where she was, Sten quirked an eyebrow. "Something wrong?" Vanessa, somewhat worriedly, looked the same way and wondered who the girl being wheeled away was.

Kyoka shook her head. "Nothing that won't turn out okay." Then she turned toward the lobby. "I heard about Toya. Wincing, Sten clenched his fists."Is he- did Endeavor really-?"

"He did." A tremor in his voice betrayed his grief, a strangled tone that she was very familiar with. "Had I not dragged him into it to begin with, just left the whole mess where it should have been, well... I've got to live with being the reason he's dead."
Nodding, Kyoka just reached out and squeezed his arm, and was almost surprised when he did the same as he followed after her. "for what it's worth?" Sten looked at her without looking up, partially bracing himself against crying. "If Toya and Mooney hadn't been there, everyone else might be dead instead. Toya saved his little brother and everyone else... if you had to choose a way out, would you choose differently?"

For a moment, a long moment, Stendhal thought about that. "...No. No I wouldn't, but that doesn't really make it better."

"No, no it doesn't." She wanted to give him a hug, but realized she probably shouldn't, so she left him alone.

After a few more paces they reached the lobby and saw that almost everyone was asleep. Everyone save for Shoto, that is. "Stendhal." Gripping at his side, he stood up. "I heard you were leaving UA." There seemed to be concern in his eyes, as he looked the other boy up and down. "Are you back?"

Understanding what he meant, referring to what had happened with Overhaul, Sten sighed. "Yeah. I think I got my clear, thanks to Guren. No need to worry."

The concern hadn't quite left as Shoto nodded. "Alright. It's good to have you back." He looked a little awkward, eyes shifting away for a moment. "They... want to burn my brother's body."

Stendhal's shoulders sunk, expression screaming that he'd given up avoiding this subject. "When I... I know you two were close. When my family scatters his ashes... will you be there?"

He closed his eyes, drew in a deep breath and let it go. When he opened his eyes, he managed a smile. "You'd let me be there?"

Shoto nodded again. "He cared about you, that's enough for me."

Sniffling, the dhampire didn't know what to say. "Thank you... Shoto."

When the heterochrome bid him farewell, Sten collapsed into a chair, head in his hands and silently wept. Kneeling by his side, Vanessa just hugged him again. "Oh, little one..." she said, running a palm up and down his back.

Not knowing what else to do, Kyoka reached over to the sleeping Izuku and shook him awake. He only looked confused for a moment before he got up and sprang lightly forward and joined the other two. Then Kyoka walked around behind the chair Sten was sitting in and leaned forward, wrapping her arms around them all.

Between sobs and sniffles, Sten swore under his breath. "Damn it... god damn it..."

"On it." Izuku stood up and went to go find one, only for Vanessa to grab and stop him. With a smile she shook her head. "Izuku, if you don't sleep I'm afraid you'll collapse. Sit down, I've got it." When Izuku relented, she wandered off, leaving the trio of friends more or less alone.

Izuku sat back down where he had been, eyes already drooping, only managing to stay awake by
shaking his head hard. "Hey," When step spoke, he looked up with bleary eyes. "Sleep. I'll be okay, not going anywhere or anything." Smiling at him, Izuku settled in and let sleep take hold. "Heh..." Sten quietly laughed. "Finally feels like he can rest."

Taking a seat on the arm of Den and Mina's couch, Kyoka sighed. "It has been one disaster to the next with us for a while... I'm pretty sure residual adrenaline is all that's keeping me awake right now."

Rubbing at his face, Sten sniffed again and tiredly shook his head. "Has anyone heard from Toga? I haven't seen her since she went after Endeavor."

Smiling a bit, Kyoka nodded. "Worried about her?"

Sten quirked an eyebrow, and suddenly she had his full attention. She'd spoken that more softly than she'd meant to, and the half human had noticed. "Why?"

She held up her hands, giving Vanessa a quick glance as she returned with a box of tissues. "she's going to be fine. She's a bit banged up, but the doctors say she should recover soon."

The amount of worry that appeared on his face was almost endearing. "Recov- What happened to her?" He almost didn't notice when Vanessa put the box of tissues on his knee.

Kyoka tried to think of how to phrase it best, but being direct was always more her forte. "A building collapsed while she was inside, trying to help folks. Like I said, she'll be okay. Paramedics didn't find anything immediately life threatening, they're just making sure she's okay now, patching up her hurt."

Unconsciously, Sten's hand went to his side, to a tear in his costume. "Okay..." he seemed to relax a little, but still looked worried.

"Don't be worried, Chizome," Vanessa shushed, "she's in good hands, and I'm sure they'll let you see her when she wakes up." At his wordless nod, she looked at Izuku and smiled. With a twist of her arms, her jacket came off and she draped it over him. Her boys were safe, Philanthropy more or less disbanded. A weight that had long been on her shoulders seemed lifted, even with that sadness in her eyes.

Silently, Kyoka let herself relax too. Leaning back against the wall, she closed her eyes.

Kirishima hadn't reacted well over the phone, and in person he seemed worse. Bakugo almost regretted letting Kyoka make those damned phone calls now. The last thing he wanted from any of this was seeing him so worried and scared. Icing on that terrible cake was having his hands bandaged up, unable to reach out and touch him, comfort him.

As the redhead sniffed, Bakugo couldn't quite bring himself to look at him again. "Dammit, I shoulda been there."

Sighing, the former warhead closed his eye. "Eiji... what would you really have done? Your quirk lets you tank impacts not fire."

"I coulda been another target!" Kirishima insisted, making sure to keep his voice down. "Maybe then you'd... you'd-"

"Still have a quirk?" Bakugo gave him a tired, patient smile. "Not be uglier than I was?"
Glarng, Kirishima frowned. "Dude... you were never ugly and you're not now."

Bakugo just shrugged. "We'll see when the bandages come off. In the meantime... god I love morphine..." He slumped his head back, smiling as he sank into the pillow. "Going through hell to get it is not at all worth it, but it's just great..."

Somewhat concerned, Kirishima scratched the back of his neck. "I... don't think that's morphine, handsome." Bakugo quirked an eyebrow, giving him a sidelong look. "I don't think they even use that anymore."

With a shrug, the former warhead settled further into his bed. "Well, whatever it is, I'm not in pain, so, it's amazing."

Kirishima gave a light laugh. "You're an idiot... a manly idiot, but an idiot nonetheless."

Bakugo just gave a thumbs up. "Damn right." Then his boyfriend actually laughed. "it's just as well about that damn quirk..." he said, quietly, "I'd have made a shitty hero."

"Oh?" Said a familiar voice at the door. "I think I might disagree."

The redhead turned, the blond opened his eye and they both saw a ghoulsh man in a wheelchair. Blackened sclera, a shock of blond hair and about the most oddly disarming smile a man could have. "All Might." Bakugo immediately sat up. "Sir, what-?"

All Might motioned for him to lie back down. "Relax, my boy." Then he turned to Kirishima.
"Mind if I borrow him for a moment?"

Shaking his head, Kirishima stood up. "I'll go grab us some dinner." He leaned over and kissed Bakugo.

It was meant to be a chaste, farewell kiss, but Bakugo cupped a hand behind his head and pulled him in closer. Kirishima squeaked, Bakugo chuckled and then let him go. "Later, sweet cheeks."

Kirishima rolled his eyes and left them be, closing the door behind him. "I heard about what you did..." All Might said softly, wheeling himself up beside his student's bed. "You went above and beyond the call of duty tonight, young Bakugo."

The former warhead shifted uncomfortably where he lay. "It's just the job, sir..."

He hoped that would be enough to make him drop it, but All Might had other ideas. "Most professionals I've known would have given up after receiving just one of those wounds, boy." Bakugo couldn't look at him, couldn't accept the praise.

Not from him. "Sir... please stop. You don't have to try and cheer me up."

All Might chuckled. "I'm not here for that."

Bakugo sighed, turning his eye toward him. "Well, you might wanna give the pep talk to someone who can still be a hero. I kinda kamakazied my quirk taking out Endeavor's."

Something in All Might's face took a turn for the morose, and he sighed too. "You really think your chances at being a hero are shot?"

"Aren't they?" Bakugo said with a frown. "Can't exactly compete or be much use saving people without them. Besides that, lord only knows if my eye still works after taking a torch to the face
like I did." He leaned back against his pillow, staring up at the ceiling. "I'm calling it quits, before I outlive my usefulness."

Memories swam in his slurry mind, all the times he'd tormented Izuku for being quirkless, all the times he'd beaten him into the dirt for no reason. All those wasted moments hurting a friend, a kid who looked up to him.

What I wouldn't fucking give for a do-over...

Bakugo closed his eye, trying to keep the tears stuffed inside.

Like that's even a thing.

"Well then..." All Might, shrugged, hands splayed to his sides. "What if there was a way for you to get another quirk?"

Bakugo actually laughed. "Yeah, sure... will pigs fly that day too?"

Then All Might laughed. "Well, there's this one circus- no, not the point." He smiled, leaning forward in his wheelchair. "Young Bakugo... you can still be a hero." Eyebrow arched, the former warhead gave him a sidelong look. "Would you accept my quirk, if I gave it to you?"

Silence hung over them both, for a long time. That hopeful patient, smile remained on All Might's face and reality settled into Bakugo's head. He was being serious, and the former warhead sat up. "What the hell are you talking about?" All Might laughed again. "Sir, I- No. Even if that were possible, I couldn't. It's yours." Bakugo's fist clenched, and he couldn't look at All Might any longer. "Power like that belongs to someone like you, like Izuku. Not with the poster child for 'fucked up in the head'."

All Might chuckled. "Oh, I considered Young Midoriya a long time ago now. Maybe now he'd be a good choice, he has grown into quite the hero... but I want you to have it."

Bakugo almost jumped out of bed. "But sir-!"

"Look at me," All Might gestured to his broken body, "when I was defeated by All For One... my body was irreparably damaged. I'm not going to be able to walk again for as long as I live." Bakugo felt something about his world shatter, leaving his chest cold. "My time as a hero? It's done. I knew it would be going into that battle, and I don't regret it." His smile was almost enough to make the young man feel better. "It's time for someone worthy, someone like you to inherit my power and carry forward to the next generation."

For a few moments, Bakugo considered what he'd heard. Thinking it all over, considering what he still wanted from life, he arrived at a selfish conclusion. "You really think it should be me?"

All Might's smile grew wider. "I do."

Drawing in a deep breath, he slowly let it back out. "What do I have to do?"

Reaching toward his mane of blond hair, All Might plucked a single hair from his own head and offered it to Bakugo. "Eat this... and keep being that hero you've already proven yourself to be."

Taking the hair in his palm, Bakugo stared at it for a long time. After sighing, smiling and shaking his head at himself, he said, "Well... what the hell," and gulped it down.

Always did wanna be like you...
Redemption is defined one of two ways. The first is 'being saved from error, evil or sin.' The second being 'the action of gaining or regaining possession of something in exchange for payment, or clearing of a debt.' However, some would like to think there is a third definition, even if it doesn't stray too far from the originals: the act of saving one's self by correcting their mistakes, either in their eyes or others.

Although a beautiful thing, not every journey ends with it. Some merely end as they should, reaching a conclusion that -maybe- they'd been headed toward since the beginning.

Ochako was wandering up the road, bags in her hands full of groceries, when an older woman from a neighboring building called out to her. "Hey! Uraraka!"

She giggled, spinning on her heels to face her. "Yes, Miss Kobayashi?"

"You gonna be joining us for supper tonight again?" She grinned and somewhere behind her, a little girl beamed with a hopeful smile. "I made plenty~!"

Ochako thought about it. "Hmm... Okay, just gimme a few minutes to put this stuff away." She held up her groceries. "Okay?"

The older woman nodded. "We'll be waiting." and behind her, the little one cheered.

All smiles, Ochako trotted up her stairs. She almost ran headlong into a pair of men moving furniture, when she rounded the bend. "Easy there, young'in." Said the older of the two. "Don't wanna kill the old man, do ya?" He tilted his head toward his son.

A son who rolled his eyes. "You're the old man, old man..."

She giggled. "Sorry. Here," She set her groceries aside, walking forward and using her quirk to make the couch weightless. "Just shout when you've got it inside, okay?"

Both boys were sudden all grins, "much obliged, Uraraka! Thanks for helpin us out again."

She shrugged, grabbing her groceries and waving goodbye. "It's nothing, really. Just don't hurt your back again, okay?" The older man gave a thumbs up, and they parted ways.

All the way up the stairs, round the next corner and Ochako fished her keys from her pocket and unlocked her apartment. In she went, off with her shoes, then she trotted to her kitchen and set to putting away her food. By her fridge was a calendar, several days on it were marked. 'Plans with the Mina and Momo' or 'helping the Amaris with their gardening' or 'apartment building pot luck!' to name a few. It was a full schedule outside of her class and hero work, and looking at it made her smile.

Everything was put away, the fridge just closing when her phone started ringing. Wondering who it could be, she fished her phone from her pocket and checked the caller ID. It would be her mom. Smiling, she answered it. "Hey, mom."

"Sweetie," she said, "sorry to call you again, for the thousandth time in three days."

"It's fine, mom." Ochako laughed, wandering back toward her front door. "You were just worrying, and after that disaster, why wouldn't you?"
Her mom seemed to relax, so her breath seemed to say. "Alright... I was just calling to ask what your plans were after graduation." Ochako stopped, midway through putting her shoes back on. "Your father and I were thinking about heading toward Kyoto around then..." Slowly, sitting down on her floor, Ochako realized where this was headed. "We were wondering if you wanted to come with us, travel around for a while after graduation. Like we used to."

That tone of voice, sounding so hopeful, Ochako almost felt her heart skip as she considered her answer. In truth, she'd known what it was for a while. "I... don't think I want to."

For a little while, the line was silent. Then her mom, if her voice was to be believed, smiled. "I think I understand." Ochako smiled, trying not to cry. "My little girl found her way home, didn't she?"

Sniffling, wiping at her eyes, Ochako replied. "Yeah. I think I did, mom."

Her mother made a sound, a single, happy little laugh. "Well, I think that's the best news I've heard in a long time." Ochako sniffled again and laughed too, smiling bright. "I'm proud of you... think you'll survive seeing your parents at graduation?"

"Are you kidding?" Said the gravity girl, standing up. "I'd love to see you guys. It's been so long and I really miss you, plus I've gotta show you around. Introduce you to my friends."

"Wouldn't miss it," her mother said, "I love you, my baby girl."

"I love you too, mom." They said farewell, then that was that.

Phone stuffed back into her pocket, Ochako dried up her face and left, locking the door behind her. It was a short jaunt back down the stairs, then just a little ways around the building and she arrived at her destination. She knocked and a friendly voice called out, welcoming her inside. With a smile, Ochako opened the door and walked in.

Graveyards have a way of unnerving even the most stout of heart, rattling those with strong nerves with an eerie feeling. Like phantoms lingering above the tombstones themselves long to come alive again. Even so, should one wander in without much mirth to begin with, it might feel altogether different. Almost like those same phantoms were welcoming you home, their cold and shapeless arms around you.

That wasn't quite what Izuku felt, hands in his pockets as he stood before one grave in particular, but it was close. The grave of Inko Midoriya. "Hey... mom." His foot fussed at the ground for a moment, hands wriggling in his pockets. "It's uh... it's been a while."

With his spotty memories of the last two years, he wasn't even sure if he'd even been here. He likely had, but that he couldn't be sure soured his conscience.

"I... you haven't missed much. Most of it was... excessive. A bit gratuitous in terms of violence, really... you- you woulda hated it. Probably would've yanked me right of the hero course, right when I started getting shot at, if I had to guess."

He sighed, scratching at the back of his neck, sniffing a little as he just... tried to breathe.

"You know, I had this thought, delusion, dream something like that, after dad left us. Guess I got so sad I stopped thinking clearly, and over the years, just watching time go by, I never really questioned it."
He felt the tear drops running down his face long before he realized he'd started to cry, hadn't been able to stop it. Hell, at this point he wasn't really sure he should stop it. Stopping himself from crying, maybe that was another reason he felt so tired all the time now.

"I uh... I'd convinced myself that after him? That was it." He shrugged, sniffling as his tears started staining the front of his shirt. "I honestly thought I was done losing people." Right then, right there, after all this time, all over again he began sob like had back then. Like he had the day she'd died. "I miss you... I wish you could be here, meet the people I have in my life now. Tell you that you were right that night..." wiping at his face, he shook his head at himself. "Anyways, I- I think you'd like most of them. Kyo, Sten, Mina, Den... Ochako, Yaoyorozu, Shoto."

She would have, probably would've thrown a party for all the friends he had now. All the people her baby boy could rely on, folks who loved him with all they had.

"Bakugo too." He smiled. "It's not quite like it was, way back when, if anything he's actually trying now. Trying to be good, kind to folks around him, even if he is still the same loud Kacchan we've always known."

His fingers clenched into his palms, remembering how it had been Bakugo who'd managed to haul him out of his grief stricken stupor. just waiting to die on the front step, not eating or sleeping for days on end. Sometimes, when he was feeling especially helpless and done with the world, he wondered if that had been the right call.

Looking at his mother's grave, he decided that was about the worst thing he could ever think. "I love you, mom." he got on his knees, and wrapped his arms around the tombstone and felt what ice remained around his heart shatter. "I'm gonna be the best hero I can be... please don't worry, just be happy for me, from where you are now." He stood up, wiping his face clean of tears again and turned around.

One step forward, then another and another. Every single one felt heavier than the last, and his heart clenched like a cold fist. It was almost like he felt that he he shouldn't leave her. That he should stay right there, with her. Teeth gritted, tears started flowing again and it wasn't long before he was running and sobbing.

No. No you idiot, you didn't go through everything just to wind up here again. You can still do this.

His legs kicked off the ground, sending him sailing into the air and he landed on a nearby roof. Then he started leaping from roof to roof, ignoring the pain in that damned leg.

You've got no business feeling like this. Everything turned out fine, we won! Philanthropy is crumbling, Sten's still alive and with us. Snap out of it already!

Soles of his shoes shifted, throwing him off balance as his heels skidded across the roof. Still, that wasn't enough to stop him, brain well and far away from what he was doing, just throwing himself forward. If he'd payed just a little more attention, he might've caught his footing before he made one misstep too many. Overshooting his target, Izuku missed. Soles of his shoes barely scraped against the edge of the roof, sending him into a spin. His head hit the railing of a fire escape, arm snagged on a clothes line and then he slammed, face first, into the puddled street of the alley.

Groaning, dragging himself up, he felt like an absolute idiot, then he heard a familiar laugh. "Now why does this feel familiar?" He saw a woman with purple hair, smiling at him.

Dizzy as he was, Izuku recognized that face and voice. "Hey... Kyo." When he finally stopped seeing stars, he saw she was offering him a hand up.
His fingers clasped around hers, she pulled him upright, then they both stumbled when he took a bad step. With a thump, they fell against one of the alleyway walls and felt a little silly. There she was, trapped between his arms, looking up at him and blushing.

With a laugh, she tilted her head to one side. "Thinking of biting me again?"

His turn to blush, backing away and wondering if this was the exact same alley as three years ago. "Wasn't exactly the plan..."

She shrugged, stepping closer to him again. "It rarely ever was." sticking out her tongue, she almost got him to laugh.

This girl, this rather singular woman had a way of cheering him up, of reaching him when almost nothing else could. It might not have been her directly, some of the time, but at his worst of moods Kyoka's presence just brought warmth. "No, I guess it wasn't."

Straightening up his clothes a little, fussing over him like a mother hen, she checked him over. "You okay?"

He nodded. "Yeah... just, had something on my mind, wasn't paying enough attention to where I was going."

Fingers flicked at his nose. "Dummy. What if you'd actually gotten hurt?"

Adopting a smug smile, he shrugged. "I'd have let my healing factor fix me up?"

Kyoka shook her head, rolling her eyes even as she smiled. "Were you always this snarky, Midoriya?"

"Nope."

She laughed. "Yeah, I didn't think so." When she leaned up to kiss him, they both noted how she had to get on her tip toes to reach him. "...that's not really new, is it?"

Izuku shrugged. "Hadn't really noticed. We've had a lot going on, these last few years."

"We really have." She took his hand, leading him from the alley. "Where are you headed?"

A question he hadn't actually considered answering until just now. "I- well, I hadn't decided yet."

She laughed again, giving a playful look from over her shoulder. "Well then, I think you should head home and get into some dry clothes. Take a bath, warm up or something."

His turn to roll his eyes, all the same he made sure to whisper what he said next. "You just want me naked, don't you?"

Coyly, she shrugged. "No idea what you're talking about." That little dance her shoulders and hips did said anything else. "I'm... not headed there myself for a while yet, truthfully." She scratched at her cheekbone, just in front of her ear, looking a little somber. "Kinda got something to go and take care of."

Understanding immediately what she meant, he nodded. "Okay. I'll head back and wait for you to come home." At the 'coming home' comment, Kyoka went beet red and looked very much away from him. "Call me if you need me for anything?"

She squeezed his hand. "Promise." They bumped shoulders, softly, then went their separate ways.
You know... I don't know if it's anything to worry about after all.

Smiling he looked up at that sunny sky, realizing he wasn't wearing his sunglasses and felt... happy. When was the last time he hadn't had to wear them when it was a clear day?

I'm never not going to miss you, mom. I know that.

Hand in his pockets again, he found his footsteps weren't so heavily weighted as he continued on his way home. Home for now, at least.

Try not to feel like I've forgotten you, when I'm happy with her and the others. Okay?

In true Tartarus fashion, Endeavor's cell was a near featureless, grey room. The transparent metal that separated him from his visitors was stained with his breath, as he stared his rebelius son in the eye. By Shoto's side, hands in his pockets was one Chizome Akaguro, looking angrier than he'd ever been. At his other arm, looking rather displeased though not angry, was Momo Yaoyorozu.

"So..." Endeavor sighed, shoulders sinking. "You're planning to dismantle the company."

Shoto nodded. "It's too much power, wealth and influence in one place. It needs to be distributed among the different agencies it's absorbed over the years."

Endeavor scoffed, rolling his eyes. "You're naive if you assume all will be so altruistic as you. Some of them will try to recreate what our family spent centuries building. Mark my words, boy. Philanthropy was merely one head on the hydra, and now that it's severed? Many more may rise to take its place."

Momo crossed her arms, speaking barely above a whisper, as though the conversation were not really so important. "Then we'll do what we did here, one by one, until the hydra dies."

Smirking, Shoto gave her a look, before turning back to his father. "Like it or not, it's not your world any more."

With a quirk of his brow, Endeavor almost laughed. "And should I return to reclaim it? What would you do then? Kill me? You've already proven that you can't. Elsewise I wouldn't be standing here."

Then it was Stendhal's turn to step forward, and do so he did. He waited for a moment, seeing if Shoto would stop him or make him step back. When he didn't, the dhampire growled. "He won't have to."

Reading the young man's face, Endeavor looked afraid for just one moment, before he nodded respectfully. "A shame you were not one of my children. You'd made a better heir than all the rest."

Stendhal tasted bile in his throat, deciding that was all he had to contribute to this conversation. Shoto turned and started walking away, and Sten was more than happy to follow. "Goodbye, Endeavor." Said the dual quirk used, not bothering to look the man in the eyes.

Endeavor's smile vanished, and he watched the boy leaved. "Goodbye... Todoroki."

Shoto scoffed, eyes narrowing. "Eighteen years, and the least nauseating goodbye is the one he gives from jail."

Momo reached out and squeezed his arm, "at least you'll never have to hear another one. Right?"
More than a little red in the cheeks, Shoto just nodded. "Ah, uh huh..." She released him, he cleared his throat. "Thanks, both of you, for coming with me."

Stendhal shrugged. "I honestly thought you were going to ask me to 'accidentally' let him out. Almost disappointed you didn't."

Chuckling nervously, Momo eyed him warily. "You haven't changed much, over the years, have you?"

Another shrug and the half-human smiled, giving her a sidelong look. "I'd like to think I have. After all... I did say I was 'almost' disappointed."

Releasing a bit of breath, she smiled at him. "I'm glad."

Not sure what they were talking about, Shoto decided to stay out of it until they were outside. There, waiting for them, was a limo full of his remaining family. "I don't know if I'm ready to do this..."

The people waiting for them, they were there to spread Toya's ashes. Sten reached out, putting a hand on Shoto's shoulder. "You won't be alone."

Then Momo did the same. "You have your family with you and us too. If you need to cry, or scream out loud, everyone understand."

Sniffling, smiling, Shoto nodded. "I owe you guys." and he climbed inside the limo.

"No you don't." They said in unison.

Before Momo climbed in, Sten tapped her shoulder. "By the way... how did you convince your parents to let you come with us instead of studying?"

Momo's eyes narrowed, giving him a conspiratorial smile. "Sten... I defeated the hero killer fresh out of a several-day coma. Who says I even asked them?" He just blinked, not sure what to say as she climbed inside. "I think I'm done trying to gain their approval."

Smiling approvingly, Sten climbed in after her. It was the last happy moment they'd have until after his oldest and best friend's ashes were spread... At least he wouldn't be the only one crying when it came down to it.

Fingertips fussing at the stump where her other horn used to be, Mina frowned at her reflection. "Darn it..." she pouted. "I was almost hopin it wouldn't grow back."

Behind her, Kaminari -her Kaminari- draped his arms around her middle, kissing her cheek. "Eh, I love em."

Mina giggled. "Yeah well, today, so far, you've said that about every inch of me." Turning around, still in his arms, her skin brushing his with deliberate slowness, she looked him right in the eyes. "You afraid you'll lose me to some other suitor, Denki?"

"Always," he smiled, "but that's not why I ah, well, wanted to spend today like this with you." She gave him a knowing, teasing look and he sighed, giving her one right back. "No, the reason isn't 'hormones' either." Mina's head titled back when she laughed, and Kaminari grinned. "Thought I was gonna die a few days ago. Hell, we damn near did."
She leaned against him, nuzzling his neck and holding on tight. "You mean you were planning to..." Blinking, Kaminari’s smile vanished, replaced rather plainly with fear as he looked at her face, seeing her smiling sadly. "First time you ever said you loved me..." she said, looking down at their toes. "right after Todoroki said something about 'getting evidence of Endeavor being evil on film'? I tend to notice these things..."

She ran her fingers over his shoulders, down his chest and put her palm flat against him, feeling his heartbeat. "Mina..."

"Don't." She buried her face against him, holding as tight as she dared, considering their healing injuries. "Just don't ever think about doing that again, okay? Not to my Kami..."

Arms around her, he pulled her as flush against him as she could go and kissed the top of her head. "Okay."

"Promise?"

He ran hands up her back, fingers tangling in her hair. "I Promise."

Grabbing the scruff of his neck, she pulled him down to her and kissed him. "Thank you, Den... and I don't just mean for the promise." She smiled, blinking a few times as she looked into his eyes. "Thanks for believing in me, for being patient in me while I couldn't do that for myself." A little morose, she looked to one side. "I just wish it hadn't taken me so long to get my quirk back..."

"You never lost it." He swayed with her in his arms, stroking at her spine. "Just took you a while to accept again, like I knew you would."

She chuckled, mirthlessly. "Poor Mooney... he didn't deserve anything that happened to him, did he?"

Kaminari sighed, giving that some thought. "Well... if he was telling the truth, he did sell Eri out to the Yakuza..."

Mina shuddered. "Aaaaaaaaand guilt is gone. ...not sure how I feel about that."

"He was a screwed up guy in a screwed up place." Kamnari murmured, and she started swaying with him. "Nothing about anything he went through was okay, I'm less sure how I feel about the things he did after he escaped Tartarus."

"Me too." She pressed her cheek to his chest, running hands up his back, scratching at his shoulders. "We made quite a team though, right?"

He laughed. "Yup, like some kinda dynamic duo."

Grinning wide, she stepped back, spreading her hands in front of them "Acid Shock!"

Leaning forward, catching her by surprise, he kissed her again. Closing her eyes, she hummed happily, wrapping her arms around him yet again. When they broke, he practically gasped. "Tired?"

Shaking her head, she spoke quickly. "Nope." Then pulled him in to kiss her again.

That's when they both tripped and fell.

Crashing to floor, a pair of yelps between them, the metaphorical dust took its time settling and
they both laughed. "Then again, we might not have nearly enough co-ordination for that again..."

Giggling, Mina shrugged. "That's just quitter talk, Kami."

His eyes narrowed. "Is that a challenge?"

Smiling, coyly, she averted her eyes. "I dunno. Are ya gonna meet that challenge if it is?"

Kaminari just smiled at her. "Yup."

Leaning down to kiss her again, neither of them found much more use for words after that.

That day, the hospital seemed almost empty as Kyoka wandered through it. Back to the same room as she'd been wandering to, for the last three days now. Knocking on the door, she got no answer. Waiting another second or two, she opened it and stepped inside.

Where she saw very bruised, very bandaged Toga climbing into her shirt. "Aw, c'mon!" She whined as Kyoka blushed. "Can't a woman ansray without the guards burstin before she makes her getawa-" Then she saw it was Kyoka and stopped moving. Her smile vanished, staring at her in stunned silence.

It was a while before either of them said anything, and Kyoka spoke first. "So you're leaving again?" Toga looked a little guilty, avoiding eye contact. "Before I can say goodbye?"

"Hey!" Himiko spun on her heels, cheeks huffed up and shoulders stiff. "I coulda been on my way to come see ya! you don't know!" Cheeks huffed up, arms crossed she tossed her head to one side, pigtails swishing.

Sighing, smiling, Kyoka stepped inside completely and closed the door behind her. "Were you?"

Then, grinning, Toga turned back. "I totally was!" Without further ado, she leapt forward and threw her arms around Kyoka, laughing as she went. "I can't believe ya did it! Standnin up and spillin the beans like that on national tv!" Stepping back and snickering, she ruffled Kyoka's hair. "Yer all grown up, and mamma's so proud of you."

"Heh... oh my mother was beside herself alright... I'm lucky she let me leave my room at all after I survived that building collapsing."

Toga shrugged. "A mamma's gotta protect her kids, especially when they've been needin it all their lives, Kyoka-girl." She gave her a somber smile, looking into her eyes. "I'm glad ya haven't needed me round, since back then."

Sighing, any trace of a smile vanished off of Kyoka's face. "Doesn't mean I didn't miss you, Himiko..."

"I can stick around more now," Toga offered, "finally got myself outta that hornet's nest, by burning it down, but still. Got myself out of it."

Giving her old friend a weary look, Kyoka heard something in that statement. "How'd you get into it in the first place?"

Eyeing the door for a moment, Toga sighed. "Well... I'll have to tell ya another time." She smiled, stepping toward the window and opening it. "Got a couple loose ends to take care of before I can really call this dog'n pony show done with. Then? I'll talk yer ears off about it all. Okay?"
With another sigh, Kyoka smiled. "Tell me or not, just don't run away again, okay? I want you in my life again, and all the weirdness that comes with you."

Toga gave a thumbs up. "Promise ya." then she leapt out the window, and off into the distance.

Hands in her pockets, Kyoka started wandering back to UA. It felt like both the shortest and longest trip anywhere in her life, and once back, she ran back to her room where Izuku was waiting, looking over her Zune and making sure it still worked properly. She opened the door, closing it behind her, and he stood up to greet her only for her to haul him up against the wall and press her lips against his.

He squeaked almost comically, eyes fluttering in surprise before he simply yielded as she started shoving his clothes off him. When he made a sort of nervous squawk, she stopped and pulled back, but left her earlobes around his neck. "Are you safewording?"

Timidly, smiling with a scarlet face, he pointed to the window. "The uh, curtains... they're ah..."

She glanced at them, and at all the nothing and no one outside them, then shrugged. "Fuck it." Then leaned back in and claimed his lips with hers, relishing how he squirmed between her and the wall. Only after she'd stripped him clear of clothing did she let him start the process with her.

Once her pants were off, she yanked him onto her bed, swinging her legs over him. "Say it for me?" And she settled over him, rubbing her cheek against his affectionately.

Eyes aflutter, his lust addled brain groped about for what she meant. "um... I'm yours."

She giggled, shaking her head, dragging a fingertip down the middle of his lips. "Good boy, but not that one." Her cheeks went a little red. "The other one..."

Finally understanding, he smiled. "I love you, Kyoka..."

She hummed her approval, leaning her lips closer to his. "I love you too, Izuku." When she kissed him, and he shoved her shirt off of her, the rest of the afternoon slipped away as they quickly found other things to do with their time.

Crying had always felt like such a waste of energy, all it ever left him with was less water and strength in his system. When it was with them, surrounded by the Todoroki family, it felt... cleansing, rejuvenating, almost. Still, no denying how tired it all left him as he trud his way along, duffel bag over his shoulder, toward his new home. Up the steps, avoiding some seedy looking individuals and shivering when they gave him leary looks he arrived at Vanessa's doorstep.

Before he could even knock, she opened the door and smiled. "Welcome home."

Nervous, he smiled. "Yeah... I'm home." Then he stepped inside, taking a look around the place. Squalid, but nicer than anywhere else he'd ever lived, that was for damn sure. "I like it."

She sighed, clearly relieved and walked off to the living room. "Now, I haven't actually had solid food since... god how long has it been?"

Stendhal chuckled. "Over twenty years?"

"Something like that," she shrugged, "so, I wasn't sure what to get in regards to that. So, tonight, take-out's on me and we can take care of that tomorrow after school." When she motioned for him to follow, he took off his shoes and followed slowly after her. Then they arrived at his new room.
"Used to be a storage room, with... nothing in it." She admitted, somewhat bashfully. "But, I think you should be able settle in nicely."

Looking around the room, seeing the rather spartan interior, Sten just smiled. "Me too."

One bed, a desk and chair, two lamps and some curtains. All needed. He walked into his new room, and dumped the contents of his bag onto the bed. There wasn't much in it. Just his clothes, some shoes and a few bits of memorabilia and an old guitar he walked to his desk, placing Twist's mask at the head of it, next to a pair of Sparky's glasses and Seether's mask, along with a necklace Dabi used to wear. Shoto had given that to him at the beach, saying it was only fair since the family had everything else to remember him by. Sten never took photos, so this was all he had to remember any of them by.

Vanessa tip toed forward, gingerly picking up the guitar. "You can play?"

He spun around, almost having started crying while he arranged his friends's -surrogate family, really- things on his new desk. "What? Oh, I dabble but..." he sniffled. "That belonged to Curtis."

She tilted her head to one side, tuning the guitar as she looked at him. "Curtis?"

Looking a little awkward again, Sten rubbed the back of his neck. "Have you ever heard the song 'The Ballad of Curtis Loew'?

Vanessa shook her head, he sighed. "It's a song about a kid who used to collect bottles, recycle them then use the money to pay this man to play him music. An old homeless man named Curtis Loew, 'the finest picker who ever played the blues'..." Sten reminisced, wearing a sad smile. "Well... that was me and the guy who owned that guitar, that ballad was the first and best thing he ever played for me."

Vanessa sensed the ending, but had to ask. "How'd you get his guitar?"

Sten reached out and ran his hand along the length of the old thing. "One year, a real nasty winter went through the city. Never saw him again, but I found this where he used to sleep." Vanessa handed him the guitar, and he held it lovingly. "I waited and waited, checking back every week for a year, but he never came back."

Looking to the things on his desk, she felt her heart tearing for him. "It's the same story with everyone you care about, isn't it?"

His eyes went to her, he smiled again, then set the guitar on his bed. "Not everyone."

She reached out and hugged him, ruffling his hair and kissing his cheek. "If you need to talk about any of it, I've got all the time you'll need."

"Thanks, Aunt V..." Sensing that he wanted to be alone, she left him in his room and he set to putting everything away. Wiping at his eyes, nose and shaking his head at himself Sten heard his stomach growling. "Oh, shut up..." Standing up, scowling at his own abdomen he started for the living room, then grabbed the phone.

Vanessa tossed him her wallet, he placed an order and she walked passed him with a frame in hand. Shrugging, he was about to take a seat on the couch when someone knocked on the door.

"...Okay." He walked over, opened it up and was immediately punched in the face.

Who else would it be but Knuckleduster. "I asked for one thing! One thing!"
Snarling, Stendhal threw a punch right back, not saying anything as they just started wailing on each other. Seconds after their 'fight' had started, Vanessa was between them pulling them apart. "STOP IT!" Immediately, both men froze where they stood, eyes wide. Growling, Vanessa pointed a finger right at Knuckleduster's nose. "Explain. Now!"

Pressing two of his fingers together, he awkwardly fished about for his words. "Ah... well..."

"The lunk's with me." Vanessa and Sten turned and saw none other than Himiko toga, lolipop in her mouth, waving at them. Sten looked so happy to see her, then she started talking. "It's yer girl, Toga."

Averting his eyes, Sten- wait, why did he feel- tugging at his collar, he growled. "Please don't say confusing things in front of my aunt..."

"Kay." Toga shrugged, stepped forward and offered to shake Vanessa's hand. "Hi, I'm yer nephew's girl, Himiko Toga. Nice ta meet'cha."

Accepting the handshake with a smile, Vanessa laughed. "Charmed."

Meanwhile, Sten fumed. "That's the exact opposite of-!" Stopping himself, he took a deep breath. "No. No I'm not succumbing to this." He crossed his arms, turning away from all of them. "Do your worst. Say the most uncomfortably awkward things you can, I'm not falling for it."

Blowing a raspberry, Toga laughed. "Ah, shoulda known you'd wise up quick."

That left Vanessa to turn back to Knuckleduster, glaring as she did. "And you?" Her voice alone might have been enough to kill him.

All the same, he merely gulped. "I'm uh... your son's-"

"Nephew." Stendhal corrected.

Knuckleduster nodded. "Ah, nephew's former mentor." Pulling something off his shoulder, he offered to the nephew in question. "I came to bring him this."

Setting it aside, Stendhal walked right up to him. After a moment of glaring at each other, the pair of men started furiously punching each other again. "Out with it, you violent old bastard!" Vanessa face palmed, Toga just started howling with laughter.

"I told you not to drag them into it!" Caught off guard, Stendhal forgot to throw his next punch then it quickly became a very one sided affair. "Why!? Why didn't you listen, after all that talk about not abandoning the people you love to the wolves! Now Twist and Spary are-!"

Sten's hands caught Knuckledusters, and the old man stopped throwing punches. For a moment, he just looked confused at his former protege, shaking with his head lowered. Sten looked up, tried to say something, then just burst out in tears. Messy, ugly, loud tears he tried to stifle by shoving his palms against his face. Vanessa, Toga and Knuckleduster all just stared, stunned with gaping jaws.

"I know..." he whimpered in between sobs. Then he pulled back his head and threw another punch. "I KNOW!" Knuckleduster didn't throw another one, he just... took it, letting the kid hit him. Sten's fists hit with ever decreasing strength, until he was just tapping them against Knuckleduster's large, muscled chest. "Hit me..." Sten begged, his voice so small it was barely there. "Hit me, god damnit!"

Knuckleduster just wrapped his arms around him, holding him tight. "No." Then Stendhal started...
bawling, and Vanessa and Toga hugged him too.

"Damn it..." Stendhal sniffed, after a while. "I'm so sick of crying..."

Vanessa pet at his head. "It's okay to cry, Chizome."

Toga burrowed her face against his neck, eyes tickled by his hair. "Ya clearly need to anyways."

He peered at her, she peered back. "How long ya been holdin this stuff? Tryin'a replace it with rage?" Leave it to her, out of everyone he'd ever, met to see right through him like that.

After thinking that one through, Sten realized an all too pathetic, obvious answer. "...My whole life."

Knuckleduster hugged him harder. "Oh, kid..." he gripped his shoulders, stepping back to hold him at arm's length. "What was the point of giving you an outlet then, if this was all it was going to do?"

Sten sniffed, looking down at the floor. "Leading me down the worst possible road, I guess..."

Vanessa closed the distance, hugging him as much as she could. "Then I think it's time to let the real feelings out..."

He sniffed again, wiping at his face. "Even if I have to scream?"

Toga nodded, stepping back and smiling at him. "Loud as ya like."

Looking at them, all, Sten reared back his head and did just that. After a little while, the others joined in too. Then they all started laughing, shortly before Stendhal started crying all over again.

It was about the most awkward thing in the world when the delivery guy showed up. After ordering yet more food, gathering around Vanessa's table, the group sat down and had dinner.

"So," Vanessa said, changing the subject for the umpteenth time, "is this going to be a thing?" She gave her guests a bemused look, watching them squirm under her gaze. "Because I could get used to this place being so lively."

Knuckleduster saluted. "I'll try to keep things more civil in the future, ma'am."

Grinning, Toga chimed in. "I wont!"

"Surprising no one..." Stendhal muttered while Vanessa laughed.

"It's just as well," Vanessa smiled, "Working as a hero, I'm not sure how often I'll be home at night to keep this one company." She reached over and ruffled her nephew's hair, Toga snickered at the way he blushed and squirmed under the affection. "I'd feel better, knowing he had people he cares about coming around sometimes."

She and Stendhal exchanged a smile, and Toga shrugged. "Yeah, well, beats the hell outta my place anyways." Looking Sten right in the eyes, much like a cat at a mouse, she added one thing more. "Love to."

As Sten growled, fussing at his collar and trying to cool off Vanessa laughed. "Perfect!"

"IS NOT!" Stendhal fumed and both women shrieked with laughter.

Shaking his head, Knuckleduster stood up and pulled a cigarette from his pocket. "Oi," Vanessa pointed right at his nose, even as she procured her own pack of cigarettes from a nearby vase, "not
inside, muscles. Out." She shooed him toward the door and he went scampering away with her following after, pointing right at her Nephew's nose. "No... 'fffffffffffffunny business' while I'm gone." Before following after Knuckleduster, leaving Sten a blushing mess and Toga howling with laughter.

Wiping tears from her eyes, Toga sighed. "Yer aunt is awesome."

Sighing, Sten shrugged. "Who knew she could be such a troll..."

Toga quirked an eyebrow over her drink. "Ain't that yer job to know?"

Awkwardly, he looked away. "This is the most I've seen her in fourteen years."

Grinning, Toga crossed her arms. "You love it."

Sighing, he looked right into her eyes. "I think I might." She danced in her seat, victory clearly in hand, and he finally relaxed. "So... what really brought you here? I doubt it was saying hi and all that."

Pouting, Toga tried to look offended. "Well I never." Then she grinned. "It was partially that though." She stood up walked to the door and grabbed a folder she'd brought with her, walking back over and handing it to him. "Here. I need ya to check and see if I missed anything."

Not quite sure what this was all about, he took the folder and started going through it. "This is-!" Evidence, a solid case that proved Endeavor was abusing his children for years.

Doctor's visits for serious injuries, paid for under the table to keep it hush-hush. Bank statements that proved bribes were exchanged to keep Endeavor's name clean, a thumb drive he could only assume had video evidence. "Just wanted to be sure of it all." In disbelief, he looked up seeing her looking a little squirrely. "If ya can add anything, maybe some kinda witness testimony of somethin, it'd probably help out a lot." Looking a little awkward herself, she scratched behind one of her ears. "I'm not gonna go through with this before I run it by the family. Don't worry, I know they've got enough to deal with as is."

Sten just blinked, staring at her, dumbfounded. "Why are you even putting this case together?"

She shrugged, looking more than a little sad. "Cuz Frankie deserved better than what he got, and I don't just mean when he died." She sighed, arms crossed, fingers fussing at her elbows. "You know how bad he had it, how he got kicked from one shitty spot to the next... he never had a chance at anything better, and he deserved one. More than one."

Slowly, he stood up and put the folder down. She waited, watching closely as he moved closer, moving to hug her.

At least, that was his plan when he'd started moving...

There he was, fingers curled under one side of her jaw and looking down at her, his chest almost painfully warm when he realized what he was doing. Blinking, gulping, he looked her over, seeing her staring back expectantly as he just froze. His other hand had stopped shy of her waist, he could hear his heartbeat thudding in his ears.

Smirking playfully, she put her hands on chest, and he shivered feeling her fingers through the fabric of his shirt. "Sadness wasn't the only thing yer anger buried, was it?" Sten gulped again, shaking his head slowly, very aware of how close they still were. "Waitin for somethin?"
"For you to say 'no'." The words were out of his mouth before he knew he was talking, then he blushed.

She shook her head. "Puddin... I ain't sayin it."

"If you say so... Harley." Before she could ask what that meant, he leaned in and pressed his lips to hers. His hopes that it would douse the flame soaring in his chest were not met, in fact, it only made it worse as he pulled her up against him.

When they parted, they were both panting messes, looking at each other with glassy eyes. "Golly..." Toga chuckled, breathlessly. "Never thought I'd've gotten something like that outta ya."

He laughed, almost humorlessly. "You showed up, out of nowhere, saving a helpless kid from Overhaul..." she blinked, listening closely as he whispered. "Offered to help me take down the bastard who was hurting Eri, treated my injuries yourself, gave me a place to sleep while I was making the dumbest decisions of my life..." She couldn't help the blush that followed, and he wasn't done yet. "Then you handed me all I needed to put Philanthropy and Endeavor in the dirt on a silver platter. You helped me give my family justice." He took her hand, trembling, afraid she might run away if he let go. "What the hell did you think I'd feel?"

Eyes fluttering, smiling in a way he'd never seen, she shrugged. "Like it'd be a waste to kill me?"

He gave another, near humorless laugh. "You have a talent for understatement, miss Quinn."

"That's not my- mmph!" She wrapped her arms around him, smiling into the kiss as he held her for just a little while longer.

Then they heard about the shrillest whistle of their lives from outside. "Oi!" Vanessa shouted from somewhere out there. "What'd I say about funny business?"

Reluctantly, they parted, Sten growling and hiding his face as he blushed beet red and Toga just laughed. They exchanged the meekest, happiest smiles of their lives and she leaned back in and stole another kiss. "So... that your way of asking me out?"

Sheepishly, he nodded. "If you'll have- wait," she already laughing and he just hid behind his hands. "God damnit, yes. Yes it is." Peeking from his flimsy hiding place, he cleared his throat. "What do you say?"

Nodding, she kept right on smiling. "Happily." Then she picked up her phone and started dialing.

"Uh..." he blinked, "what're you-"

"Callin Kyoka, gurl." She said off handedly. "Promised I'd meet up with her after I took care of a few things, figured you might want yet friends over anyways. Specially since one of em's yer little brother and all."

He laughed, taking a long drink of water while he was at it. "Very astute. Almost like you planned all of this from the beginning."

She winked. "Didn't plan on the kissin."

Shaking his head, he started for his room. "Meet you on the roof?" And she was already on her way there.

Grabbing the package that Knuckleduster had delivered, he entered his room and tore it open. To
his surprise, he recognized it as the 'Sword of Heaven' the second blade he'd stolen from Shogun. There was a handwritten note from Knuckleduster on it that said, 'a kid with a quirk like yours need a good blade. this one's made outta space metal, so good luck breaking it. -Knuckles.'

Smiling, Sten put it on his desk and saw something else there. Jaw dropping slightly, he reached out and ran his fingers down a photograph he hadn't put there. It was a picture of Ingenium, smiling warmly. He'd thought he'd seen Vanessa, carrying a picture frame earlier... sniffling back tears, he picked it up and smiled at it. After a few more moments, he put it down, grabbed curtis's guitar and walked out of his room.

Then Vanessa's home phone rang and Stendhal almost jumped out of his skin. Growling as he answered it, he didn't have time to speak. "I'm officially taking the blame for Overhaul." Aizawa's voice, making Stendhal's heart stop. "You don't have to worry about your nephew. It's all taken care-"

"Are you fucking stupid!?"

Clearly taken off guard, Aizawa stammered. "Akaguro. Ah, I-"

"What the hell are you thinking!?" Demanded the half human. "If you go to jail, Izuku loses another part of his family, you utter moron!" Aizawa squawked something unintelligible, and Sten growled. "Well!?"

Clearing his throat, the former hunter spoke again. "I won't be going to jail." Sten rolled his eyes. "As a professional, protecting a student of mine with a serious medical condition at the time, it will be seen as necessary. Unlike the murders I committed while hunting vampires, assuming there ever is any legal repercussion for that..."

Sten rubbed at his eyes. "Aizawa..."

"You, on the other hand," his teacher spoke sternly. "had you committed such a murder, not only would you be barred from hero work for the rest of your life, you'd be the one in jail right now. Am I clear?"

He sighed. "Crystal."

"Good," Aizawa sighed too. "Pass that along to your aunt, please... I don't have the nerve to say it again."

Sten rolled his eyes. "Fine. But Aizawa?" When his teacher hummed inquisitively, Sten held the phone very close to his mouth. "If you manage to make someone kill you before Izuku can tell you that you're like a father to him? I'll drag you out of hell, kick your ass and tape your mouth shut so he can cry on you." Then he slammed the phone down, not bothering to wait for a reply. "Idiot..."

Making his way outside, he started clambering onto the roof when he heard a familiar voice. "Crow!"

Smiling, he turned and waved. "Hey, Jack." Then he blinked when he saw the sheer number of people with her. "...and everyone else we know. Okay..." It was true. Izuku, Momo, Shoto, Uraraka, Eri, Kirishima, Mina, Den, a lizard kid and his boyfriend -at a very easy guess- and even Bakugo. Sighing, the dhampire shook his head. "What the hell are you guys all doing here?"

Den put his hands to his mouth. "We came to see you, dum-dum!"

Mina threw her arms into the air, jumping straight up. "House warming party!"
Uraraka held up a bag, smiling brightly. "We brought snacks and everything!"

Shoto sighed. "Uraraka, that was entirely your doing..."

Momo immediately looked like she regretted not chipping in. "Oh... there's still time, we could go and purchase more, should people be peckish enough."

Kirishima laughed. "Yaomomo, you're too sweet and innocent for this world."

One by one they all climbed onto the roof, taking seats around an old oil barrel someone had turned into a makeshift fireplace. Bakugo and Sten didn't say a word to each other. They just silently acknowledged each other's presences, respectfully. Sten had been the one with the guts to do what they hadn't, and Bakugo had been one of the major players in actually beating Endeavor. They didn't like each other, but they respected each other, it was enough to be civil if they had to be.

Of course, Sten wasn't allowed to glower for long before Izuku ran up and hugged him. "Hey, brother."

Wrapping his arms around him in turn, Sten smiled. "Good to see you, little brother."

Izuku laughed. "I'm still older than you, Chizome."

"Yeah, and nothing about that will ever sound right." The dhamprie quipped, shortly before they both stuck their tongues out at each other and laughed.

Smiling, sitting down next to Toga, Kyoka shook her head. "Loons."

"Ain't they just?" Said the other girl and they snuggled up together while Shoto got a fire going.

It wasn't long before they'd all gathered around, telling jokes and sharing stories from happier times.

"What'd you get up to today, nerd?" Bakugo pointed at Izuku.

Thinking quickly, Izuku tried to think of anything that didn't involve talking about his mom or... the time he'd spent with Kyoka. "Ah... had a talk with Nighteye," he fidgeted a little, trying to wrap this up quick. "He just explained that he told us 'exactly what we needed to hear' then left it at that."

Kyoka smirked. "Hon, you're leaving out the best part."

Kirishima quirked an eyebrow. "What's that?"

Blushing, Izuku hid his face while Kyoka just smiled proudly. "He called Nighteye a dick, and Nighteye said that he wasn't 'the first symbol of peace to tell him that'."

Sten, Shoto, Bakugo, Den, Ashido and Kirishima all spoke together at once. "He is a dick." The youngsters among them giggled, Eri especially.

"Sounds hilarious," Toga sighed, "to have been a fly on the wall for that one, right?"

"Right!" Mina blurted out. "Ah, it woulda been hilarious. I bet Midroiya was all fed up, putting the most 'I am so done with this' face anyone's ever seen."

While Izuku hid behind his legs, Momo cleared her throat. "Although, I think Eri has something that she wants to tell everyone too."
Sten just watched with a smile, listening to his friends talk and now he listened to Eri, who
nervously said. "I... I wanna be a hero like recovery girl!"

Raising his hand, Yoichi grinned. "Saved my bacon just a few days ago too. This thug broke my
voice box and she just... undid that like it was nothing!"

Shuichi sighed. "Despite his happy tone, it was terrifying, but yes. Eri was amazing."

Izuku beamed at her. "That's awesome! You can totally do it Eri!"

"Hell yeah she can." Kyoka added.

Then Ochako, Mina and Toga threw their arms into the air. "Hear, hear!" While Momo laughed
and Shoto smiled.

Unusued to so much positive attention, Eri hid behind Shuichi and Yoichi, and the Lizard boy
turned to Sten. "Um... you're the guy who saved me, right?"

Thinking about it, Sten nodded. "What about it?"

Nervously, Shuichi cleared his throat. "I uh... can um..." Wincing his eyes shut, he just blurted it
out. "Will you teach me how to be a hero!?" Everyone stared at him, shocked, the girls and Izuku
looked like that was the cutest they'd ever seen. "I just... you were so cool, and I've always wanted
to learn how to use a sword, so... um..."

Sten smiled, rubbing the back of his neck. "Well... I can teach you some things but... I'm not really
a teacher, so, tell you what: we'll do that, you'll get into a hero school and we'll see about having
you intern with me at some point." Shuichi's smile was absurdly happy, and mildly contagious.
"Deal?"

Then the lizard boy saluted. "Yes, sir!"

Giggling, Ochako pointed at the guitar in Stendhal's lap. "Were you going to play something?"

Nervously, Stendhal laughed and patted the old thing. "I uh... it's been a while."

"Ah come on," Kyoka quipped, "why even drag it up here then?"

Sten hesitated. "I'm just-"

Scooching over to his side, Toga leaned closer to him, batting her eyelashes a few times. "What if
we said... 'please', Puddin?"

That earned a catcall from Mina, making Stendhal blush very profusely, some laughter and a few
of the others chanting "So~ng! So~ng!"

Relenting, Sten sighed. "Okay, okay... but I'm picking it."

"Yes!" Everyone cheered, especially Eri.

Shaking his head, Stendhal sighed, flexing his wrists a few times. "Okay... this is an old one, not
something I came up with, okay? Okay."

Then he started playing fingers strumming at the strings and his voice started carrying the melody
as he sang. As the song rolled along, his gathered friends just stayed quiet, huddling together. Mina
and Den snuggled together, Kyoka and Izuku doing much the same as Ochako munched on the
snacks she'd brought. All the while, arms around each other's shoulders, Bakugo and Kirishima just swayed to the music. Some time into the song, Shoto and Momo exchanged a look, then slowly reached for each other's hands. It would have been subtle, had their cheeks not gone red the moment their fingers entwined.

Eri, Shuichi and Yoichi all fell asleep not long into the song, snuggled together in a pile. There was an unspoken agreement, that Sten would pass the guitar to Kyoka at some point, but that first one? It was perfect for them, that night and everything they'd been through. The song in question was one by 'Mumford and Sons', a song called 'Ghosts that We knew'.

You saw my pain, washed out in the rain  
And broken glass saw the blood run from my veins  
But you saw no fault, no cracks in my heart  
And you knelt beside my hope torn apart  
But the ghosts that we knew will flicker from view  
And we'll live a long life

So give me hope in the darkness that I will see the light  
Cause oh they gave me such a fright  
But I will hold as long as you like  
Just promise me we'll be all right

So lead me back  
Turn south from that place  
And close my eyes to my recent disgrace  
Cause you know my call  
And we'll share my all  
And our children come and they will hear me roar

So give me hope in the darkness that I will see the light  
Cause oh they gave me such a fright  
But I will hold as long as you like  
Just promise me we'll be all right

But hold me still  
Bury my heart on the coals  
And hold me still  
Bury my heart next to yours

So give me hope in the darkness that I will see the light  
Cause oh they gave me such a fright  
But I will hold with All of my Might  
Just promise me we'll be all right

Ghosts that we knew made us black and all blue  
But we'll live a long life  
And the ghosts that we knew will flicker from view  
And we'll live a long life

The End

Special thanks to the crazy folks who've been reading since day one, cheering me on all the while.
To DeathofSnipers for the constant encouragement, letting me ramble about my ideas, and
generally just being the best Boyfriend. I love you, baby.

To one Anonymous reviewer who recomened the hero name "Green Fang" for Izuku, as it later
became 'Guren Fang'.

To IllMadeKnight for tolerating, laughing at and even encouraging my blatant plagiarism and for
the help with choosing that last song. You're awesome ^^,

To my family for being amazing.

and you, for reading this far into the story.

See you in the next one.

(Please repeat the message, it's the music that we choose)
Imma just open by saying "y'all don't have to read this". This is the 'part of the story' where I ramble for a long time about things I wanted to do with this fic, things I regret doing and not doing, and my complaints about MHA as an entity on its own.

To be perfectly clear regarding that last bit, I like My Hero Academia. I think as a series it has an enormous amount of potential and that the characters are more vivid and alive than they manage to be in most series out there. That said, there are some missteps, bits of shortsightedness and some shortcomings that I really couldn't ignore.

And that's the initial reason I wrote this abomination. This started as a "no no no, you're doing it wrong" type thing. I had issues with the narrative, particularly Deku's character and the chapter/episode named 'All Might'. You don't name an episode after a character unless they die in that episode. Some things are sacred, damn you! (no they're not)

But that's not what I want to open with here. No, I'm dropping what I'm hoping is a rather obvious bombshell: Hi, I'm Satellite_Vi, that one crazy bitch/yandere who wrote a little something called 'What Makes a Hero' its sequel 'Legacy' and the... questionable sequels that came after those. If that means anything to you: Hi, I'm not dead and I had my reasons for deleting those fics. If that sounds like moonspeak? ...sorry?

To clear the air on those reasons: I did some crazy, self destructive, friendship ending, stupid shit and didn't want anything to do anything MHA once I'd begun to realize what I'd done. Took me a long time, but I did eventually realize it. Also, once those stories were deleted, as in 'less than a week later' something... fitting happened to me.

My leg decided it was going to stop working. There was no injury, no fall, no awkward stretch, nothing. It just stopped working the way it used to, went numb from the knee down and a trip to the hospital turned up nothing. It just said "fuck this!" and that was that. So, writing about a crippled Izuku after that felt a bit too close to home, not that anything in this story wasn't.

Damn thing still doesn't work like it should. Feeling came back, sure, but that one section of muscle above my knee doesn't work. It's either numb or hurts like hell and doesn't support my weight no matter what. As I said: writing crippled Deku took some time to get back to for reasons.

(Hello, Denizens)

So while I was on my butt, staring at the ceiling and tripping out from pain and pain meds after I got home... well, that's when Blood Butterfly hit my head so hard it almost fell off. It was inelegant, awkward and arguably the most 'crack fueled' idea I'd ever composed. It was a way to use every idea I had for MHA and to correct the perceived shortcomings of MHA all in one, really-overly-long, fell swoop.

Blood Butterfly came at me with a really weird plan in mind: Make Izuku a vampire, analyze who he was in canon and proceed deconstruct everything around him, which was the world, other characters, the narrative and setting and write better transgender characters. Because seriously, Horikoshi, what the fuck were you doing with Magne? Really.

Three chapters in total were in mind, fully formed, from the beginning: 13, 26 and one version of
45 which was scrapped. For reasons. Reasons involving someone else's story. Which I was reading as I wrote this fic. Movin on.

I knew from the beginning what I wanted to do with Jiro (taken out of context, that's worth a laugh. laugh, damn you.) There were a few other stories out there that had already portrayed her as trans, not that I'd read them, but the idea just... appealed to me. Arguably, there are better characters to suit that role, but... Jiro's one of my favorite members of the cast and finding an excuse to write her just kinda blended with this.

Fun little note, the main inspiration for her character throughout this story was Makise Kurisu, along with sprinkles of Ramona Flowers, Sheena Fujibayashi and Touka Kirishima. Also, she wasn't going to be with Izuku. That just sorta... happened.

When I realized that I'd started writing a story about two people suffering from two different kinds of dysphoria (look it up), Izuku and Kyoka getting together just made sense. When I saw all the parallels between them, most of them heartbreaking, I shipped it so hard the damn hull nearly cracked. I'd accidentally written myself into a new OTP and I just ran with it at full tilt.

It was awkward, difficult, even painful to write at times, but god dammit that was how it was gonna go. ...especially after Moonfish happened.

As I said in one comment, this was where the recycled material from those other now deleted stories came back into play. Except it was Inko dying instead of All Might, because this wasn't a dad-might fic anymore. This was a new animal.

So Izuku lost his parent, we did the big time-skip, Bakugo realized he was kinda awful by literally breaking Deku and the lead villain turned out to be human. Someone broken and out to fulfill a somewhat understandable need for revenge. Oh yeah, also Endeavor was involved in a major conspiracy and the story turned into a songfic.

Another fun note, did you notice how the music only came into play, working its way into the story, once Izuku started fixing the Zune? Immersion!

This is where we get to the main event, the meat of this story which was the whole reason this project started: Deconstructing and analyzing Deku. Chapter 26, while a huge nod to the finale of Evangelion's original anime (and a certain part of Tokyo Ghoul) was about the most brutal, in-your-face-honest appraisal of who Deku is as a person in MHA. An escapist fanboy who can't cope with his awful life.

Nothing in that entire chapter, nothing that I used to piece together and then rip apart his identity, (aside from Inko's failed suicide attempt and his father being evil) was anything non-canon. If horikoshi felt like committing plagiarism, well, something like chapter 26 happening in canon wouldn't surprise me. All those details I wrote in were there to do was to frame his mindset and expand his and Inko's characters.

Inko is and will forever be 'best mom'. Killing her off was one of the hardest things I've ever done as an author, but if I hadn't then the entire rest of this story couldn't have happened. If she'd lived, Izuku would never have started drinking, read the documents that gave his psyche the clue it needed to start accessing the memories he'd locked away and would never had survived being captured by All For One and Overhaul as a result.

I'd call it 'Fridging Brilliance' if I was just a little more evil at heart, but life hasn't quite gotten to me that much yet. We'll see where I'm at when I finally hit '30'.
Of course, the main event of BB and the Endgame of BB were completely different beasts. One went exactly as I'd planned it, the other did not. See, while I was getting closer to the end of the fic I was also nose deep in another story, one I'm still not going to name because you should read it. Like, right now.

See, Blood Butterfly was originally going to end in tragedy. The only 'happy' thing about the ending was Izu and Kyo sticking together despite everything, despite dead friends and broken hearts, seeing their futures as bleak and promising only 'more pain to come' they at least had each other.

The note this story ended on was bleak, disheartening and sad as hell in the first draft. Stain was going to actually fight Izuku, trying to make the world quirkless even as he was choking on the smoke and dying. The fight ended with a very wounded, very tired Izuku holding Stain's hand, trying to stop him from falling into an inferno as the Shroud was collapsing and exploding around them.

Then Stain, realizing Izuku loved him and desperately needed to save him in spite of the fact that Stain was going to ruin the world, just smiles. He said "you're going to put them all to shame." Drank Izuku's blood to paralyze him, then fell into the fire and died. He sacrificed himself, unable to let go of his ideals to make his brother happy and just... live.

The original message was 'sometimes redemption cannot be had', that sometimes mistakes are just forever. You accept it, cry, realize that 'sometimes the greatest gift of all is never seeing you again' and move along.

But then I read that other story and couldn't DO that.

I had to go back, redraft the entire last portion of the final act and do at least three different reversions for most of the chapters after 'Unravel' and a few scenes involving Sten in almost every chapter before hand.

Making Stain the lead villain was always the plan, so humanizing him before his inevitable fall was necessary no matter what I did. I wanted Stain to be lovable, human and someone the you guys -the audience- wanted to see succeed and be happy. His fall was meant to be painful, his death was meant to be heartbreaking and feel sort of... inevitable and fitting. He wasn't supposed to really be missed as much he was 'looked back on uncomfortably'.

Then I read that other story and beat this running gag like a dead horse.

Honestly, I'm glad. The ending that happened as a result was considerably more satisfying and was perfect for the deconstruction of MHA.

Ending BB on a high and happy, bittersweet note was perfect for a few reasons. One, I kinda started to like Sten myself and wanted him to be happy. Shocking, I know; it's not like I clearly have a thing for broken men or anything like that. That's crazy, you should feel crazy for even thinking that. (...um.)

Two, after so much pain, hardship and sadness, ending it with more of the same would have just felt disrespectful to you guys -the audience- and to the characters and narrative. Which brings us to reason three.

At its core, MHA canon is a story about perseverance through difficult times and about hope. It's about struggling through the hardest times of your life and coming out the other side with a smile, bearing with it and getting to tomorrow despite all the odds against making it there. Ending this
story any other way would have put this fic outside the original story too far to still be considered MHA.

So, in the end, Chizome Akaguro got what he'd secretly always wanted but had been too afraid to try and find since day one. Izuku managed to shoulder his pain and grief, moving forward with optimism, hand in hand with the love of his life. Our third protagonist reconciled with her own past, accepting that there was nothing she could do to change it and... let it go. She let Toga go, hoping it wouldn't be goodbye, after saying she missed her and then went and embraced love and happiness -things she'd deemed out of her reach eons ago- and got her happily ever after.

Also, as another fun note, Izuku and Chizome both saved each other from their worst memories and regrets. Chizome saving Izuku from a burning, crumbling ruin of a building like the one his family died in while he was powerless to stop it; and Izuku bringing his family back from the dead and talking him down from his villainous schemes, something he failed to do with Shigaraki in order to save his life.

I dare you to find a better ending for those two. I'll read it if you do.

Toga being the unsung real hero of the story is probably my favorite bit. She literally had everything lined up, all the evidence, everything to take down Philanthropy on her own and stuck to her plan throughout the entire story. She was heroic, sassy and a wild child off the rails at every turn and she was so fun to write this way. It only occurred to me very close to the end of the story that Chizome would absolutely fall in love with her for that.

That said, I regret not making Vanessa more of a character. She was delightful, in a very sad way and I would have loved to have her around more. But she was an OC and having her steal the spotlight from the others would have felt deceitful. Y'all weren't here to read about original characters, you were here for the real stars of the show.

I would have had her investigating with Stendhal while he looked into Eri's past, but... killing her off felt just a step too far. So that's where Twist and Sparky came in. Not the best characters, very referential by design and ultimately kinda... unimpressive.

One other thing I really should have done better was the big build up to and reveal of Endeavor being the true Nameless One and Philanthropy's big reveal. Maybe have the prophet system be involved in the finale. Do something with that whole 'oh yeah, dragons exist' plot threat, but that's about it. Oh yeah, and portray Mina and Den's relationship a bit better and have Mina's subplot conclusion be less... abrupt.

Over all, I did what I'd set out to do. I made the version of MHA I wanted to have exist, surprised myself along the way, used all the best parts of 'What Makes a Hero' and 'Legacy' along with the good ideas from its planned sequels and put it all to rest.

I might come back and write a sequel, probably not with the same stakes on the line. Just a continuation from where things left off, showing Izu and Kyo in their futures, have Chizome steal the damn show some more and Toga being her badass, vigilante self as she was here. Her backstory was fully written too, just never actually shown.

This is all speculation mind you, I wouldn't want to go back into Blood Butterfly without something of equal (if not better) quality to show for it. I'd want the narrative to gain something from continuing, the characters to feel as or more human than they did here and remain consistent. One of my biggest problems as a writer is suffering from 'Kojima syndrome': big, great, cool ideas that look good in theory and reference the amazing works that inspired me to write but ultimately feel... campy and a bit awkward. I'd like to avoid that if I do a sequel.
Needless to say, it'd be hard not to go full grimdark considering the potential plot threats I have access too, considering BB’s ending. Secrets are out there, dark, heavy secrets and more could easily be unearthed. The temptation to go full 'Millennium Series' with this is difficult to ignore, and very viable.

But I gotta stop writing this eventually, my own original works gotta get published too.

It was a weird trip realizing I had to write this the way I did. It was only after I'd basically completed 'What Makes a Hero' that I'd finally pieced together who Izuku was as a person, so writing him in the first place was fun, sappy and very optimistic feeling. He was the hopeful, doe-eyed kid who wanted to save lives and had this awkward, harmless adorableness about him that just melted my damned heart.

...then I started watching House-MD and Evangellion and ah, things got depressing. Realizing that Izuku's main coping mechanism for his life was avoiding dealing with it felt very Shinji, and with his level of intelligence he could very easily have wound up a drug-addicted man with a 'rubiks complex' that helped him avoid thinking about everything that hurt him.

So that's where his alcoholism, chapter 26 and 'Legacy' (god, that pun) came from.

It was the first real piece of uncomfortable truth that I'd uncovered in MHA, Uraraka being a lonesome, home-sick soul was a close second. The entire premise of 'Talk to me' and the unfortunate, uncomfortable 'Komm, süßer Tod' chapter were written around this. Ochako isn't just an extrovert who befriended the hapless social klutz, being extroverted is a coping mechanism. Spending your life constantly saying goodbye gets sad very quickly, and when you finally land somewhere and don't have to let go of the people you like right away?

Well maybe a teenager would confuse that with love. Maybe her best friend with a talent for observation would piece this together. Maybe it would really, really suck for everyone and make you wanna cry.

I still can't get over that one bookmark someone made after reading that chapter "stab me, it would hurt less." On one hand... yay, my plan worked but that's a human being feeling that because of something I wrote!

Maybe that's canon too. It wouldn't surprise me, but Horikoshi doesn't seem to write that way.

At its heart, MHA is too hopeful and cheerful to really delve into those sorts of depressing truths. It's a very fanservicey story there to lift your spirits, not ask the real questions and hit you close to home.

That would be where my decision to write this and deconstruct MHA came into play.

I can't not see these things when looking at people, characters and stories. Hell, I even outright fabricated more reasons for the cast (Kyo, Mina and Den) being the way they are just to emphasize this being an unsung theme in MHA.

Telling a story about hope is all well and good, inspiring even. But without something real, something tangible to contrast that hope with it ends up feeling a little blind. MHA had a bleak start and a very rapid upward spiral in the first few arcs. Izuku was a bullying victim, Bakugo was just rotten and Izuku's whole life was just depressing.

Then he meets his idol, gets his idol's quirk, good times happened from then on and all was well.

Call me an old cynic, but that ain't how life goes, buddy.
Life is a roller coaster, there's high-highs and low, really low lows to be had in abundance. It hurts, it feels amazing and leaves you drained and tired but we always wake up tomorrow somehow wanting more. (...uh...) MHA's tone after the USJ arc had the potential to go somewhere real, somewhere uncomfortably relatable and hard to avoid acknowledging.

But instead... we got the arcs that came after Stain.

Don't get me wrong, there's good things about those arcs. They're fun, feelsy and all around enjoyable. I do have a complaint though, something you might have noticed coming up now and then in this fic. What was it...? oh yeah! **VILLAINS HAVE TO FEEL LIKE ACTUAL GOD DAMNED PEOPLE!**

After Stain, enter Toga! Embodiment of Yandere! Frankenstein flamethrower boi! The crocodile (hunter) fanboy! ..ugh... I could go on. It really doesn't help that Shigaraki, our main bad-lad's motivation is 'I want to murder'. Yes, I'm sure his backstory was explained very well in his own personal chapter **after however many hundreds of chapters into the story** just like Toga's chapter.

You know. Toga's chapter. The one that stripped her of all Humanity from the very beginning, showing her as just 'always like that'. No depth, no interesting reasons for being who she is. Just born a yandere. Fuck. That.

As a fan of 'Tales of Symphonia', one of the best stories ever and the best game I've ever played (My favorite all time character in anything is Sheena Fujibayashi) villains who are just evil for evil's sake are... dull, flat, boring and just plain bad-in-terms-of-writing. A story is only as good as the characters and the relatability of their decisions. If you can't relate to a villain, then are they really human or do they just look like one?

MHA's villains are not good, not well written. What, what's that? It's a shonen series and they don't really have to be? Like DBZ Yeah? So's Fullmetal Alchemist 2003 and boy howdy are those villains good. Painfully human, tragic and the perfect foils to the protagonists in every way they oughta be. Yes, the series is uncomfortable to watch at times but that's the point. Putting people into 'good boxes' and 'bad boxes' doesn't work.

Even the throw away villains of 2003 in some what chanllenged, reflected or mirrored the mindset and struggles of Ed and Al. Storytelling **gold** and it's kinda hard to appreciate anything less now as 'acceptable'. I'm a lady with high standards, what can I say?

Unless we're talking about Nazis, you can assume humans are actual people with actual reasoning behind what they do and not just **hate**.

I'd like to think this story had one universally applicable kernel of wisdom in it: the dividing line between good and evil is just how willing a person is to hurt innocent bystanders in order to succeed. If what you aim to achieve is or becomes more important than the well beings of people not involved in reaching or obstructing those goals, then you've crossed the line.

In the real world good and evil don't exist, not the way we think of them. Altruism and selfishness absolutely exist though, and those are the closest you're going to find.

If you'll forgive me for waxing philosophical about the obvious: human motivations aren't just black and white, in fact, human motivations are never 'black'. (no. not like that. Stop that.) Human motivations range from white to grey, we just see things through lenses that are really good at seeing black.
Because when your entire species has terrible nightvision, shadows are terrifying. Real shadows, metaphorical shadows and Carl Jung shadows. All equally scary because what lurks within is unseen, and if you can't see it then what can you do except run and run screaming from it?

This was the entire premise of the re-write along with one other thing, but we'll get to that. I wanted better, more human villains who were relatable.

And that's why I wrote Stain the way I wrote him.

Stain was supposed to be that one guy, the goth kid who says a lot of dark, cryptic and uncomfortable things you can't really argue with. That is, in the beginning. He was meant to come across as sort of out of place, put in a classroom full of happy-go-lucky kids who see the world with 'black and white eyes' and daring to speak up and say things that challenged that.

But class 1A being class 1A they loved and accepted him anyways, even if Momo never quite got there till the end of the tale. They heard what he had to say and politely challenged it, softening him and his world view as he hardened theirs a bit. (hmm... phrasing? Phrasing. ...what is my brain?)

This is particularly visible in his relationship with Izuku, and at the end of the story they reach this sort of middle ground. Yeah, Stain is absolutely right. The world is wrong, that's just how it is, but Izuku and class 1A are also 100% correct too. Doing bad things right back won't solve anything, it'll just make everything else worse and ultimately it's up to them -the next generation- to define what fixing everything means.

Stain's progression both as a character and through the narrative -in the roles that he played- is by far the thing I am most proud of as a writer. From ominous ally, to the 'dark knight' type thing he was through act three and most of act four to one of the lead villains. He's what I wish Horikoshi had done with Stain in the first place, the replacement for worst-boy that we needed and deserved.

Then there's Kyoka, the girl in the middle who simply has no idea what else to do or where else to go. She was in that place that Izuku and Stain both got to only at the end of the story, the character who defined 'the line' as it were. At least that was the plan, I'm vaguely comfortable with how that played out, but it could have been clearer, better and executed more eloquently.

Then again, making that clearer would have been a bit against the plan and point, wouldn't it? Or maybe I'm just talking nonsense, I dunno.

All in all, Blood Butterfly went exactly as it should have. It ended in the way it had to in order to respectfully complete the story and mini-stories therein. As it was with Izuku's hero name: this was a story about love and kindness overcoming harsher things. Healing broken hearts instead of beating them down in order to stop them from breaking others.

Blood Butterfly: messy, violent, scary and celebrating gentleness and acceptance. Welcome to the ending of the greatest thing I've ever written. It hurt to write, it made me cry to get here more than thought still possible and... it left me kinda happy.

That was the point, plain and simple.

That said, it's been a treat. If you read this, thanks a bunch, hopefully my insanity wasn't too jarring/annoying and cleared the air on some things or gave you something to smile at or gave you better understanding of moments you hopefully already loved. I spent two years and some change writing this, it was quite the ride, and I appreciate you for riding along with me. Yes, you. The person reading this, in theory. It's nice to know I wasn't just writing this for myself after all.
Blood Butterfly is a crack fic that took itself seriously enough to become something else. From Moonfish being the most important puzzle piece in the plot, to Inko’s death, to the ship, to Izuku being a vampire and All For One being a human being with feelings and Chizome being Mineta’s replacement and also turning out to be human? Yeah, crack fic, just a bit.

But it's good, right? I sure thought so.

Anyways, I'm Black Dog and Satellite_Vi and it's been fun, hopefully stays that way a bit longer. Maybe I'll just write more IzuKyo smut and leave it at that. Eventually. Provided I survive the embarrassment of posting such things.

Catch ya in the next fic, it could be yours. (so go kill someone. ...don't-don't actually do that. that's just a reference to 'Doctor Horrible's sing along blog'. It only occurred to me hours later that some folks might not...get that. my bad.)

Signed - Black D0g

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