Of Quirks and Magic

by MysticMartyr

Summary

Having long been told that his desire to become a Hero was naught but a fanciful dream, Izuku Midoriya suffers a terrible accident that makes it seem more like an outright fantasy. However, he is soon shown by a certain Sorcerer Supreme that sometimes diving straight into fantasy is the best way to achieve one's dreams. Make way for Izuku Midoriya, future Master of the Mystic Arts!

Notes

So...hi! This is the first time I've posted a story on this site. In fact, I just joined today and am still getting acquainted. Please be patient with me if I happen to screw up any story tags and
whatnot as I upload. I was originally posting this MHA/Marvel crossover story over on Fanfiction.net, but a beta reader for the story Total Command talked me into giving AO3 a chance, so...here I am! My plan, if this works out, is to post a couple (or a few) chapters a day for the next several days until this story is caught up with the original Fanfiction publication. I hope you'll give my first ever fanfic a chance, and I doubly hope you enjoy reading it as well!
"What's the matter, _Deku_?" Bakugo said with a sneer, his voice laced with vehemence and contempt as he uttered his favorite insult toward the green-haired boy that he tormented so frequently. The explosive blonde stood front and center, his arms crossed as he glowered down at the Quirkless boy before him. His entourage of friends—sycophants, really—stood behind him, mimicking his posture as best they could, as if they were hoping to capture even a fraction of the charisma and coolness that Bakugo exuded in their eyes. "Don't tell me you're scared?"

Midoriya shuddered as all eyes were on him; he had followed Kacchan with an uncanny reverence for years despite the humiliation that was reaped upon him day in and day out, but he hated being at the center of attention like this, in front of more condescending glances than usual. It usually meant Kacchan was going to degrade him worse than he normally did.

It helped that they were in the middle of the woods, though. Slightly, anyway. Midoriya knew that at least if he ended up crying—which he was apt to do—he wouldn't be made a spectacle of in the middle of the park or the schoolyard, which is typically where Bakugo reveled in his bullying of him.

Still, Midoriya shrank under the gaze of Bakugo and his gang of followers; he always felt so small and beneath them all, especially Bakugo, but wasn't that why he always followed after them all—in spite of everything? So long as he followed the boy who he always thought was a model case of victory and strength, couldn't he, too, a Quirkless weakling, become strong as well?

"I-I'm not scared!" Midoriya stammered in the face of their malicious smirking. His shaking body said otherwise, though, and Bakugo knew it.

"Oh?" Bakugo said with a sickeningly sweet tone. "Then what are you waiting for? Get to it _Deku_!" Bakugo stomped toward Midoriya, gripping his shoulders and whirling him around before giving his backside a rough shove.

Midoriya caught himself before he could face-plant into the slick, mossy ground beneath his feet, a loud creaking noise causing him to stare up with trepidation at the looming, decrepit mansion rotting forlornly before them. The abandoned mansion was the entire reason Bakugo brought him and the rest of his gang out into these woods in the first place.

Midoriya glanced all over the decaying outer husk of the building: brown and white paint particles were flaking off unceremoniously, rotted wooden planks on both the walls and the front porch looked as if they were forcibly rent and twisted off by turbulent, stormy winds, vines—alive and dead—had victoriously covered and consumed huge swaths of the walls and roof (which also had gaping holes in it), and what windows remained looked cracked beyond repair.

All the kids in the neighborhood knew it colloquially as the Haunted Mansion, and it wasn't uncommon for kids to dare other kids to go inside and creep around, much to the chagrin of parents and local authorities alike, who had deemed the building unsafe and off-limits for years, long before Bakugo and Midoriya were born, even.

"You want to do something fun?" Midoriya thought back to Bakugo's words from earlier. "How about we go check out that haunted mansion before the storm hits?" A chorus of 'oohs' and 'ahhs' followed, as if Bakugo's suggestion was scandalous. Midoriya went along with it, as did everyone else, but he hadn't picked up on the snickering and the nefarious glances being cast his way as they traipsed through the darkened woods. Now the boy knew: Bakugo waited for a soon to be stormy day like this to goad him into exploring the haunted mansion. Alone.
A sudden drop of precipitation landing on his shoulder rocked Midoriya out his thoughts. He slowly tilted his head up at the dilapidated building towering above him. He hadn't even entered yet; he was standing on the torn up porch, hesitating directly in front of the foreboding door.

"Deku!" Bakugo snarled, making the poor boy jump up in fright. "Hurry up! Or else we'll leave you here in the storm!" Bakugo said that last bit with a nasty grin, and Midoriya knew better than to call his bluff.

Slowly, Midoriya shuffled forward, placing his hands on the great wooden door. If Bakugo and his gang made him feel small, then this huge, rotten building made him feel microscopic. He gave a half-hearted shove, and the door gave little resistance as it creaked open, much to his surprise. He stepped in, giving a cursory look around the decayed foyer and the staircase directly in front of him before turning back to the other boys, giving them a friendly wave as newfound courage swept through his body.

Bakugo's followers whispered fervently amongst themselves, surprised that Midoriya hadn't cowered out like they expected. Even Bakugo looked surprised for a second, but said nothing, opting to instead grit his teeth in frustration.

A sudden breeze blew through the forest before Midoriya could yell anything out, causing the door to swing shut in his face, causing him to jump back and yell in fright. The slam from the door seemed to shake the entire building, eliciting a slight groan from the structure as dust rained down from the flaking ceiling. Midoriya quickly shook himself free from the clinging grime.

Alright, I'm in, Midoriya thought. Now what?

Thinking back, Bakugo had never explained what exactly he was supposed to do once he entered the mansion; he had only told him to go in. But Midoriya didn't think Bakugo would be really impressed with him if he simply left right this moment. No…he'd at least explore a bit.

To say the interior of the building was dark would be an understatement. The two rooms flanking both his left and right side were completely shrouded in darkness, and the foyer had barely any light as it was—Midoriya chalked it up the brewing storm outside. The pitter-patter of falling rain was more audible, spurring Midoriya toward the stairs. He certainly wasn't going to be left behind if he could help it.

With careful steps, Midoriya slowly ascended the stairs to the upper foyer. Its stability was questionable at best, but it still seemed capable enough to support his weight, which he was grateful for. He stuck near the crumbling railing and inched his way toward a side room. The upper foyer extended all the way to the back of the building, stripped bare of even the most basic decor or furniture. A large circular window crisscrossed with a strange series of arcs seemed to offer a view of the woods behind the house, but the impending storm blocked view and light alike, leaving the second story even more bleak than it was bare.

A clap of thunder and a blinding flash through the window startled Midoriya; he really needed to hurry, but he wanted to make sure Bakugo would be impressed with how long he had stayed inside.

Not lingering any longer, Midoriya slipped into the closest side room, promising himself he would leave right after to ensure Bakugo wouldn't leave him behind. The room was more compact and square-shaped, though just as dusty as the rest of the house. The walls were lined entirely with grand bookshelves touching all the way to the ceiling, splintered and barren of whatever texts they might have been decorated with in the past. Except...

Wait, what? Midoriya blinked and approached a bookshelf that ended in the far corner of the room.
Hiding in the shelf's shadow and coated beneath a thick layer of dust was a single book. Midoriya's curiosity took over as he reached out to fetch it. He stared at the cover for a good minute before flipping it over and studying its backside and spine.

Midoriya discovered the leather cover of the book was a brilliant shade of red beneath the dust covering it. There were no words written on the cover, and when he flipped it open to a random page, he was greeted with lines and lines of indiscernible text.

What language is this? Midoriya wondered. It's not Japanese, or even Chinese for that matter!

The sound of thunder struck again, this time reverberating through the shelves and causing the entire room to shake harder than the foyer had just moments prior. Without even thinking, Midoriya slammed the book shut, tucked it under his arm, and bolted out of the room and down the stairs.

The pelting of rain and the howling wind that accompanied it was louder than ever, and Midoriya felt a surge of panic at the prospect of Bakugo abandoning him here to ride out the storm in the night. He'd certainly have some explaining to do to his mother the following day if that were to happen, provided she didn't die from worry first.

Midoriya burst through the door and nearly yelled out in relief as he saw Bakugo standing in his exact same spot, along with his other 'friends' behind him, though they looked more desperate than their leader to seek shelter from the storm.

Bakugo's natural scowl only deepened as the Quirkless loser finally emerged from the house after roughly eight tense minutes. About damn time, shitty Deku...

"Would you look at that," One of Bakugo's cohorts muttered as he wrapped his arms and elongated fingers around his torso, shivering in the blustery rain. "Quirkless kid went in and came out just fine!"

"Oi! Deku!" Bakugo barked. He leveled his glare directly at the poor boy, not looking or feeling impressed in the slightest. In fact, all he felt was frustration that Midoriya had succeeded. "We're leaving!"

Without even waiting for the green-haired lad to respond, Bakugo turned and stormed off, his hands in his pockets as his followers flocked around behind him. Midoriya wasted no time in bounding across the mossy forest floor--now waterlogged from the incessant rain--to catch up with the rest of the group.

In a few minutes time, the group of boys found their way back along the ravine that held the creek they had played around so many times in years prior. They always followed the creek back in the general direction of the park whenever they decided to play out here, but the sight before them made the drenched youths linger in awe.

The ravine before them no longer held the gentle creek they had seen an hour before, but instead contained a rampaging torrent of rapid floodwaters, filled to the brim with mud and debris--and that was just on the surface.

"Hmm?" The kid with the elongated fingers turned toward Midoriya, noticing the red spine of a book nestled in his armpit. "Whoa, Midoriya even managed to sneak something out of the mansion!"

For the second time that day, Midoriya shrank as all eyes were on him; it didn't matter that they didn't have looks of contempt on their faces, he was simply conditioned after so many years of bullying to feel uncomfortable and brace for the worst whenever this happened.
The worst, unfortunately, was about to come.

"Huh!!" Bakugo growled, pushing the boys that were crowding around Midoriya and inquiring about his find aside so he could see it for himself. Sure enough, tucked in snugly beneath the boy’s arms was a thick, red book. Midoriya was shielding it as best he could from the rain, but Bakugo saw it as Midoriya trying to keep it away from him. Naturally, his anger surged.

"Well, well," Bakugo spat. "I never pegged you to be a thief and a loser, Deku!"

Midoriya blinked as the words reverberated inside his head. *Thief?*

"And you want to be a hero?" Bakugo was sporting his trademark crazed grin now. "How can you even play the role of a worthless wannabe hero when you steal things like a villain?"

Midoriya clenched his eyes shut and backed away from the boys as Bakugo’s words stung his brain like a hornet. *Like a villain...like a villain...*

Immense guilt swelled inside Midoriya as he took another step back from the gang of boys, moving away just as Bakugo was reaching out to grab hold of the book's spine, earning him a murderous glare.

"Give me the book, Deku!" Bakugo growled. He clenched his fists; he might not be able to use his Quirk as effectively in the rain, but he could still throw a hell of a punch.

"K-Kacchan!" Midoriya yelled out in protest, taking another step backwards toward the edge of the ravine. "I need to return this!"

"What you need to do is fork that book over!" Bakugo growled with even more anger. Was that even possible? Of course it was.

"Kacchan—!" Whatever protests Midoriya was about to yell were lost as he felt the earth give way beneath his foot with one final step back. Gravity took full effect as his body tumbled backwards, with the last thing the Quirkless boy seeing before submerging into the murky depths below was the look of absolute shock on Bakugo’s face.

"Help—!" Midoriya sputtered desperately as the torrential floodwaters tossed and turned him like a load of laundry. He lost his grip on the book, but he hardly even noticed as he was flailing his arms wildly trying to keep himself from sinking. He parted his lips the moment his face was met with air and not water, gasping for breath as he looked around, beleaguered and distraught about his predicament.

Midoriya whimpered before being pulled back under by the raging current—there was no one to be seen running along the ravine edge. Bakugo and his followers were gone. He was going to die, and he was going to die alone.

Something solid and hefty suddenly rammed into his side, knocking what little breath he had out of his lungs, but fortunately also propelling him back to the surface. Midoriya instinctively clung to the object—a log large enough for him to hold onto—as he was swept away. He kept his eyes tightly shut as rain, wind, and muddied water battered his face relentlessly.

Midoriya suddenly yelled out in pain; a searing, scratching sensation ran up his right cheek where the pointed tip of an errant branch being danced around the raging waters sliced across his skin. The hapless boy only clung to his makeshift lifeboat harder, even as the waters began banging the wayward log against what Midoriya could only surmise to be other logs and whatever debris he could imagine. With his eyes clenched shut, the boy could only guess what the chaos swirling
around him in the muddied waters looked like.

Midoriya sputtered and sobbed as he was tossed so mercilessly down the ravine, but his sobs soon gave way to horrid, bloodcurdling screams as his log rammed straight into a derelict tree trunk entrenched in the depths of the river, his hands being pinned and crushed between both splintered, wooden surfaces. In the wake of the blistering pain, Midoriya yanked his eyes wide open as he screamed out, only to be met with a splattering of muddied water to his face. The muck blinded him, and he slipped limply off his log the moment his crushed hands were released from the vice.

*I'm going to die!* Midoriya thought hopelessly. *I'm going to die and I'll never become a hero!*

Now back to being tumbled back and forth by the unyielding waves, Midoriya could only gurgle out his screams whenever he was plunged back into the murky depths. The final thought that flashed into his mind before losing consciousness was his mother, and how heartbroken she'd be whenever his body was recovered.

The splashing of a wave stirred him out of the all-consuming darkness. His eyelids cracked open, blinking repeatedly in a vain attempt to clear out the gunk that blurred his vision.

*Am I...alive?* Midoriya thought weakly as he swiveled his head around, taking note of his surroundings as best he could.

He was laying on his back, that much he knew; it seemed he had miraculously washed up on the bank of the ravine. Casting his gaze down toward the water, he could see it still churning ferociously, though the rain had lessened a considerable deal. With a grunt, Midoriya tried lifting his body up, but found he had no energy to do so. He tried settling for his arms instead, but winced in pain; a surge of adrenaline was felt as Midoriya realized he could not even *feel* his hands, let alone move them.

Midoriya coughed and let his head drop back down; his body couldn't even handle that minuscule rush of adrenaline it seemed, and he could already feel his consciousness slipping away from him again. That is, until some movement above him caught his blurry eye.

"Who...?" He croaked out but felt his mouth clam up. It came as no shock that he also lacked the energy to even speak.

"Don't move," a gruff voice replied. Midoriya released a sigh he hadn't even realized he was holding at that moment. He strained to get a good look at his savior before everything faded. The only precise details he could make out was a gentlemanly face, a blue tunic, and a flapping, red cloth that gently wrapped around his body, coating him in what felt like an otherworldly warmth. Midoriya let his eyes flutter shut as he drifted peacefully to the sensation of being slowly lifted to safety.
Crushed Hands, Crushed Dreams

Chapter Summary

Midoriya wakes up in the hospital and meets the man who saved him, the enigmatic Doctor Strange. After the doctor introduces himself, the extent of Midoriya's injuries are revealed, causing the boy to despair at the potential end of his dream to become a hero.

Darkness and warmth were not typically things Izuku would normally correlate with one another, yet the waves of warmth that washed over his body, inundating him with a serene sense of calmness, had not waned in the slightest as he drifted through sleep.

The gentleman, the tunic, the red cloak capturing his body in such a gentle embrace—those were the last things he saw before darkness once again robbed his senses. Well, his normal senses, anyway; Izuku could hardly explain it even as he was set adrift among the Aether of his own unconsciousness, but he could still feel that cloak wrapped loosely around his drenched form and the comforting heat that seemed to literally pulse out of its fibers.

And further beyond the gentle radiance of the cloak was the other sensation he had detected before his mind slipped away: that of being lifted off the sludgy riverbank by the gentleman he had caught a glimpse of.

Or was it the cloak? Now that he thought about it, it had seemed like the blue-robed gentleman and the red cloak were almost like two different entities. Did that cloak belong to a second individual? Had someone else besides the gentleman slipped down into the ravine to fetch his exhausted body without Izuku even noticing them or their features?

A sudden shift in sensations forced Izuku to file that thought away for the time being. The shift rippled all through the darkness he was floating in—what was happening? The feeling of being lifted had ceased, and now he was...sinking? The last thing he had felt against his backside before the heat was the slick mud of the riverbank, but now his back was being pressed against what had to be a cushion of some kind. He was sinking into it, but not to the point where Izuku feared falling into it entirely.

And speaking of the heat of the cloak that had undoubtedly saved him...that, too, had dissipated.

Izuku despaired and imagined himself reaching out into the abyss, hoping that it was not totally beyond his grasp, but there was no vestige of heat left to be felt.

And then...a stirring. And Izuku finally opened his eyes.


Where there was once a safe cocoon of darkness surrounding him, Izuku now found himself blinking helplessly beneath a white light: blinding, intense, and invasive.

What...? Izuku thought as his eyes reoriented themselves, his vision no longer obstructed by the
muddied muck of the river. Where am I?

The glare of the light faded as his eyes became more adjusted with each blink: he was in a hospital room. The white walls, ceiling, floor, and bed were probably what made the light of the room so initially blinding.


Izuku tilted his head toward the sound. An EKG monitor was to the right of his bed, beeping in tandem with his pulse, causing Izuku to be grimly aware of the wires and tubes connected to his body; thankfully, his mouth was clear. A television was mounted on the wall before him, and a few posters of doctors and health-related phrases dotted the walls here and there. It didn't make the room seem any less blindingly white, though.

"Ah, so you awake at last." Izuku nearly jolted at the gruff voice that spoke to his left.

Wait, that voice!

Izuku snapped his head in the voice's direction, eyes widening in shock at the man that sat beside him: blue tunic, red cloak draped over the hospital chair, the meticulously trimmed goatee, the combed, well-kept hair—this was without a doubt the man he had seen after washing up on the riverbank.

"Y-you saved me!" Izuku sputtered as he tried sitting up in his bed, though his body's muscles protested with great pain and a well of newfound tears threatened to spill forth.

The gentleman was up in an instant, placing his palm against Izuku's chest and gently nudging him to lie back down. When his backside pressed against the cushion of his hospital bed, Izuku realized that this must have been the sensation—the soft sinking one—he felt before waking up.

"Yes, I did save you, young man," the stranger said after ensuring Izuku was placed back into a fully resting position. His lips became taut and his eyes took on a studious yet grim look, as if he was observing the green-haired boy but was crestfallen by what he saw. "Though I'm afraid I did not save you in time."


"What do you mean?" Izuku managed to rasp out before descending into a harsh coughing fit, turning his head away from the man who had saved him. When Izuku turned back, the strange man had a piping hot cup in his palm before him. The vapors wafted across Izuku's face, tickling his nostrils before he took the hint and parted his lips for the steaming liquid that the man was offering him.

Izuku couldn't decide which was worse: the burning heat of the drink or its goddamn saltiness.

Much to his relief, however, the man only offered a sip out of the diminutive cup before pulling it away. His taut lips loosened into something akin to a forlorn smile as Izuku struggled to keep himself from spitting the salty concoction all over his clean, white hospital sheets.

"Butter tea," the man said as he set the cup down on a small table nestled in between Izuku's bed and the chair he was sitting in. The table, Izuku noted, had a sizeable stack of what could only be get-well cards and a second tea cup, filled with the same brew he had just been subjected to. "The heat and the salt combined will help keep your throat clear of mucus. I won't give you too much; no need for you to fall ill to dehydration when you've already almost drowned."

Midoriya blinked and nodded his head numbly before turning his attention toward the stack of cards.
resting beside the...butter tea.

The gentleman followed his gaze to the cards and seemed more than willing to push their conversation along. "Ah, yes, you've received quite a few of these," the man said, picking up a pink-colored one and holding it open in front of Izuku's face for him to read, much to the boy's confusion, though he said nothing as he perused the card. It was very monotonous and bland, with a generic 'Get Well Soon' scribbled in the middle of the card with a nearly incomprehensible name signed on the bottom. Izuku recognized it as a student from his class, though why they would send him a get-well card was beyond him. No one even gave him a passing glance besides Bakugo and his ilk—

Izuku shuddered and felt his gut sink in as if it had been punched at the mere thought of Bakugo. Memories of his recent ordeal began flashing through his mind, and the most terrifying realization that had come to Izuku when he was being battered by waves and logs alike was not just that he believed he was going to die—he truly thought he was going to die alone, abandoned by the boy he had so reverentially followed for so long.

The man flipped through card after card for Izuku to look through. All of them were the same: bland, repetitive colors, generic wording, lazily written signatures. Izuku was sure by this point that the cards weren't made willingly, that they'd been crafted by the order of his homeroom teacher. Adding further insult to injury was the fact that in that whole stack, there was not a single card from Bakugo. Izuku visibly winced; maybe Bakugo really had left him for dead. Maybe he really didn't care if Deku had died.

"I'm grateful for what you've done for me, sir," Izuku said, a feeling of exhaustion swirling in his stomach. "But you don't have to feed me tea or hold the cards up for me—"

Izuku tried raising his arms to push the empty gesture that was his classmate's card away from him. And then he froze.

M-my hands...!

Izuku had a terrified expression etched on his face as he gaped at his thickly bandaged hands resting atop the covers. How had he not noticed this earlier? Was he still that exhausted? Izuku grunted as he tried flexing his hands beneath the layers of gauze covering them, but it was no use. He felt pain as he'd tried lifting his arms, but his hands? He had hardly any feeling in either of them.

He shakily turned his head back toward his savior, his wide eyes seeking desperately for an explanation. But the grim, taut face returned to the blue-robed gentleman as he sat back down and stared at the boy's ruined hands dismally. There was a glint of empathy in the man's eyes, as if he understood Izuku's predicament all too well.

I'm afraid I did not save you in time. The words rang clearly in the boy's head as the realization dawned on Izuku that this must've been what the gentleman was referring to. His hands...they were beyond any hope of repair.

"Young man—"

All he got in response was a whimper from the boy. The gentleman grimaced, furrowing his admittedly stern-looking brow as a series of shakes and hiccups overtook the child in question, gazing disconsolately upon his broken hands.

"Izuku!" A high-pitched cry reverberated through the room, snapping the two of them out of whatever musings they were stuck in as a homely looking woman barged through the door and flung herself at the bedridden boy, sobbing uncontrollably.
The boy's mother, no doubt, the man thought as he looked on, watching the boy resting limply in his mother's grasp, his eyes looking more and more drained by the second.

After a few wracking moments of indecipherable mutterings of concern mixed with a questionably unhealthy amount of sobs, the woman—Inko, he believed her name was, based on past visits—finally pulled herself away from her son, who simply laid back lifelessly into his bed without uttering a word toward his mother.

"You've been out for two whole days, Izuku!" Inko cried while wiping away the continuous wave of tears spilling down her cheeks. "When I got a call from the doctor that you were beginning to stir, I came right over!"

"Two whole days...?" Izuku thought blankly as he processed that information. That would certainly explain the cards from his classmates; two days would have been more than enough time to hastily put 20 or so cards together and mail them to the hospital.

"And who might you be?" Inko said, sniffling as she turned her attention toward the man in the blue tunic.

The man blinked in surprise before swiftly standing up to give her a courteous bow. "My apologies, where are my manners? I've kept watch over the boy, and I've yet to formally introduce myself! My name is Stephen Strange," The man, Strange, said. "Doctor Stephen Strange."

"A doctor?" Inko asked with a small smile, feeling slightly more at ease by the display of politeness from Strange. "Are you one of the doctors that worked on my son in the emergency room?"

"Alas, no," Strange said with a tone of resignation. "I am merely the man who retrieved your son out of the ravine and—oof!"

Inko had blindsided Strange with a tackling hug, throwing her arms around him as she buried her face into his tunic. He could both feel and hear the waterworks of her tears kicking into action once more...right after she had gotten them under control, too.

"Thank you!" She sobbed. "I will never be able to repay you for saving my boy...!"

Strange struggled to keep himself from collapsing under the crushing weight of Inko's hug, but he still managed to work her way back down (or up?) from her inconsolable display of grief. Strange gave his tunic a few brushes with his hand after she had calmed down, and tried his hardest to conceal his small grin of amusement to the fact that his garb now sported a noticeable tear stain on it after being subjected to the woman's tear ducts for no more than a minute.

"I assure you, there's no need to thank me, ma'am," Strange replied graciously.

"I'll not hear you selling your own actions short!" Inko replied sternly. "You saved Izuku's life! If you hadn't been there..."

Izuku merely laid in his bed as his mother reaped her accolades on Strange's shoulders, who in turn shrugged them off as humbly as he could. He wasn't listening to their conversation; all of his attention was focused squarely on his hands.

His rent, broken, bandaged, lifeless hands.

Izuku had always been called weak and powerless throughout his childhood by others. It had been expected—he was Quirkless, after all. But even though he had suffered through numerous instances of bullying and beatings and taunts over the years—mostly from Kacchan—Izuku had never truly
felt powerless until the moment he laid eyes on his shattered extremities.

*So the worthless Deku wants to be a Hero, huh?*

Izuku tried curling his fingers once more, and dismayed when he could not.

*Give up on that shitty dream of yours, you Quirkless loser!*

He clenched his eyes shut; he didn’t want to shed tears uncontrollably like his mother had just moments prior. How could he become a Hero without his hands? How could he help people—*save people*—like All Might if he couldn’t use his hands to lift people up, to hoist and carry people to safety, to punch villains into the dirt?

”—and his doctor said that within another day or two, the bandages can come off permanently,” Izuku perked up as Strange was most definitely talking about his hands.

"Oh, thank goodness..." Inko sighed, clasping her hands together. "I’ll be sure to take him straight home once he's been cleared—"

"And then what...?" Izuku weakly muttered, causing both adults to turn towards him with startled expressions.

"I-Izuku?" Inko whispered worriedly.

"And then what?" Izuku repeated, staring up at them with despondently heartrending eyes. "Look at my hands! I can't become a Hero after this, Mom!"

A dumbstruck Strange glanced back over to Inko, only to catch her before she could collapse to the ground. Her facial expression looked as if something inside her had visibly cracked and shattered.

"How can I help people if I can't use my hands!?” Izuku wailed, the tears he had tried so desperately to keep bottled up finally pouring down his cheeks, the monitor beside him beeping dangerously fast.
Teach Me

Chapter Summary

Izuku continues to despair over his crushed hands, believing that the path toward becoming a hero ends for him right here. Doctor Strange, however, aims to convince the boy that there is another path of the hero that he can follow: the path of magic.

Strange had barely settled Inko's slumped form down in the chair beside the bed before the door to the hospital room burst open, a small cadre of nurses rushing in to cease the boy's wailing and thrashing, trying their damndest to get Izuku to compose himself. The boy, to his credit, did not put up much resistance as the nurses successfully restrained him, administering medicine to forcibly calm his obviously frayed nerves as well as checking and documenting all of his vitals.

Turning his attention back to Inko, Strange tilted her body back so her head rested against the wall behind her, ensuring she would not slide out of her spot and collapse to the tile floor. Confident the woman was safe where she sat, Strange turned again toward Izuku to monitor over the nurses giving him aid. He fully intended on jumping into the fray himself and administer orders to the cluster of nurses working diligently over the now silent child (against his better judgment, though he could recall medical knowledge just as readily as any spell from the Book of Vishanti, and it was not difficult for him to regress to his younger inclinations of being overwhelmingly authoritative given the hospital setting).

"It's under control," A dull-sounding voice said as a hand suddenly shot out in front of Strange before he could take another step toward the bed. A rather bedraggled-looking man was standing beside the sorcerer. He wore the garb of a doctor, though Strange would've been hard-pressed to acknowledge him as such on first impressions alone given the man's grizzled grey hair, loosely fit clothing, and slouchy posture. The man finally turned to face Strange, bright green eyes slowly dissipating back into a lusterless shade of hazel.

"X-Ray Eyes," the doctor explained with an unenthusiastic sigh. "My Quirk lets me scan through organic matter and pick up on any medical anomalies."

He raised his hand over his shoulder and lazily bobbed his thumb over in Izuku's direction. "He checks out. Just a panic attack." Another sigh.

X-ray vision—Strange couldn't deny that such a Quirk offered priceless utility in a medical profession. But to held by such an unenthusiastic fellow...

"Toushi," the doctor said.

"I beg your pardon?" Strange replied, snapped out of his musings.

"My name," the man, Toushi, explained and limply offered his hand. "Doctor Toushi."

"Strange," the sorcerer said, gripping Toushi's hand only for it to drop back down lifelessly after what had to have been the worst handshake of Strange's life. "Doctor...Strange."

Toushi perked an eyebrow. "I figured as much. You were here...two days ago, when this boy was
brought in. You were giving your 'recommendations' to the other doctors." There was a sarcastic emphasis put around that word, recommendations.

That would be the polite way of putting it, Strange thought back to when the doctors were rushing Izuku into the ER. Strange was spouting orders to the men and women around him, who looked at him dumbfounded but carried out his demands without resistance. It must have been a strange sight indeed, to both doctor and patient alike, to see a man in a blue tunic and a red cloak shouting out precise medical jargon and procedures to everyone around him. Strange knew if Wong was there he'd have told him to be at least a little sheepish about his behavior that day, but Strange—stubborn man that he is—couldn't bring himself to regret his abrasive actions. In that instant, watching that young man suffering from wounds so startlingly similar to those inflicted on him many years ago, Strange felt himself the 'Surgeon Supreme' again instead of the Sorcerer Supreme.

"Still, it was admirable," Toushi drawled on. "You know your stuff. You sure you want to continue being a Pro Hero and not take over my job here?"

"Oh, no, you're mistaken, sir," Strange said after a few moments were taken contemplating Toushi's statement. "I am not a Pro Hero."

"Oh." Toushi's face morphed into one of confusion (A step up from his typical lukewarm expression, Strange noted). "I had thought you were, considering..."

Strange saw Toushi's gaze drop down to his admittedly unusual attire, understanding where the confusion was stemming from in an instant.

"It's...complicated," was all that Strange found himself willing to offer his fellow doctor.

"Right..." Toushi said with a tone of apprehension before pointing over at Inko's wilted body resting in the corner of the room. "And what about her?"

"The boy's mother merely passed out after his...fit," Strange explained. "She should be fine after some rest, but if you'd like to formally examine her—"

"No thanks," Toushi quickly waved the suggestion away. "Less work for me to do."

A tap suddenly came against Toushi's shoulder from one of the nurses, indicating that they had finished their work. She handed him a clipboard which he perused with thinly veiled disinterest.

"Well, that's that. Stabilized and analyzed," Toushi said, handing the clipboard back before speaking to Strange again. "Feel free to stay if you wish. Just don't overstay. I don't have to tell you the importance of rest for a patient in his condition."

Toushi lazily swiveled toward the door, shooting Izuku a glance as he pushed it open. "Tch, importance of rest," Toushi muttered before finally departing for his next chore. "I wish I could just lie in bed all day..."

The nurses bowed before Strange one by one before exiting the room in the same manner. Strange—chivalrous as always—returned the courtesy to them.

"Languid lout," Strange muttered under his breath as the last nurse departed, silently thankful that Toushi was not one of the surgeons who had operated on Izuku's hands. Strange was back to Izuku's side, watching the boy now resting peacefully in his bed—a far cry from the thrashing, sobbing mess he was just a few minutes ago. His eyes lingered on his tear-stained freckles before sliding his gaze down to his bandaged hands.
A painful pang of remembrance jolted through Strange's mind. In that instant he saw not Izuku lying in the hospital bed, but himself, despairing over the ruined state of his hands... and the ruined state of what was once his prestigious surgical career.

I could have done better... Strange thought of that pathetically bitter whimper he had uttered when perusing the work done to save his own hands, work that Strange had, at the time, been convinced was botched and amateurish. Strange shook his head clear of such distasteful memories. He would not pedantically comb over every inch of skin that Izuku's surgeons had worked on; he would simply have faith that the surgeons had done the absolute best they could.

"Have faith," Strange said quietly to himself, chuckling at the irony of that statement. Where would he be today if he hadn't lacked faith in the aftermath of his operation? His lack of faith helped set him off on a grand naive adventure to right the wrongs of his grievous injuries. Lacking faith is what ultimately led him to Kamar-Taj in his most desperate bid for treatment. Lacking faith is what set him on the path to becoming Sorcerer Supreme.

"Hmm?" Strange felt a twinge of movement and saw one of the bottom tips of his Cloak of Levitation curl up toward Izuku's face, gently wiping away what tears remained on his cheeks.

"You've taken a liking to him, haven't you?" Strange asked unabashedly.

The enchanted cloak bristled with confirmation before settling back into place lifelessly upon Strange's backside.

Strange couldn't help but chuckle again. "As have I."

Strange connected the tips of his middle and index fingers at an angle, curling his thumbs into his palms. The tips of his connected fingers sparked with a radiant orange energy before he briskly drew them apart, downwards, and then together again, drawing a large square shape in the air with his fingertips. When his fingers reconnected, Strange's magic rushed inward, filling out the empty space of the diagram with energy. There was a bright flash, and a blanket had materialized where the mystical square had once been. Plucking the fluttering fabric out of the air, Strange set it loose over Inko's sleeping body, letting it settle nicely on top of her—she, being the boy's mother, deserved some comfort in all of this, too.

Strange then raised his hands, stretching his left one out and curling the fingers of his right, circulating them up and down as his magical energy swirled before him like a vortex. The space then split apart, opening wide to reveal his sleeping quarters in the depths of his Sanctum.

His portal opened, and Strange prepared to step through and retire for the day when suddenly—

How can I help people if I can't use my hands!? Izuku's declaration of despair rang through Strange's head, the words giving him pause as he placed one foot through the portal.

Those words... despite what similarities Strange had noted between Izuku and himself, those words highlighted a great difference between the two: Izuku possessed a far more impressively selfless nature than Strange could've hoped to have had when he suffered his injury.

Where he had been distraught over the loss of his hands, Strange knew now (and could admit without shame) that what truly destroyed him that day was what that loss represented: his lucrative and wealthy career, built up meticulously over many years of dedicated study and practice, lain to waste in a single day.

It was easy for Strange to see and understand the loss that Izuku surely perceived when he gazed
down in abject horror at his own broken hands: he had lost the simplest, kindest way to offer help to another person.

Where the Stephen Strange of the past had viewed his own two hands as little more than tools for maintaining the aggrandizement of arguably the world's greatest surgeon at the time, Izuku viewed his own two hands as the simplest, yet best, way to offer any aid he could spare to others.

Strange understood this clearly. And now he understood what he had to do.

"Izuku Midoriya..." he whispered to himself as he stepped fully through his portal. "I failed to rescue you in time, but I refuse to simply stand aside and allow such a pure dream to perish where you lie."

Giving the boy one last glance, Strange flicked his fingers in the direction of his sleeping quarters. The two teacups he had placed on the hospital desk suddenly levitated—propelled by his unseen magical energy—and darted through the portal right as it closed.

*I will give you pity no longer, Izuku,* Strange thought as his eyes slowly adjusted from the bright white of the hospital to the darkness of his Sanctum.

*I will instead offer you what my Master offered me all those years ago.* He allowed the Cloak of Levitation to remove itself from his back. Strange wasted no time in retiring for bed to get plenty of rest for tomorrow.

*A path to follow.*

Izuku wished he'd gotten plenty of rest for today.

When he groggily regained his senses after being restrained by the nurses, nighttime had already arrived. His mother, couched in the same chair as the gentleman that had saved him, greeted him with familiar teary eyes; she looked significantly worn out, though Izuku was lacking a mirror right in that moment and couldn't imagine himself looking that much better.

"Sweetie...?" Inko said tiredly. "A nurse came by earlier, but you were still out...would you like some dinner? I know hospital food can leave much to be desired, but it might not be a bad idea to at least get some food in you."

Izuku visibly tensed and jerked his head away, resting his gaze squarely on his still bandaged hands.

*No,* Izuku thought. *They've been replaced with clean bandages.* Did it happen while he was rendered unconscious by the nurses? It didn't really matter, he'd supposed; he was just grateful to not be awake when they did it.

"I'm not hungry," Izuku grumbled, turning his face away from his mother's.

Inko reached out, her lip quivering as if to say something in protest, but whatever was bubbling just beneath the surface managed to stay there. Inko didn't argue or press the matter any further. They sat in silence (with the sole exception being the beeping from Izuku's EKG monitor) for what felt like an hour.

A sound of stirring caught Izuku's attention, forcing him to face his mother again, only to see her standing up and stretching her arms. *How long had she sat there watching over me? How long had the gentleman?*
"It's...getting late," Inko said, leaning down to plant a motherly kiss on Izuku's forehead while she glided a hand through the curly green sea of his hair. "Doctor Toushi said I can take you home tomorrow so long as you don't have another..." She bit her lip, struggling to finish her sentence.

Breakdown, Izuku dejectedly thought for her.

Unsurprisingly, Inko left her sentence hanging in the air. She creaked the door open slowly—almost as if she was trying to open it as slowly as possible—as she gave her son one final forlorn smile for the night. Then she proceeded to close the door at an agonizingly slow pace, as well.

The door finally clicked shut. It took another minute before the sound of his mother's footsteps faded down the hall. And Izuku was finally alone.


Not quite alone, he guessed.

"Midoriya," Doctor Toushi said sluggishly as he sauntered into the room with a nurse without even looking at his patient. His eyes were glued to whatever data or information was on his clipboard, though he looked at it with equal indifference. "I hope you've slept well."

Izuku cracked his eyes open in Toushi's direction, hoping the bags beneath his eyelids would speak for themselves. When Toushi finally looked up at him as if he was actually expecting a verbally given answer, Izuku responded: "I slept well."

The time on the clock was now 9:00 A.M. Izuku had stayed up for twelve hours straight, fidgeting the night away in his bed. Oh sure, he'd tried to catch some sleep last night, but sleep was not just elusive, it was nonexistent! How was he supposed to get any decent sleep with that damn monitor beeping all goddamn night!?

Oh, cripes, Izuku thought. I'm starting to think like Kacchan now...

"Good, good," Toushi's voice dripped with apathy. "Well, everything seems to be in order, so let's not waste anymore time, shall we? I do enough of that clocking in every day."

The nurse—a far younger-looking woman with long, blazing red hair—bounded forward after that, practically skipping toward Izuku's bedside with a saccharine grin plastered across her face from ear to ear.

"Morning, Izuchan!" the nurse said, quickly disconnecting the monitor and shutting it off before leaning down closer to Izuku, who had a blanched look smeared on his own face. "I'm Nurse Kuchi, and I'm going to help take your bandages off! Would you like that~?"

Doctor Toushi, help me! Izuku screamed in the deep recesses of his own head.

Before he could stammer out a protest of any sort, Kuchi puckered her lips and planted a sloppy kiss directly onto Izuku's forehead.

W-what the...!? Followed by a tingling sensation consuming his whole body that Izuku could've sworn was just a natural reaction—

"How's my Quirk feel?" Kuchi giggled. "My Quirk is called Numb—people lose all sensation in
their bodies whenever I kiss them!"

F-for a second I thought I was just—

"This way you won't feel any pain when I take your bandages off!" Kuchi interrupted his thoughts. "Not that you should feel any pain, but one can never be too careful!"

"Let's get this over with," Toushi sighed.

Layer by layer, the doctor and nurse unraveled the long strips of bandages covering Izuku's hands. The shock and embarrassment from Kuchi's kiss helped to distract him from the slow, gentle procedure.

"All done," Toushi said dully.

Any lingering embarrassment Izuku held over Kuchi's kiss was swiftly swept away by a visceral wave of shame and remorse.

Toushi, to his credit, said nothing and looked back at his clipboard (though Izuku couldn't decide whether it was for lack of caring or if he didn't want to seem rude by staring) while Kuchi offered him a sympathetic smile.

"Hang in there, Izuchan," Kuchi said, kissing her fingertips before tapping them against his forehead. A simple way to show affection while getting around an obvious drawback of her Quirk, Izuku noted.

"Guess we're done here," Toushi said, tucking the clipboard into his armpit. "You're mother already called ahead, she's coming to check you out. Once she's here and you change out of your hospital clothes, you'll be free to go."

Izuku said nothing, but nodded to show that he understood. Toushi grunted and left without another word, Kuchi following right behind him, but making sure to blow Izuku another kiss before she, too, left.

Izuku wanted to say it helped somewhat...but that would have been a filthy lie.

Alone once more, Izuku stared at the only thing he wished he could bring himself to not: his superfluous hands, scarred far worse than he imagined they would be. They looked absolutely gnarled; Izuku ran his hands over each other, delicately touching the indentations of the scars on both his palms and on the back of his hands even though Kuchi's Quirk hadn't worn off yet. Even the squiggles of his knuckles seemed indistinguishable from the rest of the scars.

Oh!

Izuku blinked as the numbing sensation suddenly began to fade away, first from his forehead, then spreading down across his body—

And then reaching his arms.

Izuku audibly gasped as feeling crept back into his hands and digits like a hand fitting snugly into a glove for the first time in months. He hadn't possessed any sense of feeling in his hands yesterday, and already he could bend his fingertips and feel the movements. He gingerly ran his hands back over each other again.

Maybe this wasn't a complete disaster, he told himself.
Maybe I can still use my hands after all! He felt relieved.

Maybe I really can still become a—!

And then the shaking started.

At first Izuku was confused. He could still bend his fingers and move his hands, he could still feel all of that, so then why...?

"No," Izuku quietly whimpered as he sat there, watching helplessly as his hands shook and trembled uncontrollably. "No. No, no, oh nonono..."

Because that was the real source of his problem now, wasn't it? Sensation returned to his hands, just as he'd hoped, but Fate decided to horde away that which he desperately needed most of all: control.

A scarred hand he could lift. A scarred hand he could flex. A scarred hand he could use. But a scarred hand, trembling uncontrollably, unable to even properly grasp and lift up the edge of the bed sheet he was lying on?

Izuku bit his lip and choked back a sob as he laid his unsteady hands down on the bed sheet (he couldn't bear to lay them directly on his thighs and feel the shakes throughout his whole body). The world seemed determined to strip Izuku of any means possible to become a Hero. First, Fate robbed him of a Quirk. Then it took his hands. What could be next?

A cruel reminder of his debilitating condition immediately after he'd discovered it, apparently.

Kuchi swept back into the room with an elongated tray of food, placing it before Izuku by clasping its bottom onto the handlebars on the side of his bed—a simple yet nifty method to give patients mostly relegated to their beds a way to eat food that didn't require getting up or leaning over to a side table.

Sausages, a rice bowl, orange slices, a carton of milk—it all looked appetizing (well, as appetizing as hospital food could be, anyway).

Except he couldn't stand to even look at the food, let alone eat any of it.

"...I didn't order any breakfast," Izuku muttered.

"You didn't," Kuchi said softly, her once bubbly personality now somber as she looked over Izuku's trembling hands. He wished she wouldn't look at him with such pity.

"Your mother's down in the lobby," Kuchi continued. "She'll be up shortly to help you with this. She demanded that you put some food in you before leaving..."

And with that, Kuchi left again, but not before blowing him another kiss. Izuku had stopped paying her any attention.

Izuku looked back up at the clock, trying to look at anything in the room other than his hands or the food: 9:10 A.M.

But the steam from the freshly cooked sausages and rice wafted into his nostrils, enticing him to eat. Izuku's stomach grumbled loudly, and even though Izuku kept telling himself he wasn't in the mood for food, his rumbling gut forced him to turn his attention back to the breakfast spread before him.

There was just one problem, though: his hands.
Izuku placed his hand over the pair of chopsticks that had come with the rice bowl, grasping at it as best he could. They, too, shook whenever he tried picking them up. They clattered out of his hands and back on the tray time after time, the lack of results and progress slowly eating up Izuku's patience as he failed to grasp and pick up something as simple as a pair of chopsticks after dozens of attempts.

"Damn it all..." Izuku angrily cursed under his breath, uncharacteristic of him as it was. Now the world was just mocking him, of that he was certain.

The chopsticks dropped back onto the tray, clattering a final time as Izuku finally embraced defeat. How many minutes were spent trying to pick them up? And where was his mother? How long did it take to get to his room from the lobby?

Izuku glanced back up at the clock: 9:10 A.M.

...What!? Had the clock broken just now? What were the odds of that?

"I'd start with the sausages if I were you," a familiar but no less startling gentlemanly voice spoke to the left of Izuku, causing the poor boy to jolt and thrash around to see the source of the voice, knocking the tray loose from the handlebars in the process and sending the food and milk splattering to the tile below.

The tray rattled around the floor before eventually coming to a halt, leaving Izuku's shocked panting as the only audible sound left in the room. He stared wide-eyed at the figure with the same-colored blue tunic, red cloak, and well-trimmed face as yesterday.

"D-Doctor Strange," Izuku panted.

"You seem surprised to see me, Midoriya," Strange replied from his seat—the same chair he had been sitting in yesterday as well.

"I-I didn't..." Izuku stammered. "How long have you been there?"

"Did you not hear me come in?" Strange responded inquisitively, his eyebrow perked.

"I didn't even see you come in!" Izuku said, feeling as exasperated as he was hungry.

"Interesting," said Strange, as if such a logical response was something to muse over as he looked down at the mess on the floor. "I apologize for ruining your meal. Allow me to fix that."

Strange placed his hands together, curling his pinkies and thumbs into his palms. His index fingers were pointing straight up while his middle and ring fingers connected with each other, forming a rhombus-like shape.

Izuku watched the scene curiously. What was the doctor going to do?

Strange then slid his hands past each other while maintaining the positions of his fingers. A rumbling hum caused Izuku to blink in confusion. The room rumbled? What was happening? He glanced back over to the doctor and—Was he wearing that amulet yesterday?

Draped from his neck was a shimmering amulet, opening like a golden eye and revealing a radiant green light from within. Strange reconnected his hands, his thumbs parallel to each other with his other fingers spread wide open. He rotated them clockwise, like a key being turned in a lock, and a resplendently emerald pattern appeared before his hands; Strange pulled one of his hands back, and the pattern was pulled along with it, coating his other arm like a bracer of slowly swirling emerald energy. Izuku could only stare on, fascinated at the intricate display before him.
Strange took a step back, allowing the green radiance from the amulet to illuminate the ruined breakfast on the floor. He slowly waved his hand across the air to his right, the swirling pattern adorned on his arm—layers upon layers of squares and circles intricately placed within each other—moving in tandem with him.

Izuku could hardly believe the spectacle he was witnessing: as Strange slid his hand, the fallen tray began rotating again before floating back up. The sausages and orange slices bounced off the floor a couple times and returned to their place atop the tray. The spilled rice was seemingly pulled back into the bowl, and the puddle of milk was sucked back into the now straightened and unperturbed carton.

Izuku sat, dumbfounded and blinking, at the fully restored breakfast tray before him, still fresh and steaming, as if it were none the wiser of its plummet to the floor.

"Breakfast," Strange said while dispelling the green energy, the amulet closing shut tightly as well. "Is served."

Izuku didn't immediately respond. He sat still, looking up at Strange in awe for what had to have been several minutes, though the clock still read 9:10 A.M.

"D-Doctor Strange," Izuku finally managed to speak, a hint of excitement in his voice. "I-I've never seen a Quirk like that before!"

Strange bowed as if he had given an elaborately staged performance (which, of course, it was, and the performance had only just begun).

"You flatter me, young man," Strange said with thinly veiled amusement. "Though I must inform you that what you just saw was not caused by any Quirk."

"...What?" was all Izuku could utter before Doctor Strange began levitating cross-legged above the end of his bed.

"Your Quirk is Levitation!?" Izuku said with a slack jawed expression.

"Wrong again," Strange said with an unreadable tone and expression. "Eat."

Izuku grumbled something indiscernible before reluctantly taking the floating ball of rice into his mouth...and immediately struggling to swallow it down.

"Hot! Hot! How is this rice still this hot!?"

Strange was openly grinning now, and Izuku found the open carton of milk floating daintily in his face. Izuku latched onto it with his lips and quickly slurped it down, panting as the scorching hot rice was washed down with it.

"Care for some more?" Strange asked mildly, giving another wave of his fingers that was far more complex for Izuku to follow this time.

More? Izuku was about to ask before he felt a sloshing against his lips—the milk carton was
completely refilled! Izuku released it from his mouth and pulled his head back in shock. The carton simply floated back down, resting lifelessly once again on the plastic tray.

"Do you not like oranges?" Strange playfully inquired. "Perhaps you would prefer something else, like..." Strange moved his fingers up and down in a circular motion, a dazzling orange energy sprouting from his fingertips and opening up in a rift...which Strange calmly reached into, pulling out a bunch of bananas to show Izuku.

Izuku simply sat in stunned, perpetual silence.

"Or perhaps you're more a fan of—"

"STOP!" Izuku finally shouted.

Strange and Izuku stared long and hard at one another. Strange was studying Izuku's eyes intently. There was no apprehension or even excitement in those green eyes of his, only a desire—a demand—for answers.

Strange inwardly smiled, pleased by what he saw.

"Who...?" Izuku started to ask before closing his lips, searching for a better word."What are you?"

Strange didn't miss a beat. "I am Doctor Stephen Strange. Master of the Mystic Arts. Sorcerer Supreme over this reality. Everything you've seen and everything I've done was, and is, achieved through the use of the ambient energies that flow through and around everything in this dimension, as well as every other dimension in the multiverse. I rely solely on this mystical knowledge, for I, like you, possess no Quirk."

The air became fraught with tension, lain thickly by the growing silence between Izuku and Strange. Izuku had lowered his head as Strange explained himself honestly and earnestly, his curly green bangs covering his eyes.

"You don't have to lie, you know," Izuku whispered, eliciting a deep frown from Strange. "You don't have to make stuff up just to try and make me feel better."

"Young man, I assure you—"

"How could you even say all of that with a straight face!" Izuku suddenly exploded in anger and tears, glaring daggers at the levitating Strange. "You already know I'm Quirkless! My hands are shaking and ruined! I can't even eat on my own! And now you're telling me...you're telling me that you're Quirkless despite having so many abilities!"

Izuku raised his shaky hand, struggling to keep his fingers curled as he pointed at Strange accusingly. "I don't want to hear any of that!" He shrieked. Yes I do. "I don't want to be told that a Quirkless loser like me can have that kind of power!" Yes...I do! "I don't need you feeling sorry for me!"

Please...help me!

Izuku suddenly dove toward him, his movements almost too fast for Izuku to perceive. Izuku glanced down just as Strange thrust his hand into his chest and yanked him upward, sending him soaring into the air.
Except...he was floating, instead. Listlessly, Izuku watched in confusion as he felt himself floating closer and closer to the clock on the wall. 9:10 A.M., the clock said mockingly.

"What just...happened?" Izuku asked aloud before reaching out to stop himself from floating into the wall.

Only to stare at his glowing, transparent arms with a mixture of amazement and horror. Izuku turned his head toward the blank television screen next to the clock, taking in his reflection: his entire body was floating, entirely transparent, and emanating a golden, wispy luster that rolled off this ethereal form of his like waves at the beach.

He looked into the reflection and saw behind him, too: Doctor Strange, floating above...his body? His body was still lying, wide-eyed and motionless, on his bed! He saw Strange curl his fingers back downward...and then felt himself being forcibly sucked back down—!

Izuku blinked as he jolted in bed, his heart beating in his ears as he panted loudly, struggling to catch his breath and simultaneously go over what just happened.

"W-what did you just do?" Izuku demanded.

"I merely pulled your astral form out of your body for a few moments." Strange replied plainly.

Izuku grit his teeth in frustration as a fresh batch of tears peeked out of his ducts. This again...!?

"Why are you doing this to me?" Izuku pleaded. "Why are you showing me all this!?"

"To show you that dreams aren't ruined just because your hands are." Strange whispered, placing his hands above Izuku's face. "And to show you that power is never beyond your grasp."

His hands...! It can't be...! Izuku thought in stunned disbelief. Izuku had initially thought the doctor's hands to be wrinkled and callused, but no—they were indeed covered with scars, like his were. They were faded with time and not nearly as pronounceable as his freshly rent hands...but they were scarred nonetheless.

"Open your eye...!" Strange uttered, placing his thumb on Izuku's forehead.

Izuku's breath caught; he stared gaping as the room seemed to twist and stretch beyond recognition...

And Strange sent him propelling through the window with a violent crash.

Am I falling up!?

"This isn't real!" Izuku shrieked as he barreled through the howling void. "This isn't real, this isn't real, this isn't real, this isn't...real?"

Izuku's acceleration crawled to a sudden halt as an All-Might bobblehead figure floated by.
Incredulous, Izuku reached out, pushing the head away, only to be violently sent flying in a different direction as the head snapped back.

Izuku's screams returned, the space before and around him twisting and contorting into a convulsively swirling maelstrom of sights and sounds, colors and energies, amalgamations of which Izuku could hardly begin to comprehend.

"You think your lot in life is predestined?" Izuku heard Strange's voice echoing in his ear, the tempest of loud colors and brightly lit sounds enveloping his body, consuming him, rendering his very being little more than a crusty paste before the frenzied vortex, snapping him back whole as he crashed through the singularity.

"You think powerlessness is your inevitable fate?" Strange's voice echoed again as Izuku soared through a neverending deluge of frigid, misty tendrils of fire and charred, smoldering waves, threatening to scald him with every scorched splash. The damp fires and blazing waters collided, erupting into a miasmic whirlpool of solid steam, pulling Izuku in deeper, deeper, deeper...

"At the root of existence, where mind and matter meet, strength can be gleamed and grasped." Strange echoed yet again. "Such strength is off limits to no one...not even you."

Izuku rocketed through the steam and into a pulsating corridor, of which an endless number of gnarled grey hands shot out of the pulsing mass, grabbing him all over and disintegrating his body upon touch. A flurry of ashes, Izuku was swallowed into the throbbing mass, falling further and further along as the turbulent energies reconstructed and deconstructed his form repeatedly.

"Will you succumb to the temptations of power?" Strange's voice asked. "Or will your selfless disposition persevere in the wake of your boundless prowess and potential?"

The raging spectrum spit Izuku's body out distastefully, sending him spinning through an endless kaleidoscopic sea of enormous diamonds, shifting and writhing in limbo as their razor sharp edges shimmered in the distortion. Izuku braced for a painful skewering but bounced harmlessly off the gelatinous gem and shattering through another, swirling once more down the ethereal drain.

"In the infinite vastness of the multiverse, Izuku, powerlessness is chosen."

Izuku winced as the vortex drew narrower and tighter, brighter and louder, closer and closer—!

With a final yell, Izuku burst through the shining veil at the end of the astral corridor, stopping only as his body crashed onto his hospital bed. Izuku, shaken beyond belief, ran his trembling hands all over himself and his bed to confirm he had indeed returned to his world.

"So Izuku," Doctor Strange, still levitating in the exact same spot above the bed, said. "What do you choose?"

A disheveled and thunderstruck Izuku forced his shaken body onto his knees, looking up at the Sorcerer Supreme with bewilderment as his tears flowed freely.

"Please," Izuku said, daring to hope once more. "Teach me."
A Step Into a Sanctum

Chapter Summary

His despair now replaced with optimism, Midoriya eagerly awaits training with magic by Doctor Strange. However, there is still one more Midoriya that needs convincing: Inko Midoriya, the boy's mother. Perhaps a tour through the Sanctum Sanctorum will assuage the woman of her doubts?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"I'm late, I'm late, I'm late!" Inko whispered frantically to herself, racing as fast as she could through the maze of marble white halls and reflective floors and panels of the hospital. She moved as if she were fleet of foot, in spite of her rather diminutive stature, through throngs of doctors, nurses, patients, and visitors alike.

"Third floor, Room 313..." she mumbled to herself, choosing to dart between two conversing nurses rather than be slowed down, uttering hurried apologies as she passed right on by. Inko clutched a tightly wrapped plastic bag to her chest, the textile contents jostling with every hurried step.

Ten past nine. She hadn't meant to be late. She hadn't anticipated being held up in the lobby. Inko silently hoped her baby boy's breakfast hadn't cooled off by the time she got there. It would have seemed cruel, telling a nurse to deliver food to her son that he couldn't eat on his own with the expectation that she would be there on time to help feed him and then turn around and be late herself.

Izuku already had crushed hands (and dreams) to worry about. Inko certainly didn't want her son to think for even a second that she would seem negligible when he needed her now more than ever.

Room 311, Room 312, Room 313...! Inko burst into her son's hospital room and...it was honestly difficult to take everything in all at once.

A tray of assorted breakfast foods lay unceremoniously scattered across the tile floor, her precious son was in his bed and on his knees, openly weeping to be taught by the man who had rescued him (Doctor Strange, she remembered the gentleman introducing himself as to her), and said gentleman was levitating while cross-legged by the foot of Izuku's bed.

But even with all of that to take in, Inko still found her attention drifting to the barrage of sensations cascading around her body. The entire room felt incredibly energized for some indiscernible reason, as nothing seemed out of place or off besides Izuku, Strange, and the spilled food. Inko could only stare wide-eyed at the other two occupants of the room as the bag of fresh clothes she had brought up for her son threatened to slip out of her previously iron tight grasp.

For a moment, the two Midoriyas and Strange could only stare at each other, with one looking frantic, another looking particularly overwrought, and the other looking...surprised but not at all displeased.

Small wonder that Izuku, Strange, and herself suddenly began talking at once, with Strange greeting her and apologizing for causing yet another mess on the floor, Izuku yelling out for his mother while
waving his arms, and Inko calling back to Izuku frantically before reciprocating Strange's greeting with a soft tone.

Naturally, both Inko and Strange gave deference to Izuku, allowing him to have his say first. However...

"Mom!" Izuku shouted with—and Inko felt her heart crack—what sounded like renewed hope. "I can still become a hero!"

What tightness Inko had in her grip finally gave way to slack, and the bag of clothes she was carrying dropped to the floor with a soft rustle.

"D-Doctor Strange told me!" Izuku motioned toward the still levitating man with his scarred hand, though Izuku hardly seemed to care at the moment. "He can teach me magic even though I'm Quirkless!"

Inko's wide eyes followed Izuku's hand in the direction of Strange, who said nothing as Izuku raved about how his dream hadn't died after all. No, Strange was instead looking over at Inko in an almost contemplative manner, as if he were gauging her reaction to her son's sudden dropping of that bombshell of information.

"And there was this maelstrom of fire, water, and steam—!"

No... Inko inwardly quivered. Strange's lips twitched, his eyes—as gentle but firm as they were—boring straight through her as if she were perfectly transparent, feelings and all.

"And there were these crystals but they were made of jelly I think—!"

Just how much more hope can you stand to endure, Izuku...? Inko despaired to herself.

"And I was even flying through space, and—!"

"Izuku!" Inko suddenly yelled out, interrupting the boy's excited rantings. She took in a deep breath, composing all her motherly thoughts and feelings as best she could while leaning down to retrieve the bag of fresh clothes. "Take these clean clothes into the restroom and get changed."

Izuku was startled by her sudden interruption, but he shakily accepted the bag without any arguing or retorts of any kind. He slowly shambled into the adjacent restroom, giving his mother and Strange one final look of dejection before shutting the door.

Even after that, Strange said nothing still, continuing instead his studious analysis of Inko as she stared right back, though with far less confidence.

"Doctor Strange," Inko began. "I will be forever grateful that you saved my son's life, but...it's irresponsible to give him false hope like that."

Inko felt something akin to a phantom gut punch as the words exited her mouth. It may have seemed a callous thing to say, but...she remembered quite clearly her son from nearly ten years ago. How hopeful he was at getting his very own Quirk, and how it would undoubtedly set him on the path to being just like his idol, All Might.

But she saw his tears and heard his despondent sobs even more clearly. How shattered her son was to learn he'd never exhibit a Quirk of his own, all because of something as seemingly trivial as a toe joint...and how shattered she was to understand that there was little she could do about it. As much as she treasured her son...didn't he deserve something better than constantly crushed dreams?
"I understand the dangers that can be posed by dreams," Strange said after an additional moment of silence. His mind wandered to that ethereal entity dubbed Nightmare who he has clashed with on numerous occasions over the years. "But I also see how Izuku's dreams have molded him into the pure hearted young man that he is today. And I know that you see that, as well. I wish to teach him and nourish those dreams and that heart of his."

"You offered to teach him...magic?" Inko inquired, her voice laced with skepticism as she wrung her hands together out of discomfort.

"I understand your reluctance to lend any sort of credence to the existence of those things considered mystical and arcane," Strange said, casually conjuring two floating teacups and saucers in midair with a wave of his fingers. "Such skepticism is to be expected when one has been a sorcerer for as long as I have. Tea?"

Inko could only gape in astonishment as the diminutive teacups materialized out of thin air, hovering daintily above Strange's outstretched hands, whirling around where it floated as if for additional effect. No, it hadn't simply appeared, Inko thought. It was if the space around the strange doctor's hands had actually warped and the teacups had merely...slipped through the cracks, for lack of a better description.

"Ah, Doctor, there's no tea in here..." Inko said lightly.

Strange offered a quiet chuckle. "Your son had a very adverse reaction to that very same tea. I hardly blame him, though, Tibetan butter tea can be quite the acquired taste."

Inko was certainly bedazzled by Strange's display of tricks. "Is all this...you must be using your Quirk to do all of this, correct?" Inko asked after another sip. The words had come out almost instinctively. After all, how could any ability in this power-riddled world of theirs not be the byproduct of some Quirk?

"And yet...the back of her mind was being nipped at by the voice of her own doubts that none of this was caused by a Quirk: the doctor's levitation, his conjuring of teacups, the materializing of tea from seemingly thin air, none of it seemed related. She did not have the superb analytical skills regarding Quirks and powers that her son possessed, and could not think of any correlation between any of Strange's tricks.

_Magic_, her voice of doubt reasoned.
"A lot to take in, isn't it?" Strange said softly as his body drifted downwards, his legs stretching out to meet the ground as he resumed a standing position, though the teacups remained floating. "Most people in the world are so entrenched into a reality instilled by Quirks that they fail to realize or even entertain the possibility of there being so much more."

Strange extended his hand out as both fire and electricity consumed it. The fire spun wildly around his open palm before leaping off and covering the room's walls in its erratic, fiery dance. The lightning zipped between his fingertips before ultimately leaping up onto the ceiling, coating it in a dazzling array of blue sparks.

Inko was rooted where she stood out of fear and reverence for the sudden showing of power. Another simple snap of Strange's fingers, and it had all faded away. No more heat, no more light, and most impressively of all, there was no damage to any of the walls or the ceiling.

"These magic abilities," Inko said while keeping her eyes glued to the floor. "If Izuku were to have these powers, he could pass as having an actual Quirk of his own, could he not?"

What is this feeling...?

"I cannot deny that it would indeed be somewhat similar," Strange said after pondering her question for a moment. "Though his skills will not be particularly distinctive from anyone else who is the least bit proficient in the mystic arts."

This spark I'm feeling...is this hope?

"If you were to train him, could he become strong?" Inko blurted out as she tried to contain a great surging of emotion welling up behind her eyes.

Izuku...can I bear the burden of hope like you have for all these years...?

"Undoubtedly so," Strange replied. "Given his young age, he could even come to surpass my own skills with enough training."

"Then he can become a hero with magic?" A few droplets fell down her cheeks and to the floor before Inko tearfully looked back up at Strange. "It's Izuku's dream to become a hero like All Might, but he doesn't have a Quirk of his own to help him get there. For nearly ten years I've been unable to help my son achieve the life that he wants, so please...!" Inko shocked the doctor by falling to the floor, bowing to Strange almost reverently. "Please teach Izuku! Teach him to become a hero!"

Strange looked on, his expression undecipherable yet erudite in his ponderings. He offered Inko a gentle hand and helped her back up, allowing her to regain her composure and to take her spot back on the edge of the bed before speaking. "It is beyond my power to teach Izuku on how to become a hero."

Strange raised his hand to prevent Inko from interrupting, and he continued. "I am offering to train your son in the skills of the mystic arts so that he might have more than enough power to help realize his dream. But whether or not he actually attains this goal...will be entirely up to him and him alone."

Strange offered a knowing smile to reassure the boy's mother. "I've placed my faith in the boy to use the power I have to offer for good, and I can see you, too, are not bereft of hope for your son. And I would not dare attempt to train him without his guardian's express permission, which I can see you are also willing to give."
"Let's bring Izuku back in here, shall we?" Strange asked among a chorus of sniffles and thanks from the depleted woman.

Strange made his way over to the bathroom door, rapping his knuckles against the wooden frame with a series of quick knocks. He heard an 'eep' on the other side before the door swung open and a rather sheepish looking Izuku stepped out. He was sporting a grey shirt and green sweatpants—clothes easy enough for him to slip into given the state of his hands.

Was he listening in on the conversation? Strange thought to himself as he noticed how flustered Izuku looked, as if he was about to explode with exuberance.

"So," Izuku began, his hands shaking from possibly as much excitement as nerve damage for now. "Are you going to train me?"

Strange grinned and planted a hand onto Izuku's green mop of hair, ruffling him gently. "As of this moment, we are master and student, Young Midoriya."

Izuku's whole body shook and he opened his mouth to cry but not before his mother slammed into him, embracing her son in the mother of all hugs as they both sobbed joyously, leaving Strange the sole witness to the uncanny deluge of waterworks that seemed to be par for the course for the Midoriya family.

After several minutes of sobs, hicups, pats, and the passing around of handkerchiefs by Strange, Inko finally managed to pull herself away from her son.

"Oh! Izuku," Inko choked out as her sobs finally subsided. "This was sent to the apartment yesterday. I thought it best to bring it here rather than leave it there."

Inko slipped a hand into her handbag and procured a shiny card. Izuku reached out to take it but stopped short given his hands.

"Can you...?" Izuku left his question hanging in the air, but Strange understood what he wanted. Izuku still hadn't completely come to terms with his still unusable hands, and the sorcerer doubted he would until his training produced results.

"Say no more, Izuku," Strange replied and levitated the card before the boy so he could read it without impediment.

Izuku's eyes scanned the card, growing more and more wide as he took its contents in. It was a 'Get Well Soon' card that was signed 'The Bakugo Family' in big, bright calligraphic letters. It was bright and colorful, not at all mundane and bland like the cards sent in by the rest of his classmates. And at the very end of the card were several giant explosion stickers slapped on. Only one person from the family could have done that.

"Kacchan...!"

He did care!

"Since we're in the middle of sharing cards," Strange spoke up as Izuku was gushing over the Bakugo's gift. "I have one of my own to give." A small card, business-like in size, appeared with a flick of his wrist, which he handed promptly to Inko.

"What is this?" Inko asked as she gave it a look over. One side was bare except for a strange symbol: it was a circle with a series of four swooping lines in its interior. The backside of the card had a...tea recipe printed on it?
"With this card, you may get into contact with me," Strange informed. "Running your finger clockwise along the circle will alert me to your location. If you need to convey a verbal message, run your finger counterclockwise along the circle, then speak into the card."

"And the tea recipe on the back is for—?"

"The butter tea that you sampled earlier," Strange said with a smile. "During his training, Izuku may have to go into deep meditation. You can use that tea to pull him out of his meditation if you need to."

"Does the tea contain...magical properties?" Inko asked.

"Oh no," Strange said, leaning in close to whisper to Inko. "Your son just absolutely abhors the stuff."

"Izuku, I know you're excited, but please calm down a moment!" Inko called after her son who was positively bounding all around the apartment the next day. Given the nature of his injuries, Inko had managed to procure time off for her son until the beginning of the following school week—more than enough time for him to get acquainted with whatever training regimen Doctor Strange had in store for him.

"As much as I would like to jump straight into using lightning or fire spells, it's far more likely he'll start me off small with something akin to his levitation before anything else, and then I can move on to more practical uses of—" Izuku mumbled on as he paced around his abode excitedly, his exasperated mother watching on helplessly as her son engaged in monologue with himself.

Deciding not to interrupt his deep murmurings, Inko pulled out the card Strange had left her with, remembering his instructions.

*I will come by tomorrow to give you both a cursory tour of my personal Sanctum, Inko recalled Strange's words. I think it would be both beneficial and fair for you to see where I will be training your son. For now, though, allow yourselves to rest with what remains of the day.*

Inko hadn't any time to respond before the space before Strange split apart and opened up in a swirling mass of energy, directed by Strange's very hands. Strange offered one last gentlemanly bow before stepping through, the portal closing behind him, leaving an even further stunned mother and one overjoyed teenager.

And rest they certainly had. After finalizing Izuku's release from the hospital, Inko drove herself and Izuku back home where they promptly crashed, no doubt exhausted by all that had transpired that morning.

By the next day, they were fully rested and dressed presentably, though Izuku squirmed quite a bit as he needed his mother's help to get fully dressed.

Inko ran her thumb clockwise along the edge of the circle on Strange's card. Almost immediately, a portal sprang into being in the middle of the apartment and Strange strolled into their living room, red cloak and all.

"Very quaint," Strange said with a small smile as he took in the Midoriya's abode. "You'll have to invite me over for tea one day, but for now..." He glanced over at Izuku...who was still muttering to
himself at the table. "Izuku, are you ready?"

"Ah! Yes! Doctor Strange! O-or should I call you Sensei now!? That's not too much, is it? I hope that's okay! Sensei! I'm ready to begin!" Izuku stammered profusely as he snapped back to attention, bowing his head low, to which Strange reassured the boy as best he could.

As Strange assured her son that calling him 'Sensei' would be no trouble, though may be too formal for his American sensibilities, Inko peered into the portal Strange had opened up. Beyond the shimmering veil appeared to be a...forest? It didn't seem all too bizarre in hindsight, Inko thought, since Strange seemed like a very private man who would need to practice his seemingly arcane abilities away from the prying eyes of the general public. She just hoped he didn't actually live out here.

"Ladies first," Strange said politely, extending his arms toward the portal and inviting Inko to step on through.

Inko did after a moment's hesitation. She tried to crouch through so as to avoid touching any of that blazing energy that the portal seemed to be made of. She landed on a squishy bed of moss as she abandoned the air-conditioned comfort of her home for the muggy warmth of the surrounding forest, followed closely by Strange and Izuku.

"And behind us is my own abode," Strange spoke, dispelling the portal as the Midoriyas turned around...only to yell out in shock (though both did for very different reasons).

He lives in a such a dilapidated building!? Inko internally shrieked.

He lives in the mansion Kacchan had me sneak into!? Izuku internally wailed.

Indeed, the building before them was the very same building Izuku had snuck into and explored briefly that fateful night he had lost all functioning use of his hands. Izuku visibly wilted—he couldn't let his mother know what he had been roped into doing, and he was most certainly praying that his new sensei wouldn't spill the beans either!

"It's appearance is indeed shocking, but I assure you, it's entirely intentional," Strange informed them. As Inko turned and looked at him questioningly, he elaborated. "The ruined building you see before you is merely an illusory spell cast to ward off any would-be intruders. The illusion affects even the interior, so even those who step inside will not be privy to the true appearance and secrets of the Sanctum." At this, he cast a knowing look toward Izuku, who shrank sheepishly under his gaze.

"The Sanctum?" Inko asked.

"Yes, the Sanctum Sanctorum, as it's known among the practitioners of the mystic arts," Strange replied. "This is one of three in the world, and the one I personally preside over. It's location here is temporary--it is usually located in New York."

He moved an entire building from New York to Japan!? Izuku thought before immediately berating himself for even being surprised. Of course he could do something like that...

"Stand back a moment," Strange instructed the Midoriyas as he stepped toward the ruined mansion, hands stretched out. As he parted his hands in an arcane movement, a sudden rumbling echoed from the house. The structure began to shake as if roused from a deep slumber. To Izuku and Inko's amazement, the building seemed to stretch and flex as the peeled off wooden beams miraculously snapped back into place, the holes in the roof seemed to patch themselves whole, and the flaked off paint reemerged with a brand new coat of mahogany and brown. The mansion then stretched
upward, and where there were once two stories, now there were three, sporting pristine window panes. The third floor sported a giant window pane that was circular with four swooping lines—an identical symbol to that on the card Strange gave Inko.

"Let us tarry no longer, shall we?" Strange asked in a nonchalant tone as he strode toward his mansion, leaving mother and son to collectively shelf their continued amazement of the doctor so they could catch up.

"The architecture isn't anything I've ever seen!" Izuku gawked to himself as Strange stepped aside, allowing his guests to enter first. But he did say it was from New York, after all.

Izuku and Inko removed their shoes at the door—cultural norms and whatnot— despite Strange urging them that it would fine regardless, and looked around the foyer with bewilderment: intricately tiled floors, luxuriant frames adorning the walls featuring landscapes completely unrecognizable to Izuku, furniture of a most ostentatious sort, and a number of relics on pedestals and behind glass cases alike. The grand staircase filled in the wider-than-expected room quite nicely, and the arched doorways flanking the staircase seemed to house living and dining room areas respectively.

"My my, Doctor Strange," Inko said bemusedly. "This is all... quite a bit!"

"And this is only the first floor," Izuku added, as he perused the various artifacts in the room, though he made sure not to touch any of them.

"It never truly ceases to amaze me either," Strange admitted with a nod. "My position as Sorcerer Supreme has blessed me with many privileges while also burdening me with many responsibilities. The protection of the many relics here being one of them."

Izuku flinched away from a cauldron, fearful of causing any damage before being led to the second floor by Strange.

"What's down that hallway?" Inko inquired while pointing toward a room filled with many shimmering panels.

"That," Strange said, his eyes gleaming with fondness as he led the Midoriya toward the end of the hall. "Is the Rotunda of Gateways."

"What is this...?" Izuku asked aloud as his gaze drifted from window to window. Each window in the round room depicted a different environment of sorts, ranging from desert to jungle.

"The Rotunda can be used to open a direct portal to wherever the window is showing," Strange informed them.

"So what we're seeing right now is—!?"

"Correct," Strange nodded. "Every environment depicted is an actual location somewhere on the planet that you can travel to via this device. Not only that..." Strange placed his hand on a dial protruding from the wall and gave it a spin, seemingly taking the rest of the room with it. When Inko and Izuku regained their bearings, they saw that each window was now displaying a different location—some were urban this time, too.

"You can manipulate the location of each portal!" Izuku shouted out as he became more and more filled with excitement.

"Indeed," Strange said with a knowing smile. "With the Rotunda one can appear virtually anywhere one desires, whether it be this world or another."

Izuku nearly felt his knees buckle when Strange
gave the room another spin and he was suddenly gazing at the gates of U.A High through the window in front of him.

"This world or another?" Inko asked dubiously. "Are you saying you can use this room to—"

"Travel to other dimensions?" Strange interjected. "Yes, you can."

"Other...dimensions!?" Izuku's eyes widened in sheer delight. "Can you show me!?"

"Not now," Strange's voice clipped with an uncharacteristically morose tone. He quickly regained his composure and took a deep breath, turning to face Izuku with a more reassuring smile. "When you are deemed ready, you will be permitted to use the Rotunda in such a way. Let us continue."

And so the tour continued, with a brief look into the various living quarters and the several library and study rooms dotting the interior of the Sanctum. Izuku absorbed everything in the same studious manner he did for heroes and their Quirks, and while Inko was receptive of what Strange was showing them, she still found herself lingering on that sudden change in tone he had in the Rotunda.

"Doctor Strange," Inko suddenly called out to him as they descended the staircase back into the foyer. "These sessions you're going to put my son through...will they be dangerous?"

Strange was giving her a firm stare as he pondered her question for but a moment.

"I will not lie to you, ma'am," he said. "Devoting oneself to studying the ways of the mystic arts will never be without risk to a practitioner, even if said risk is usually marginal or negligible." He took a step toward her and gave a deep bow. "But I swear on my life that I will keep your son safe while he remains under my tutelage!"

"P-please raise your head," Inko stammered, feeling a bit ashamed as she thought she may have come across more dubious and offensive than she had intended. "You've already saved my son's life once. I more than trust you to keep him out of harm's way, Doctor."

"You have my word," Strange reiterated as he regained his posture, looking between the relief on Inko's face and the barely constrained enthusiasm on Izuku's.

"Izuku," Strange called out to his new student.

"Y-yes sir!" Izuku snapped back to attention and stood up straight.

"Do you know what today is?" Strange asked.

"Ah?" Izuku blinked. "The date?"

"Today is August the 26th," Strange said matter-of-factly. "The entrance exam you'll be eligible for takes place in exactly 18 months. I assume you'll want to begin as soon as possible, yes?"

Izuku nodded furiously.

"I see," Strange said with a smirk. "Then we shall begin posthaste."
For context: Izuku begins his training in this story during his second year of Junior High, about 7-8 months before the sludge villain incident, which takes place in early April, according to the MHA timeline. Izuku is also 14 years old as of this chapter.
Izuku's training with Doctor Strange finally begins! For his first day, Strange informs Izuku of the different kinds of energies and abilities involved in magic, and introduces him to the first relic he'll be using for his training.

Izuku fidgeted with his clothes as his mother helped him slip into his training uniform. He was oddly silent, staring into the mirror intently, taking in the tunic he had been granted by Strange—his new sensei. His tunic was completely white—marking him as the rank of novice, as Strange put it—and flowing briskly whenever he fidgeted. It felt and moved comfortably, and it breathed. All in all, the tunic felt pleasant to wear.

"You look dashing!" Inko cried, interrupting Izuku's musings with the sudden 'flash' and 'click' of a camera. "Your first day of training, I'll need as many pictures as I can take for this! Oh, just imagine the scrapbook years from now!"

"Mom, please!" Izuku's face flushed red and he promptly turned away, hiding his face in his trembling hands. "I-I'm ready, so we should call sensei here while it's still early!"

And early it still was. The sun had just barely peaked over the horizon, and with all the buildings surrounding their apartment, the sky still glowed in vibrant and iridescent hues of red and yellow as the sun itself was not yet visible.

Izuku thought back to his sensei's explanation of what their first training sessions would entail. They were to be longer than the lessons Izuku would come to expect while school was in effect.

"Of course, none of this training shall take precedence over your regular school work," Izuku recalled Strange saying. "You'll need to remain diligent as a student at school as well, Izuku."

Inko certainly snapped to attention at that, assuring the doctor that she would not allow her son to falter when it came to grades, eliciting a small smile from Strange.

"I know, I know!" Inko pulled her son's attention back to the present for the second time that morning. "It's just...training! Magic! This is all so new for you! And also me! I can't even imagine —!"

Izuku cupped his mother's cheeks. "Mom! I'm...excited, too! I'm more excited than I've been about any other day in my life! Now let's call Strange before I literally choke on this excitement!"

Inko nodded and fetched her purse, rummaging through it to retrieve the calling card Strange had gifted her. She ran her fingers clockwise along the edge of the symbol as instructed.

"And a good morning to the both of you," Strange's voice echoed through the living room. A bright
swirling flame sparked into existence, opening up the fiery portal with which Strange walked through, decked in his usual attire.

"S-sensei, I'm ready to begin!" Izuku said, offering as formal of a bow as he could muster.

"Cordial to a fault," Strange thought as he turned his attention to Izuku. "The flowing white robes of the novice," Strange remarked on the attire he had gifted the boy. "Hopefully by the end of next summer you will have instead the crimson robes of the apprentice."

"I will have your son returned home with his expectations of training and assignments before sundown," Strange spoke to Inko before motioning for Izuku to follow him back through the portal and into the Sanctum.

Izuku stepped toward the portal, his mother tearfully waving him off from behind and his new sensei watching him expectantly from the other side. He paused momentarily. He balled his trembling hands into fists.

This is it! Izuku thought, determination flooding his mind and spirit. Stepping through this portal will be like my first step toward becoming a hero!

And step through he did, only to have his view obstructed by a floating tray carrying biscuits and tea, with a nonchalant Strange speaking on the necessity of breakfast.

To make matters worse, it was that damned Tibetan butter tea again. Izuku blanched.

Not a good start for a first step.

"As with any field requiring study and practice," Strange spoke to his student. "It is essential to start with the theoretical before transitioning into the practical. As contradictory as it may sound, magic—like any science—must be studied to be understood. And more importantly, it must be studied to be controlled."

Strange sat cross-legged on the floor of the second floor study, with Izuku sitting on his knees across from him, nodding his head as he took in everything Strange had to say.

A studious mind, Strange noted. Good. He'll need it for what's to come.

"If it suits your fancy," Strange continued. "You may also view magic as a language, one that has existed since the dawn of civilization...and long before the emergence of the powers we call Quirks."

"The use of this 'language' has traditionally been called spellcasting since the days of the Ancient Masters," Strange went on, weaving his hands through the air and conjuring lines of dazzling energy from the tips of his fingers. "Though if you prefer a more contemporary description...magic can be likened to a 'program'; it is the source code that forms the foundation of our reality." The energy began taking shape as Strange talked, linking and chaining into an intricate mandala design before Izuku's eyes. "Sorcerers harness this energy from our Universe and from other dimensions to weave spells into existence, to conjure shields and weapons to our aid, to make magic!" Strange flicked his hands towards his student and the mandala he had constructed so exquisitely rumbled as its energy was released in Izuku's face, engulfing him in a shower of fizzling embers and ethereal warmth.

Izuku released a breath he hadn't realized he was even holding in. These displays of magic that he'd been audience to never ceased to amaze him. He glanced at Strange's hands, the faded scars being
nearly indiscernible from wizened and callused age and hard work, and traced his eyes down to his own quivering palms, the scars still fresh and startlingly visible and apparent.

"Even if I tried to do what you just did," Izuku said after collecting his thoughts. "My hands...would just be waving around in the air. How do I get from here," he motioned to the white tunic symbolizing his blatant inexperience. "To where you are now?"

"It's as I said Izuku," Strange responded. "Study and practice. Before I was a sorcerer, I was a surgeon, and I would have given the same answer to anyone desiring to follow in my footsteps. Given enough time and dedication, there will be nothing you cannot reshape using the energies within you or the different energies around you."

"Different...energies?" Izuku blinked in confusion.

"There are three different energies that can be used in magic," Strange said while holding up three fingers. "The first are the personal energies: energy that is derived from a sorcerer's life force. This kind of energy can be used to develop mental powers such as the astral projection technique I showed you back in the hospital."

Izuku recalled clearly having his astral body ripped from his physical body by Strange when he was displaying his power.

"However," Strange intoned warningly. "Constant use of one's personal energies can prove fatal, even to the most skilled master of magic. Therefore, it is necessary for sorcerers to learn to harness external energies through meditation and training so that we may use magic without posing any unnecessary harm unto ourselves."

Izuku gulped; Strange did say that there was always a risk when studying the arcane, after all.

"One of these energies that can be harnessed—and the one that we will be working on the most to train you in—are the universal energies," Strange said gesturing to Izuku and then the entire room. "These are the energies that flow all around our world and around ourselves. Even at this very moment, our bodies are surrounded by an infinite amount of pure energy that one need only grasp in order to use."

At that, Strange reached out and clenched his hand on thin air as if grasping the hem of a fabric...and pulled. It was barely visible to Izuku's eyes, but he still managed to make out a thin sheen of light that became more apparent as Strange balled the energy up into a sphere. Strange inspected the glowing globe he had whisked into existence and promptly let it go, watching his student's entranced face with amusement as the globe dissolved into a multitude of fading white specks.

"It is with the universal energies that the majority of your spellcasting will come from," Strange said. "The majority?" Izuku picked up on his word choice right away. "There's another type of energy that can be used, right? You said there were three kinds."

"That I did, my pupil," Strange replied, his grin faltering enough for Izuku to notice. "The third energy: dimensional energies. These are energies derived from other dimensions rather than our own...and also from the entities that dwell there."

Izuku couldn't shake the feeling that his sensei was alluding to something grim. Entities?

"Izuku," Strange spoke with a deathly seriousness. "I have no intention of teaching you how to harness dimensional energies. Not until you reach the rank of Disciple, that is. Dealing with forces that exist outside of our natural universe can open oneself to a host of otherworldly influences...and
I-I understand," Izuku said with a solemn nod.

"Dimensional energies aside, training in the personal and universal energies should be enough to flesh out your magical repertoire by the time the entrance exam rolls around," Strange moved the conversation along a bit quickly, possibly to put the tension he had just laid out to rest.

Izuku wasn't going to push the issue of dimensional energies. He figured he would cross that bridge when he got there. If he got there.

"My repertoire?" Izuku asked aloud. "Just how many skills can be used through the use of magic?"

"Where to even begin," Strange scoffed. "Astral projection, divination, spellcasting, portals, transmutation—the list goes on and on. You've already seen firsthand the versatility that magic can grant a practitioner."

"And you're going to train me in all those skills?" Izuku asked incredulously.

"In time, yes," Strange said, the corners of his lips threatening to curl into a grin. "Why not simply train me in one skill at a time until I master it before moving onto the next?" Izuku asked.

At that, Strange wagged a finger at Izuku. "Because a jack of all trades—a master of none—is a far better deal than a master of one."

Izuku couldn't say that he was a fan of riddles, but he got the gist of Strange's words well enough: it would be more beneficial to show competence but not mastery over a vast array of skills than to exceed at one skill and be extremely poor in all others. This was especially true for himself, being Quirkless and whatnot. He was aiming for U.A., and only the best of the best could get into the best school. He would need to develop a diverse skill set if he hoped to stand on equal footing with anyone else skilled enough with their Quirk to get into the famed Hero Course.

Kaachan... Izuku's mind invariably wandered over to Bakugo. He possessed an extremely powerful Quirk that seemed suited for heroics—no one could deny that. But even though Bakugo could likely get into U.A. through brute strength alone, Izuku knew his old friend would never rely on just that. Bakugo was smart—his grades showed that—and he knew how to be terribly creative with his Explosion Quirk when he wanted to be.

Izuku resolved to be just as creative with his magic if he hoped to surpass him and aim for the top!

"Then let's get started!" Izuku yelled out, startling Strange with his sudden burst of enthusiasm. "Where will I begin first?"

Strange had to fight a visceral urge to beam a great big smile at his energetic pupil. "Now, now, don't get ahead of yourself! We have to start small! Which means starting with this!"

Strange dug his hand into a pocket on the waist of his tunic and pulled out a diminutive item of some sort. Izuku leaned in closer to get a better look: the object appeared simple, with two looped openings that seemed melded together and with a flat top. It was golden, but extremely dull in its luster.

"What is it, sensei?" Izuku inquired.

"This..." Strange replied. "Is a sling ring. And it is one of the first steps toward using magic."
Chapter Summary

Doctor Strange sets Izuku on the first task of his training: successfully creating a mystical portal all on his own. As the days turn into weeks, Izuku grows increasingly frustrated by a perceived lack of progress. Strange is forced to take a page out of his old master's handbook in order to help Izuku harness magic through the Sling Ring.

Izuku slipped the two-fingered ring onto his index and middle fingers respectively—with a little trouble, as his hand was shaking as usual—looking the object over inquisitively. Mastering this small, unassuming tool would be his first step into the foray that was magic? It seemed almost contradictory to the boy, that the most mundane object he could possibly find in the Sanctum would have such importance into learning what Strange had to teach.

Although, I suppose, Izuku thought. I should get into the habit of expecting the unexpected. I don't want to let Doctor Strange down by fumbling on the first lesson!

"Mastery of the Sling Ring is essential to delving into the Mystic Arts," Strange explained. "As a practical tool for beginning sorcerers, a Sling Ring can allow one such as yourself to travel through the infinite expanse of the Multiverse!"

"T-the Multiverse!?!" Izuku yelled, furiously waving his hand in a desperate attempt to shake the ring off. He'd already been sent hurtling through the Multiverse once, he had no desire to go through that again anytime soon!

"Calm down," Strange reassured his young protégé, lightly grasping his quivering hand to cease his panicky shaking. "The Sling Ring is a tool that allows for the controlled opening of portals. And as you are now, you will not be capable of performing such a feat. The opening of portals, in and of themselves, poses little danger to you, Izuku."

Although closing them is definitely another matter altogether, Strange internally reminded himself in the back of his head, vivid flashbacks of witnessing bodily dismemberment—both accidental and intentional—briefly popping out from the depths of his memory. Not to mention what creatures or foes might lie beyond your mystical gateway—memories of the dreaded Dormammu appeared this time.

Strange hurriedly buried those thoughts away; there would be no need to weigh Izuku's mind down with such bothersome concerns. They would cross that bridge when they got there. Strange had to remind himself yet again to start small with Izuku's training. He wouldn't besiege him with power that could potentially lead him astray. He wouldn't rush through Izuku's training and ultimately fail him like he had that boy...

"Baby steps, Izuku," Strange continued as his student visibly calmed down. "The first milestone for your training will be opening a portal to a location within the confines of this Sanctum. Under my careful watch, of course."

Izuku seemed to be definitely comforted by the confidence with which Strange spoke; the man was Sorcerer Supreme, after all...even though Izuku knew little about what such a title actually meant.
"Baby steps, Izuku," he reminded himself. "Still," Izuku spoke up. "Doesn't it seem kind of...advanced for me to be jumping into portals right at the start? I would've thought opening portals would be for more advanced sorcerers."

"Izuku," Strange said with an undecipherable glint in his eyes. "By the time your entrance exam rolls around, the lessons I'll have you working on will make you wish you were still learning portals."

The words didn't seem inherently foreboding, and although there was no malice in Strange's tone, Izuku's hands shook harder all the same.

The lesson soon gravitated down a floor and into the main foyer of the building, before the grand staircase and the front entrance. It was actually more akin to levitated, as Strange's cloak carried him down the whole way.

"You seemed concerned that beginning at portals was too great a leap for a beginner such as yourself," Strange addressed Izuku. "But remember the function of the Sling Ring: to harness magical energy and to use it to open a portal of your own design and destination. Can you imagine why, then, it is important for you to begin your training with this tool?"

Izuku crossed his arms as his face adopted his usual quizzical, analytical visage. In hindsight, Izuku would recall this as the precise moment he began incorporating the applications of magical abilities into his mumbling, alongside his typical obsession with Quirks and their uses.

"Well, the Sling Ring works to open portals by harnessing energy, ostensibly through one's fingers where the ring resides..."

"Izuku."

"And this energy that can be harnessed exists naturally all around us at any given time, though it can't be felt under normal circumstances..."

"Izuku."

"Then I can rationally conclude that a Sling Ring isn't merely a tool for opening portals, but can also be used to help beginners detect minute levels of the energy in their surroundings...!"

"Izuku!"

"Which means a Sling Ring's first real function is not the creation of portals but—!"

"Izuku!" Strange roared again, this time successfully bringing his student's mumbling to a crashing halt, only for it to be replaced with a rambling apology. "Analysis is always appreciated, but it would be far more beneficial if said analysis was spoken aloud and discernibly."

"Uh...right!" Izuku said, regaining his composure. "Erm, I deduced the Sling Ring would be the best place for me to start since it will help me sense, feel, and harness energy before actually using it to create portals!"

The tips of Strange's lips turned upward into a grin of approval. "An excellent deduction, my student."

"But I have it on and I still don't feel anything..." Izuku said with a frown, looking down at the Sling
"It's never enough to simply possess a tool when it comes to using magic," Strange said. "Even with one as basic as the Sling Ring, it must be used. It is not the Sling Ring doing the actual work, Izuku. You are. The Ring is merely a focal point through which to draw in the energy around you. It will be up to you to reach out for it..."

At that, Strange extended his hand and closed his eyes, his focus tightening. He uncurled his fingers and they began glowing, like small flowers blooming beneath a gentle morning sunlight. A shiver ran up Izuku's back as he watched his sensei draw in energy around and across his fingers and opened palm. It wasn't anything quite nearly as tangible or bright as the mandala he was shown earlier, but the harnessed energy still managed to give off a gentle static that emanated throughout the entire Sanctum.

More than that, Izuku noticed, was that it felt so warm, and that warmth made it all the more inviting for him to finally give it a try.

"Reach out for it..." The words practically floated out of his mouth on whispered breath as he mimicked Strange's hand movements, closing his eyes, uncurling his fingers, and trying to will the energy to collect into his open palm through his Sling Ring.

"Oww!" Izuku yelped, clutching his hand where he felt the swift 'whack' land. Glancing up, he saw one of the bottom tips of Strange's magical, seemingly sentient cloak wagging at him like a condescending finger. Izuku felt equally ticked and embarrassed—it was only the fabric of his sensei's cloak that he was feeling the entire time.

"W-what was that for!?"

"Hmm?" Strange replied with a wry smile. "Oh, don't mind that. It does that from time to time."

"Guess I was just getting my hopes up, thinking I could draw in magic on my first try..." Izuku muttered dejectedly.

"Izuku," Strange said sternly, getting the boy's attention real quick. "From a practical standpoint, everything you just did was entirely correct. What you lack is experience and discipline, not potential. Remember that."

Izuku nodded, though his concerns seemed less assuaged this time around.

"The theoretical will come to you easily enough," Strange said as he floated to the ground crisscrossed, patting the floor beside him and motioning for Izuku to join him.

"If discipline is what you require in order to properly manipulate the energy around you, then look no further than meditation," Strange said as Izuku mimicked his posture. "Clearing one's own mind and attuning oneself to their environ is the surest way to not only establish one's connection with the mystical energies that they wish to use, but to also deepen said connection through continued contemplation."

"Meditation..." Izuku muttered as he straightened his back and closed his eyes...although clearing one's mind was easier said than done.
After several minutes of agitated fidgeting and wandering thoughts, Izuku cracked open an eyelid and turned to his Sensei for guidance.

"Sensei, I—Sensei?" Izuku blinked as he looked over at Strange. The man looked positively serene as he meditated, floating in the air like a buoy bobbing about on docile ocean waves, his cloak softly rippling in the air for extra effect.

"One cannot clear one's mind through talking, Izuku," Strange said plainly as he fluttered back to the ground, the aura of serenity wearing off him.

"I know, I know, it's just—the whole 'clearing your mind' part is coming across as more difficult than I anticipated!"

" Hmm," Strange pondered where to go from here. "Perhaps you should focus less on clearing your mind of all thoughts and instead focus primarily on pushing any distractions you may have to your periphery."

Distractions? Izuku clenched his trembling hands into trembling fists. That was definitely one distraction he could not easily ignore.

"Perhaps I can give you a...nudge in the right direction," Strange said, reaching out with his hand and pressing his thumb against Izuku's forehead.

"What are you—?" Izuku felt a pull from within that was not too unfamiliar to what he felt before being hurled across the Multiverse, but before he could utter any dissension, he simply...fell.

Reach out for it.

There was nothing around him; Izuku was surrounded by an infinitely expansive white nothingness and he could swear he was falling but he could still feel. He could still sense his real surroundings: the stiffness of the floorboards he sat upon, the charged stillness of the air around him, and the many dimensions of the Sanctum, be it wall, staircase, hanging ornament, or secured relic.

And when Izuku reopened his eyes, he was greeted to a most shocking sight indeed: a shower of ethereal sparks emanating from his fingers and around the Sling Ring, fizzling out of existence almost as soon as he laid eyes on them.

"Was that...?" Izuku couldn't even finish his own words. He instead turned to Strange, as if looking for confirmation.

"Correct, Izuku," Strange said with a most proud smile. "You just used magic."

And so Izuku's lessons at the Sanctum with Doctor Strange continued, even with his schedule made tighter by returning to regular classes and the standard homework taking a priority over his 'extracurricular studies' with his Sensei, as Inko rightfully mothered over his schoolwork, even getting him a recorder to use in lieu of notes since his hands made it virtually impossible to effectively write in class.

And as the days grew into weeks, and the weeks became several months, and the end of the year drew nearer and nearer, so too did Izuku's concerns and anxiety over being a beginner in the ways of the Mystic Arts compound into open frustration at his own lack of progress.

True, he had managed to feel energy and briefly summon a brilliant array of magical sparks (on his first day, no less). True, as the weeks passed by, he became better at sensing and feeling energy with
his Sling Ring, and his meditation techniques became more refined.

But he had still not yet successfully opened a portal by his own volition.

"Focus. Visualize," Izuku recalled Strange's instructions with using the Sling Ring. "See the destination in your mind. The clearer the picture, the faster your portal will form."

And every time Izuku tried to focus his mind and use his Sling Ring properly...he couldn't get over the hurdle that were his always-shaking hands.

And therein lied his frustration: weeks and weeks were going by and he had still not completed the first step toward mastering magic! At this rate he couldn't possibly be capable of making a strong impression at the Entrance Exams and get into U.A!

Izuku thought how disappointed Strange must be in him...although the man never showed it. Quite the contrary: Strange seemed delightfully pleased in spite of Izuku's lack of progress, and the boy couldn't wrap his mind around his teacher's encouraging attitude no matter how hard he tried.

Come to think of it, Izuku thought to himself while his mind still lingered on his Sensei. There's a lot about Doctor Strange I can't quite wrap my mind around.

The fact that the man professed to be Quirkless was at the forefront of his thoughts.

Perhaps Izuku could kill two birds with one stone when they next met: Strange could help him find a way to sift through his frustrations in order to finally open a portal on his own, and he would get to learn more about Strange's Quirkless background.

And Izuku would find his chance late afternoon the next day, when he and Strange were in the middle of their meditation session.

"Sensei?" Izuku finally worked up the courage to brooch the subject to his teacher.

"Yes Izuku?" Strange replied, not quite snapping out of his meditative trance.

"What was it like for you?" Growing up Quirkless?"

Now that definitely snapped Strange out of his meditation. He looked over at his student questioningly. "What brought this about?"

Izuku fidgeted uncomfortably, though he pressed on. "I mean, I'm just being curious. Since I'm Quirkless, too, I figured...we would have had similar experiences."

"You are referring to bullying and discrimination," Strange said, causing Izuku to wince at how bluntly he dove right to those subjects.

"Y-yes."

Strange stroked his goatee as he pondered; he seemed deeply reflective, and not necessarily on memories he liked to remember.

"To be perfectly honest," Strange began at last. "Bullying and discrimination were never really problems I personally had to deal with. Not in the long run, anyway. No, my problems were more...self-inflicted."

"What do you mean?" Izuku asked, feeling genuinely caught off guard by his teacher's admission.
"Growing up, I was never isolated by the bullies among my peers," Strange explained. "Rather, I isolated myself with my own intelligence and ego. Sure, there were taunts and teases here and there early on, but..."

"Hey Strange!" He could still recall the driveling, sneering voices of his dull classmates as if it were yesterday. "How does it feel to be Quirkless while the rest of us all have powers?"

"Oh, I don't know," A young Strange retorted with an exaggerated eye roll. "How does it feel to be second-rate in grades compared to me? You take so much pride in your Quirks, but not nearly enough pride in your own futures! Honestly, those Quirks are wasted on you all if you ask me!"

The students all looked to be either angered or horrified at the blatant disrespect Strange was giving them, but they were all perturbed enough to leave him be from that moment on.

Strange was smarter than them all, there was no doubt about it. They knew it, his teachers knew it, his future employers it, and most of all, he knew it. Even at a young age, he had a singular vision about his life's path, and he would attain it no matter what—childhood louts and distractions be damned.

"Perhaps I was too smart for my own good," Strange addressed Izuku. "My intelligence was my greatest asset, but the ego that I allowed to come with it became my greatest detriment. It was my ego that I had to overcome in order to properly walk down the path of the sorcerer. Just like it is your frustrations and doubts that you must overcome in order to follow in my footsteps".

"I—what?" Izuku asked, flustered at having his inquiry suddenly turned back on him.

"Your intentions are as blatant as the freckles on your cheeks," Strange said with a knowing glint in his eyes. "By inquiring about my past and how I got to where I am today, you'd hoped to ascertain some clue to help speed along your progress. Not a bad idea, if I say so myself."

"I just—" Izuku stammered. His hands were shaking badly again as his frustrations bubbled to the surface, and he clenched them shut to try and contain their movements. "I just can't seem to open up a portal. I try to force the energy into a portal over and over, but my hands are preventing me from making any progress! I can't shake the feeling that I'm failing you and wasting this opportunity you've given me!"

Strange was silent for a few moments. "I see," he said at last. "Your feel that your biggest obstacle are your hands."

"Yes, precisely!"

"They're not," Strange said sternly.

"How can the issue not be my hands? How did you get around this problem?"

"You cannot force the energy into forming a portal any more than you can beat a river into submission," Strange said pointedly, and the parallel to a river was not missed by Izuku, echoing back to the tragic day he effectively lost the normal use of his hands. "In order to use that power as your own, you will need to surrender to its current."

"Controlling magic...by surrendering control?" Izuku's head was thoroughly spinning now, and Strange's insistence at using a river as a parallel wasn't helping in the slightest; Izuku had no desire to be reminded of that day when his hands already did that. "That doesn't make any sense!"

"And you'll come to find that not everything has to when it comes to learning magic," Strange said.
"Your empirical intellect will go far in helping you understand the Quirks of heroes and villains alike, but it will do little to help you understand magic if you do not surrender control."

Izuku grunted as he tried to understand the meaning behind his teacher's words, eliciting a sigh from Strange.

*I'd hoped to avoid this, but...* Strange thought.

"Come with me, Izuku," Strange said as he picked himself up from where he sat, prompting his student to scramble to follow him down the Sanctum's halls...and toward the Rotunda of Gateways.

The Rotunda? Izuku pondered. *Why is he taking me there?*

"Just like I had to silence my ego, you will have to silence your own self-doubt," Strange explained as he twisted the dial governing the Rotunda, causing the room to spin until the mirror directly before them settled on the scene of a raging river. "Silence your self-doubt, and your power will undoubtedly rise."

Strange swung the mirror open, causing Izuku to instinctively shield himself as a frothy wave spray splashed against his face.

"As I'm sure you're aware by now, it only takes three to four minutes for a person to drown," Strange said while taking a step back from the mirror.

*Wait a second...*

"But it only takes twenty seconds or less for a struggling person to submerge fully," Strange said, whirling his fingers and stepping through a portal of his own creation before Izuku could comprehend his intent and turn around himself.

"Wait, Sensei!" Izuku called out.

"Surrender, Izuku," Strange reminded his student before the portal closed fully. "I'll be waiting at the bottom of the staircase."

And the portal closed just as the raging river swept fully into the hallway, sweeping Izuku off his feet and into the clutches of its torrential current.

Izuku tried to yell out for Strange's help just as a wave crashed down from above, sending him tumbling and whirling through murky depths before managing to resurface. Izuku looked frantically for anything to hold onto like the log as the current raged down the hallway, and—

Just how long was this hallway now!? To Izuku's terror, as he caught glimpses whenever the river would permit him to, it seemed as if the hallway leading down to the Rotunda was infinitely *stretched* out, with no end in sight.

Izuku's mind began flashing back to that rainy day, the muddied water staining his face and eyes, and the trees and stumps battering his body and his hands as the river he was currently trapped in battered him against the walls and occasionally the floor whenever a large wave forced and dragged him back down under.

*I'll be waiting at the bottom of the staircase.*

Izuku widened his eyes as Strange's words finally registered with him. He broke through the surface and took in a deep breath of air before he could get pulled back down. All he had to do now was
focus! Visualize! Strange gave him a destination he was well aware of and could see clearly in his mind! Now all he had to do was move his hands properly and...

Not lose the Sling Ring to the furious current like he just had.

With a panicked gurgle, Izuku dove back down, swinging his hands wildly in his attempt to relocate his missing tool. Luckily it was in the same current as he was, and every couple seconds, Izuku would feel a quick bump of something metallic against his arm or his leg. Izuku was fully submerged as he reached around wildly in the barraging depths for the Ring. He just felt it slip past his fingers...! Just one more reach and...!

Strange, true to his word, stood uncomfortably still at the bottom of the staircase, stealing glances up to the second floor hallway that led to the Rotunda every few seconds. He could hear the roar of the rampaging river from where he stood, but not any cries from his student. He'd resisted taking a page out of his master's handbook when it came to training for awhile now—and he doubted Izuku would see being stuck in the middle of a raging river as being objectively better than being stranded near the peak of Mount Everest.

_Should I go fetch him? It's been a solid minute..._

Right as Strange opted to intervene and raised his hands to go through the motions of portal creation, a blazing display of sparks erupted in the air before him. Strange stood, feeling simultaneously dumbfounded and proud, as the sparks coalesced in a swirling fashion and opened up. The rampaging river gushed through, carrying Izuku with it, and only nearly missing Strange.

The wall of water burst open the doors of the Sanctum and spilled out into the surrounding forest, dumping Izuku unceremoniously with a splash onto a bed of now soggy moss. He shakily coughed his airway clear, propping himself onto his hands and knees as Strange rushed to his side.

Izuku rolled onto his back and stared up at Strange with teary eyes. "I-I did it!" He proudly exclaimed, raising his dripping Sling Ring as high as he could muster.

Strange exhaled and plopped down on the ground beside his student, surveying the receding floodwaters. "Yes...you did it."

After several moments of nothing but exhausted panting from that ordeal, master and student alike suddenly burst out into laughter right where they sat. For Strange, it was because Izuku ultimately did have to go through a similar trial in order to draw his power out. And for Izuku, it was because all of this was done in order to get him through the first lesson of wielding magic, and his journey to becoming a sorcerer had only just begun.

The only one not laughing, however, was one Katsuki Bakugo, who was crouched behind a gnarled tree and glaring two piercing red eyes into the back of Izuku's head. He had witnessed the entirety of the tail end of Izuku's ordeal, from the water bursting through the doors to him laughing like a damned fool with that weird old man.

_What...the actual FUCK, Deku!?_
As Bakugo struggles with guilt and doubt following the day of Izuku's tragic accident, he comes to discover that his former childhood friend has begun receiving training of some sort to help him realize his foolish heroic dreams.

Katsuki Bakugo believed in two things above all else: that might made right and the concept of destiny.

These beliefs were spurred on by the very heroes he'd spent idolizing in his childhood, especially the greatest among them—All Might. No matter where he went, no matter who he faced, no matter what odds seemed stacked against him, All Might always emerged victorious because he was the strongest! That kind of power—the kind that always resulted in a hero's victory and a villain's defeat—made him destined to be the Number One Hero.

It all made perfect sense to Bakugo! Those with power were destined to rise to the top as the best of the best, and he would be the greatest among them all.

And why wouldn't he? Didn't he have an objectively superior Quirk? The power to make *explosions* with your bare hands. His entire life since he got his Quirk, he'd been lauded by family, friends, teachers, and strangers alike with how amazing his Quirk was, how he was destined to grow up and become a hero, how he'd be the *greatest*.

Those with power were destined to rise...

And those without power were destined to get in the way.

Deku... Bakugo can't help but grit his teeth in frustration at the mere mention or thought of that green-haired nerd.

Deku also followed him around constantly like some of his other classmates—had since they were little kids, too. Deku also heaped mounds of praise and adoration on him because of the strength of his Quirk, just like all the others.
But Deku forgets his place in the back, where all the others are content to stay and watch as Bakugo progresses closer and closer to becoming a hero. Deku always has to go too far.

Why? *Why won't he give up his ridiculous dream of becoming a hero!*?

Deku is not content to just merely sit back like all the other pebbles and watch him become the greatest hero; no, he doesn't even need to look back anymore to tell, he just knows that with each step he takes, Deku is right there behind him, practically nipping at his heels with how goddamn persistent he is.

He might've respected Deku for it...if he had a useful Quirk to justify holding onto such a lofty dream. Or if he had any Quirk at all! And that was what made Deku so infuriating to deal with! How could a Quirkless loser not just get it? How could Quirkless Deku keep thinking he had what it took to be a hero!?

Bakugo took each heroic declaration from Quirkless Deku as a personal affront.

*Why? Is he really just that stupid?* Bakugo seethed, though he knew Deku's grades were nearly as high as his. Was there some kind of hidden malice in his words instead? Was Deku somehow looking down on him all this time? *Is he...mocking me?*

The more he thought about the conundrum that was Deku, the more he struggled to understand him. The more he struggled, the angrier he got. And the angrier he got, the more determined he became to stamp this fantasy of a dream that Deku held onto so dearly into the dust.

Bakugo didn't see it as bullying. And neither did anyone else, student or teacher alike, seeing as how nobody bothered to even try to stop him.

And so for nearly ten years, Bakugo tried his damnedest to put Quirkless Deku back in his place. For ten years he tried to force Deku to dream realistically. For ten years he used every possible opportunity to kick Deku aside like the pebble in the road that he was.

Until one day, when Bakugo felt that somehow...he'd gone too far.

"Give me the book, Deku!" Bakugo growled, clenching his fist in preparation of a pounding he was sure to give Deku once he forked that damned book over to him.

"K-Kacchan!" Midoriya protested with that insipid nickname of his while stepping back. "I need to return this!"

"What you need to do is fork that book over!" Bakugo seethed in anger at Deku's continued defiance.

"Kacchan—!" And when Midoriya slipped off the ravine edge, all the anger slipped off Bakugo's face, with only a stunned expression remaining.

"Oh shit! Oh shit!" One of his sycophants—the one with the gangly finger Quirk—yelled out in a panic, rushing close to the edge but stopping short just as Midoriya was swept away and submerged beneath the frenzied waves.

"Bakugo!" He yelled out, turning back toward his boss. "What do we do now!?!"

"He fell over the edge—!"
"Midoriya's gone—!"

And amid all the hushed tones and fidgety kids that looked like they just wanted to bolt from the scene of a crime, Bakugo just...stood still. Shocked. Processing.

*What the fucking shit,* Bakugo thought as he stared down the ravine, frozen into stillness. This wasn't supposed to happen. Bringing Deku out here and goading him into exploring the haunted mansion was just to scare him! It was just another means to put him in his place! He wasn't supposed to—! Bakugo didn't mean to—!

"Young man!" An orotund voice called out among the panicky whispers.

Bakugo turned his head toward the sudden voice. His followers stood gawking at the man now in their presence: a blue-robed gentleman, red cloak flapping in the wind, arms crossed, white temples, slicked hair, oh, and *he was floating.* A Pro Hero, perhaps? Not one Bakugo could recognize, though...

"The book that was removed from my mansion," he said sternly. "Where is it?"

*His mansion?* Between Deku getting swept away and this floating man claiming to own that wretched building, Bakugo could hardly formulate an answer. He tried to raise his shaking arm and point toward the river, but Gangly Fingers beat him to the punch.

"Midoriya had the book! But he fell into the ravine with it!"

The gentleman hardly missed a beat and took off flying down the ravine edge after Midoriya, his cloak violently flapping from behind as he zoomed in low in his search. A Flight Quirk, Bakugo assumed. Not flashy, but you never could go wrong with them.

When the gentleman took off flying, so, too, did most of Bakugo's gang take off running out of the forest, and far away from the ravine. Only Bakugo and Gangly Fingers--an appropriate nickname in Bakugo's eyes--were slow to depart. For Bakugo's part, it was mainly because he was still reeling in shock over the possibility that Deku could very well be dead because of him. As for Gangly, he was still in shock that Bakugo was even in shock to begin with.

*N-no, not because of me,* Bakugo hurriedly thought. *If Deku had merely stayed in his place like he should have, none of this would've happened!*

By the time he and Gangly had arrived back at the park adjacent to the forest, thoroughly soaked but otherwise quiet, an ambulance was already there, the bundled up body of Deku being loaded into its back.

Bakugo and Gangly breathed a heavy sigh of relief. It looked as if Deku, though definitely roughed up and muddied beyond belief, was still alive.

The blue-robed guy was there, briefly speaking with some paramedics before they took off. When they did depart with Deku in tow, the man turned toward Bakugo, looking as if he wanted to approach and speak with him, but seemed to decide otherwise at the last second. The man turned heel in the rain, rounded the nearest corner, and was promptly gone.

Out of sight and out of mind, because Bakugo wasn't paying the gentleman the least bit of attention. All his racked mind could think of was the fact that Deku was alive.

*T-that's good,* Bakugo's mind was reeling defensively and desperately searching for that silver lining. *Maybe now Deku will give up on his shitty dream and stay in his place for good!*
He didn't even hear Gangly say goodbye, nor notice him leave. He hardly noticed his own two legs walking himself home to an overly worried father and an overly bitchy mother.

After all, it wasn't my fault, Bakugo told himself repeatedly until it became like a new mantra. It wasn't my fault...

"I'm sorry to have made everyone so worried!" Midoriya bowed his head deeply to his fellow classmates upon his first day back since the incident, eliciting a scowl from Bakugo. It seemed as if his timid personality hadn't changed in the slightest during his time away.

"I received all your cards while I was in the hospital," Midoriya flashed a smile amid a chorus of greetings--some more halfhearted than others--and crossed his hands across his waist. "I greatly appreciated it!"

Bakugo's eyes drifted down to Midoriya's hands as he approached each desk on the way to his, stopping to personally thank each student he passed. They were gloved. And shaking.

That certainly piqued Bakugo's curiosity a bit. When the hell did that loser ever wear gloves? He certainly never did before...the accident...

Whatever happened to Deku the day he was swept away by the river, Bakugo reasoned, he certainly didn't away scot free.

"Kacchan..." Deku's voice snapped Bakugo out of his musings.

"Huh?" Bakugo glowered at the boy as he stood by his desk sheepishly. "The hell do you want?"

"I just wanted to thank you for your card," Deku said with that damn friendly grin of his. "I appreciated it. I thought it was the best out of all of them."

"Of course it was the best!" Bakugo snapped. "You didn't think it was gonna be the best!? Who the hell do you think I am!?"

"No, no, it's not that—!"

"Don't get it wrong, Deku!" Bakugo said wide-eyed and with a crazed grin. "I only did it because the teacher made us all make one! And I only put in the extra effort because my damn mother was up my ass about it! Got that!?"

"Of course, of course!" Deku said timidly and hurried past Bakugo to get to his seat as their teacher restored a semblance of order and got on with the day.

And so Bakugo finally managed focus on something different like school work, even though Deku's mannerisms and behavior were grating the back of his brain like an itch just dying to be scratched. But he managed to push it down and ignore it class after class, subject after subject, and then lunch passed, until that focus was inevitably broken.

"Midoriya," their teacher called out to the boy the class before lessons for the day ended. "Why aren't you taking notes?"

Bakugo shifted his view to the side just enough to catch a glimpse of Deku at his desk, angrily
wondering why that loser was breaking his focus right before the day was almost over.

He nearly dropped his pencil right as Deku dropped his...and then shakily tried to pick it back up with his still gloved hand. Deku repeated this several more times as he offered their teacher a weak smile.

"S-sorry sir, it's a bit difficult right now..."

Bakugo turned back toward the teacher. A look of realization, followed by a look of pity, had washed over the man's face. "Well, alright," he said. "We'll discuss it after class, then."

And so they did. After the last of the students trickled out the room, Deku had stayed behind to talk with their teacher. Bakugo was lurking just outside the door, curious as all hell, but certainly not dumb enough to barge in or make it obvious that he was eavesdropping just so he could hear things more clearly. He would try to settle for mumbling.

After several minutes of tolerating wave after wave of incoherent sentences, Bakugo had finally had enough and opted to risk a peek into the room. A peek couldn't hurt, right? But just as Bakugo tilted his face in front of the window on the door, he nearly jolted as he saw Deku showing his gloveless, trembling hands to his teacher.

To Bakugo's horror (though he would never admit it), they were scarred beyond belief.

Deku offered the teacher a bow before seemingly being dismissed and turned toward the door, with Bakugo ducking out of sight before he was spotted.

"Hey," was all Bakugo said as Deku opened and closed the door behind him, catching the green-haired boy off guard as they were the only ones in that hallway at the moment.

"Kacchan—!" He had yet to re-glove his hands, and scrambled to slide them back on, but Bakugo was too quick for him and he tightly grasped Deku by the wrists, forcing his hands up for him to look at, scars and all.

"Holy fuck, Deku," Bakugo said as Deku squirmed uncomfortably.

"Kacchan, please—"

"No wonder you couldn't take notes earlier," Bakugo continued, leveling a glare right at him. "Should've known you wouldn't get out of that river unscathed, useless nerd."

Deku fell silent, Bakugo's glare driving his own eyes down toward the ground instead.

Bakugo blinked in surprise—was he finally going to give up, after all this time? Had Deku finally learned his place after losing the use in his hands?

"Now do you understand, Deku?" Bakugo growled, tightening his grip on his wrists as he went in for the proverbial kill. "You still think you can be a hero without your hands?"

"I will," Deku uttered back defiantly, yanking his arms out of Bakugo's grip with a sudden renewed strength that caught him off guard. "Even if my hands never recover fully, I haven't given up."

Normally this was the part where Bakugo angrily exploded on the boy, burying him under a mountain of belittlement and physical intimidation. But nothing of the sort came; there was merely stunned silence from Bakugo.
"I appreciate your concern, Kacchan," Deku said before beaming a big smile at him—one that seemed more real and honest than any other smile he'd ever given. "But I won't let this stop me from becoming a hero!"

_It wasn't my fault_, Bakugo's mantra suddenly rang through his head, and he suddenly realized why Deku's behavior was so off-putting to him and grating his very nerves more so than usual, and that damn bright smile of his made the problem all the more clear.

Deku turned away and promptly left without another word, leaving Bakugo to stew in his realization that Deku bore no ill will whatsoever over what had happened.

_Why won't you give up?_ Bakugo asked in his head over and over again, as the guilt swelled up in his gut like a well of lava pushing for a cataclysmic release.

But deeper down, the depths of his subconscious was repeatedly asking and burying a question that was far more problematic for him: _Why aren't you angry with me?_

If Bakugo was expecting an answer to those questions soon, he was bound to be disappointed. The days turned into weeks, and the weeks turned into months as he was left stewing in his guilt and frustration—guilt over what happened to Deku and frustration over that fact that he _wouldn't give up already, damn it!_

But his frustrations did not blind him to those of Deku's, either. If anything, his defiant declaration only made Bakugo scrutinize him even more.

The very next day after their initial confrontation, Deku began bringing a recorder to class with him, and his inability to write notes down was never brought up again.

But even still, Bakugo couldn't help but notice the weird amalgamation between determination and frustration that Deku had become over the weeks after his declaration. While in class, Bakugo would steal quick glances and notice uncharacteristic behaviors from Deku: clenched teeth, furrowed brows, angry, defeated looks as he poured over his school work. He seemed genuinely frustrated, but whenever he was approached by anyone, or vice versa, he perked right up, and every goofy grin of his seemed genuine and real.

Bakugo had to resist clenching his hair and letting out a yell as he tried scrutinizing his assignments instead of the enigma that was Deku for a change. Why was that damned nerd so difficult to understand!

Seeing Deku flip on a dime between being filled with frustration one moment and being filled with resolve the next didn't make Bakugo feel any better about his role in this situation—if anything it made him feel even more guilty. More vulnerable.

And Katsuki Bakugo hated feeling vulnerable more than anything else.

Bakugo wasn't the greatest when it came to interpersonal relationships and the feelings (baggage, as he called it) that always came with them. He was determined to squash these feelings of vulnerability before anyone—especially Quirkless Deku—could see that they'd manifested in the first place.

At first, he'd been relatively successful, venting all his pent up irritation into physical activities, whether it was gym class at school or punching a sandbag at home.

But as Deku's anxiety seemed to grow—for reasons Bakugo couldn't quite pin down, as he was sure it wasn't something related to school—so, too, did Bakugo's.
It was then that Bakugo, exasperated beyond belief and at his wit's end, decided he'd have to try something he had hoped to avoid if he wanted to deal with these feelings of insecurity accordingly. He'd have to return to the proverbial scene of the crime.

Bakugo didn't know what to expect or feel when he returned to the ravine edge, all dried and cracked with what was once a raging river now reduced back down to a relatively calm stream. He didn't know what to expect or feel by returning to the so-called Haunted Mansion, where he'd goaded Deku into sneaking around in, thus leading to the river incident to begin with.

But he never expected to witness Izuku being carried out of the wrecked mansion by a wave of water and crashing down on the mossy ground. The mysterious robed and cloaked man from before also floated over to his side to check on him.

What...the actual FUCK, Deku?!

Why the fuck had Deku come flying out of the mansion on a wave of water? Why the fuck had Deku even returned to the mansion to begin with? Why the fuck was the older gentleman who'd saved him with him now? But more importantly...

Why the FUCK are you laughing!?! Bakugo internally seethed. For what reason did Deku have to laugh in his condition? He was getting to the bottom of this right now no matter what!

"OI! DEKU!" Bakugo roared as he stomped out from behind the gnarled tree he was situated behind. "WHAT THE FUCK IS GOING ON HERE!?!"

"Kacchan!?" A bewildered and dripping wet Deku quickly scrambled to his feet as Bakugo approached with an angry scowl. The gentleman also picked himself up to his feet, and while looking genuinely surprised by the other boy's appearance, said nothing but watched on instead. "What are you doing here?"

"Don't answer my question with another question, you damned nerd! You answer me!" He jabbed a finger in Deku's face accusingly. "What the FUCK is going on here!!?"

"I-I was just—" Deku stammered, looking between Bakugo and the gentleman before staring back down at the ground like a scolded puppy caught chewing on the furniture.

"You were just what, huh!?" Bakugo thundered, reaching out to grab him by the shoulder only for the older man to intervene, pulling Deku backwards and just out of Bakugo's reach.

"He was just in the middle of his training," the man answered coolly, eliciting surprised looks from Bakugo and Deku alike.

Training...? The word spread through Bakugo's mind like a virulent infection. His brows became furrowed. His lips twitched into the beginning of a sneer. "What kind of training?"

"Training that may help him become a hero, of course," the man again answered coolly, a strange and undecipherable twinkle in his eye as he replied.

"You've got to be fucking kidding me..." Bakugo hissed, balling his angrily shaking hands into fists hard enough to suppress any explosive sparks that may have come out otherwise. "Training? So he can become a hero? Do you even know that he's Quirkless!?!"

"I'm well aware," the continued coolness of the man's tone infuriated Bakugo to no end, as if he
"So then...why!?!?" Bakugo demanded, and for a split second couldn't decide if he was asking the man or Deku. He opted for the former. "Why...waste your time training a Quirkless loser?"

The man's gaze became steely for a moment, and Bakugo couldn't deny that he looked downright intimidating in the brief flash of emotion. "On the contrary," he said. "I feel as if my efforts have been more well spent now than ever before."

"Oh yeah?" Bakugo decided to dig a bit deeper. "And how long have you been training that nerd?"

"Since after his accident," the man replied matter-of-factly.

Tch. That was a vague answer, but Bakugo knew he couldn't hound this man for answers like he normally could Deku or anybody else. "And what exactly have you been training him in?"

"Skills befitting his Quirkless disposition."

That doesn't tell me shit! "Just...who the hell are you?"

"My name is Doctor Stephen Strange—"

"Never heard of you," Bakugo cut Strange off. That definitely made Bakugo feel a little better, knowing that Deku was trying to get some training in with some nobody hero that he'd never even heard of. He wasn't the fanboy hero nerd that Deku was, but he still knew which big names were making the rounds in the media. He knew who the best of the best were, and he sure as hell could never recall any 'Doctor Stephen Strange' anywhere near the top of the Hero Billboard Chart. Which meant this relatively older-looking gentleman was somehow a newer, up-and-coming hero who was flying way under the radar for the time being, or...

He's a totally lame duck of a Pro Hero, Bakugo snidely derided the man in his mind. Where previously he felt incredibly livid that Deku of all people had snagged a private tutor ahead of someone way more deserving of one such as himself, he now felt some relief. Nothing had changed; he felt somewhat convinced that Deku was not going to make any progress toward his ridiculous dream with training from a nobody flunky hero.

But still... that gnawing doubt sprang up once more. It remained bothersome that Quirkless Deku was still so persistent, so much so that he'd pathetically roped a Pro Hero, flunky though he may be, into supporting his unrealistic goals.

"You think this changes anything, Deku?" Bakugo directed his vehemence toward the meekly boy. "You think this gives you a leg up over me?"

"N-no, Kacchan—"

"Well good!" He spat. "You'll see soon enough that no amount of training will be enough for your Quirkless hide! No amount of training gags like that water shit will get you anywhere! It won't get you into U.A, and it won't help you become a hero!"

"And unlike you," he continued while turning his back toward student and master alike and storming off back home. "I won't debase myself by crawling to some flunky Pro for help."

While Bakugo felt like he'd gotten the last word in, he didn't exactly feel like he'd won, per se, which only made him angrier. That Doctor Strange fellow answered his questions vaguely, and he hated when people answered with technically truthful answers but were really just trying to keep the
It doesn't matter, Bakugo quietly seethed to himself. **Deku will always be Deku: just another pebble in my way.**

Strange had a seemingly perpetual frown etched on his face as he watched the foul-mouthed blonde boy stomp off back where he came.

*That was somewhat of a close one,* Strange thought as Izuku fidgeted by his side. *We'll be more cautious about allowing any training to stray outside the Sanctum from this point forward. A bit of an oversight on his part, really.*

"Izuku," Strange called out to his student.

"Y-yes, sensei?" Izuku replied.

"I was going to save this for right before your entrance exam because I was not expecting this to become an issue, but I was not expecting to be nearly found out so soon," Strange said. "But I must ask you to refrain from divulging the magical nature of your training to anyone outside your immediate circle. Please be sure to extend this message to your mother when you return home."

"Are you worried Kacchan will tell everyone about me getting training?" Izuku asked. "Because...he won't."

"You seem sure about that," Strange said, raising a brow.

"It's...just how he is," Izuku said with a sigh. "He won't have it in him to tell others. Besides, I...trust him."

"This is less a matter of trust," Strange retorted. "And more of a matter of necessity. And speaking of necessities..." Strange made a quick, arcane motion with his hands, a similar-looking card appearing between his fingers.

"Is that...?" Izuku asked as Strange handed him the card.

"Another calling card of mine, yes," Strange affirmed. "Just like the one I gave your mother. You know how to send me a message or your location, correct?"

"Good," Strange continued upon receiving a nod from Izuku. "I think it necessary for you to have one of your own, just in case...I didn't account for this happening, and I've taught you to expect the unexpected, haven't I? It's time I put those words into practice myself!"

"And one more thing, Izuku," Strange said, getting his student's attention. "I want you to refrain from socializing with that boy for the time being. I won't pry into the history between you two, but it's best to bury those complications for the time being in order to better focus on your upcoming training, understood?"

"Understood, sensei," Izuku said with another nod. Strange was right, in the end. The history between him and Kacchan could really only be described as *complicated,* but it wouldn't do him any good if he'd let said complications obstruct his training. He knew that Bakugo wouldn't let something as flimsy as feelings get in the way with his training, so he'll try to do the same!

And so Izuku heeded his Master's advice and did his best to limit interactions with Bakugo while he continued his training into the next school term. Bakugo, likewise, limited the times he'd snap at
Izuku, and the class-wide bullying and belittlement slowly but surely died down as well, as if the rest of his classmates could tell Bakugo was no longer directing the majority of his vehemence toward Izuku.

And for a time, there seemed to be peace at Aldera Junior High as the unofficial ceasefire between Bakugo and Midoriya took full effect.

And this peace lasted all of roughly four months before a certain sludge villain attacked.
Enter: All Might!

Chapter Summary

The 'ceasefire' between Bakugo and Midoriya comes to an abrupt end the day Izuku meets face-to-face with All Might and a sludge villain attacks the boys. Izuku uses what magic he knows to save his former friend, much to the shock of everyone present, causing people to believe the boy really does have a Quirk after all. In the aftermath, All Might approaches a bewildered Izuku and proposes to make the boy his successor. But how will Doctor Strange feel about this sudden turn of events...

"—my boy—"

Izuku's mind was positively swimming. The darkness of encroaching unconsciousness and the overwhelming stench of the green muck that had been forced down his throat and into his airways were repressing his senses and clouding his mind in a near impenetrable fog.

"Young man—"

The sorcerer-in-training gave a start as he suddenly hacked what gunk remained lodged in his throat, rolling over onto his hands and knees and trying to pick himself up as he tried racking his brains for answers.

_What...just happened?_ Izuku thought, spitting out another green blob. _Oh yeah._

The last thing he remembered whilst walking home from school was getting snatched by a villain with a sludge Quirk of some kind. It would've been an interesting enough Quirk to analyze...if it wasn't being used to kill him right then and there.

_Perfect_, the slimy voice had hissed as he moved to force himself down Izuku's gullet. _Your body will be perfect for escaping that grinning fool!_

His vision had faded right as another looming shadow crashed into the villain that had attacked him, and the last thing he recalled feeling was the solid brick ground below that he unceremoniously plopped down on.

"I'm glad to see you're alright, young man!"

That voice! Booming, boundless, brimming with energy! Izuku dared to look up at the man casting his colossal shadow over him.

"Have no fear!" All Might roared with his flashy grin as held up duel bottles with the aforementioned sludge villain packed tightly into their confines. "For I am here!"

_Holy crap! "All Might?!"_ Izuku shrieked with tears of joy threatening to spill forth.
"I was chasing this dastardly villain down for quite awhile!" All Might boomed loudly and followed it up with a hearty laugh. "I'm fortunate to have arrived in the nick of time! No need to ask for an autograph, I already put one in your notebook!"

Izuku shakily scrambled through his notebook to verify: there his signature was, as large and loud as the man himself, on the very last page.

"And now I'm off to deliver this slimy evil-doer to the police!" All Might declared as he turned and crouched, preparing for a monumental leap.

"W-wait!" Izuku cried out. He had just been saved by his childhood hero and idol, the man he had revered for years above all other Pros. Doctor Strange might have been the man who was training him in the skills that would allow him to properly attain his dream, and Izuku would be forever grateful for that, but All Might was still the man that molded that dream in the first place. All Might was responsible for Izuku's love of heroes. All Might was responsible for the hope that Strange had helped him recover. That kind of reverence is not so easily replaced or forgotten.

Watching what could be a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity about to bound away, Izuku sprang forward. Despite Strange's warning, Izuku felt that he desperately wanted his idol All Might to hear him declare his dream and intentions. He wanted All Might to know just how important he was to driving Izuku forward to realize his dream.

And so Izuku, in his haste, did the only thing that he could think of in that moment: he latched himself onto All Might's leg right as he took off.

A few shrieks of terror and bewildered admonishments later, All Might had landed down on the nearest convenient rooftop to ensure Izuku's safety.

"That was dangerous and reckless, my boy!" All Might scolded Izuku while still maintaining that trademark smile of his.

"I'm so sorry, All Might!" Izuku pleaded as he caught his breath after such a harrowing ordeal. "I just...really needed to tell you something before you go!"

"I see," All Might said, and Izuku noticed he was...shaking a little bit? "Very well, but please, make it quick, my boy!"

"Thank you, All Might!" Izuku said with a bow. "I know you must hear this a lot...but I just wanted to tell you that you've been my greatest inspiration since I was a little kid! I'm going to be applying to U.A next year, and I'll become a hero who saves lives with a smile on my face just like you, even if I am Quirkless—!

Poof!

"I—All Might?" Izuku blinked. 

Crap, ran out of time...! "I-it's fine, kid, pay no attention to—gurk!" The gaunt man in All Might's place tried uttering before a spurt of blood ran from his mouth, eliciting a panicked yell from the boy.

"Listen, kid," the man behind the All Might persona—Toshinori Yagi—said as he lifted his shirt, revealing a twisted wound across his abdomen that outclassed Midoriya's scarred hands in every discernible way. "It's never bad to dream. But you still have to consider what's realistic."

The young man kept his gaze downward, but Toshinori could still see that the boy was visibly
shaken. The man sighed; he hated what he was saying, but he thought it still needed to be said.

"Pro Heroes are burdened by numerous responsibilities," Toshinori said while gesturing to his grievous wound. "They must always be willing to endanger themselves—to risk their very lives—in order to save the lives of others. And without having any power to do that...you can end up being the one in need of saving instead."

"But...! I'm not powerless!" The boy balled his hands into fists, raising his head to look at All Might with an expression that blended defiance and desperation. "I'm—!"

"Quirkless," Toshinori interjected before dropping his shirt back down and giving the boy a gentle grin. "Listen, my boy: I'm elated to know that I've inspired such hope in your heart, and I'm not at all unimpressed by you vying for U.A of all places. Heck, if you were to show good enough marks on the written portion, you might still earn yourself a spot in the General Education Department. Despite the heroic reputation and image U.A gives off, Quirkless students are not entirely unprecedented at that institution, whether it be General Education, Support, or Business."

Still, the boy seemed unconvinced.

"I know you're aiming to become a Pro such as myself," Toshinori said, approaching the boy and placing a reassuring hand on his shoulder. "But remember that one needn't be a Pro in order to be a hero. Just take the police as an example: they are no less heroic for being in a profession that is not nearly as flashy as mine, and there are plenty of Quirkless police officers, as well."

The boy seemed to noticeably relax at that, and Toshinori grinned as he departed down the stairs. Hopefully his words resonated with the boy in a meaningful way.

It wasn't until he'd reached the bottom of the stairs that Toshinori realized the bottles containing the villain he'd captured were conspicuously absent.

_Izuku stood silent and alone on the rooftop, processing All Might's words for several minutes. They were certainly not the words he was expecting—or even really hoping for—but he did not feel at all dissuaded. He was mostly definitely shaken, especially at All Might inadvertently revealing his true self, but if anything...his resolve was stronger now than ever before._

Like Kacchan before him, All Might was now placed on what seemed to be an ever-growing list of people Izuku would prove himself to. This list, Izuku had long come to expect, might never stop growing, but that didn't mean his determination would waver anymore.

He made sure not to reveal the magical nature of his training, as per Strange's instructions. Nevertheless, it still felt relieving to unpack his dreams on his idol and to have him listen—so few people ever seemed interested in entertaining the heroic aspirations of a Quirkless boy, but All Might did. Even in spite of his rebuke of Izuku's declaration, he had still listened.

_Just wait, All Might! You, too, Kacchan! Izuku reaffirmed to himself as he followed the stairwell to the street below. In time, I'll prove myself to you just like I will everyone else! I'll show that Quirkless doesn't mean powerless!_
That time would come far sooner than Izuku would have ever expected, as a series of earth-shaking explosions sounded off many blocks away.

"It can't be... is that...?" Izuku thought, stunned, as he approached the growing crowd that was gathering to watch the explosive commotion going on. They were held back at a safe distance by a line of formidable heroes that Izuku easily recognized, such as Kamui Woods and Death Arms.

Normally Izuku would be flipping his notebook open to analyze battles and Quirks, but Quirk Analysis was far from his mind at the moment. Flailing wildly about in the street, obstructed by billowing black smoke and twisted, flaming debris, was the sludge villain that he assaulted him earlier.

"How!?! I thought All Might had him contained!" Izuku thought frantically. Then a sinking feeling settled in his gut: had his drastic actions earlier resulted in the villain slipping from All Might's grasp?

"Kamui Woods," Death Arms grunted. "Can you use your Quirk to momentarily restrain him?"

"No," Kamui Woods replied with a groan. "They're surrounded by fire, and that kid is letting off explosions every chance he can get!"

"Explosions?"

"Kacchan! I won't let you get killed because of me!"

But before Izuku could break off from the front of the crowd, a wooden appendage gripped him by the shoulder. It was Kamui Woods, who was stopping Izuku from going any further.

"Are you mad, kid!?" He exclaimed. "Stay away from there!"

"It's Kacchan!" Was Izuku's only tearful response. "It's Kacchan!"

Izuku flailed his arms wildly to try and break Kamui's hold, but the arbor hero held on tightly, refusing to budge and give the boy another inch.

"If only I could just reach him! Kacchan!"

Izuku threw his arm back, as if winding up for a monumental throw as it shimmered with a bright energy.

"It doesn't matter if I'm a Pro...! It doesn't matter if I'm Quirkless...!"

Izuku then threw his arm forward and a spectacular array of fiery, crimson bands flew from his fingertips and through the smoke toward Bakugo. The flame-like whips honed in on their target, wrapping around Bakugo's exposed arm. Bakugo grunted and instinctively let off another explosion, but the whips appeared unaffected. Izuku let out a tearful yell and yanked his arm back, ripping his former childhood friend from the grasp of the sludge villain, much to the shock of everyone in
There will always be something I can do...to be a hero! Izuku triumphantly recalled All Might's words.

"Kacchan!" Izuku used Kamui Wood's shock to rip himself from his grasp and rush forward to help Bakugo to safety.

"Deku! I didn't ask for your help!"

"No, you didn't!" Izuku said with a snuffle, ecstatic that he was mostly unharmed. "But I gave it anyway! Isn't that what a hero does!?

Bakugo couldn't formulate any kind of response before the massive form of the sludge villain began bearing down on them. "You impudent worm!" He roared as he threatened to smother them with his slimy mass. "I'll crush you for taking my meat shield away!"

Izuku shut his eyes and forced himself in front of Bakugo to take the brunt of the attack...but it never came.

"Detroit Smash!"

One powerful shock later, and the sludge villain was simply...gone. The smoke had dissipated. All that remained was smoldering debris, two shaking boys, and All Might towering above them.

The crowd roared with approval and the heroes collectively sighed in relief as the skies darkened and droplets of rain came down, a testament to All Might's frighteningly incredible power.

Izuku blocked it all out as he fell to his knees. All that mattered was that Kacchan was safe. And, at least in his eyes, Izuku had finally proven himself.

"I shouldn't have to remind you of the ethics of public Quirk usage," Detective Tsukauchi said stoically as he stood before Izuku, who was getting patched up by a medic. "You seem old enough to know of such laws."

"Yes, sir..." Izuku said dejectedly. He'd already gotten an earful from the heroes that were on the scene, especially Kamui Woods who had tried to stop him from running headlong into danger. Every so often he would glance toward where Bakugo was getting looked over, but he'd always flinch and turn his gaze away as his former friend was glaring daggers at him every time he looked in his direction.

"You could have found yourself in a bit of trouble if it weren't for All Might," The detective informed Izuku.

Izuku perked up at that. All Might?

"He informed me that he had prior interactions with you and that you are, or rather were, Quirkless," Tsukauchi said, leaning down to Izuku's level. "And I knew he was telling the truth because my Quirk is Human Lie Detector. When people talk to me, I know if they're lying...or telling the truth. So Midoriya: are you, or were you, Quirkless before the incident today?"

Midoriya didn't miss a beat. "Yes, before today, I was Quirkless." Not technically a lie, just not the whole truth, he thought as the detective gave him a scrutinizing look.
"Late bloomers are not entirely unprecedented," Tsukauchi said with a sigh. "I suppose it was the trauma of seeing your friend captured by a villain that unlocked it. Regardless, you'll get a pass today. But please be diligent in the future regarding the law, alright? And don't forget to get yourself registered!"

Izuku nodded and hopped off the ambulance he was seated in when the medic gave him the all clear. He looked around the bustling crowd, searching for All Might in order to thank him as well as apologize to, but the man was nowhere to be found in a sea of emergency workers, police, Pro Heroes, and gawking civilians and journalists.

Giving up, Izuku turned to finally make his way home. He'd only made it five blocks when an angry Bakugo caught up to him.

"Deku, you piece of shit!" Bakugo snarled as he pressed Izuku against a brick wall with his forearm. "Late bloomer my ass! You were hiding your Quirk from me all these years, weren't you!?"

"K-Kacchan, please just listen for a moment!" Izuku whined as he struggled against Bakugo's pressure.

"Is it because you think you're better than me and my Quirk with yours?" Bakugo growled, digging his elbow into Izuku's shoulder. "Flame whips are fucking pathetic compared to my explosions!"

"It's not a Quirk!" Izuku suddenly blurted out. "I don't have a Quirk!"

Bakugo was silent for a moment before suddenly releasing his pressure against Izuku and letting him drop to the ground. "You can't even be fucking honest with me..." Bakugo muttered morosely as he began sauntering away. "I don't need the likes of a worthless Deku looking down on me!"

"Kacchan—!" Izuku yelled out, but Bakugo was having no part of it. He never looked back, and he was out of sight before long, leaving Izuku alone to nurse his aching shoulder.

Izuku slowly picked himself back up to continue his way home, but he'd hardly traveled another four blocks before being interrupted yet again--this time by All Might in his true, withered form.

"A-All Might!" Izuku yelled out in surprise as he'd nearly ran right into him.

"Young Midoriya, was it?" All Might asked somberly. "I must apologize for the words I shared with you earlier."

"No...I should be the one apologizing!" Izuku shook his head. "It was because of me that the sludge villain escaped, wasn't it?"

"Paltry compared to my wrongdoing," All Might responded. "Pathetic...I was pathetic. To admonish you and your dreams, but in that moment I was not heeding my own advice! To risk one's own life for the lives of others! To move before even thinking in order to save those in need! Those are the marks of a true hero!"

Izuku felt a great pang within his chest as his eyes welled with sudden tears. He had proven himself to All Might after all...

"Young Midoriya," All Might continued. "You were the one who made the greatest difference in that situation. I can say now, without a doubt, that not only do you have the potential to make a splendid Hero, but you have also shown that you are worthy to inherit my power."

Izuku's mind crashed to a violent halt. What...?
"Midoriya, my boy," All Might said with sheer conviction in his voice. "I want you to become my Successor!"

Midoriya could not formulate any sort of reasonable response as his mind reeled from All Might's statement. *Inherit? Successor?* He thought back to Doctor Strange and his progress as the sorcerer's student, and he mindlessly fidgeted with his sensei's calling card that he'd slipped out from his back pocket, circling his thumb around the card’s seal many times as he tried to think of how to respond to the Number One Hero.

Not even a moment later, the space beside Izuku and All Might erupted in a brilliant swirling of energy as Strange's portal opened up. The sorcerer stepped through, giving his student a quick look-over.

"What seems to be the emergency, Izu—" Strange suddenly cut himself off as he slowly turned toward a rather stunned All Might. The two men stared at each other in silence for a solid minute.

"Stephen?" All Might blinked.

"Toshinori?" Strange blinked right back.

Izuku's brain could hardly register this revelation properly. *Doctor Strange and All Might know each other!*
Sorcerers and Heroes

Chapter Summary

Returning to the Sanctum Sanctorum after the sludge villain attack, Izuku is told the story of how Doctor Strange and All Might met many years ago. Afterwards, Izuku comes to a decision regarding One For All, and whether or not he'll inherit All Might's power...

Toshinori rapidly blinked his eyes as he stepped through Strange's portal directly into his Sanctum. He strained his eyes, allowing them to readjust to the sudden change from the radiant sunset to the dimmed interior of Strange's sanctuary, with minute amounts of light from the sunset outside flickering in through what windows were visible and those that weren't obscured by thick, ornate curtains that reeked of incense.

He had come out into the dining room, first floor, and looked over at the table in the center of the room. Several books were splayed open and illuminated by a series of lights that were hovering above the pages.

Floating candles, huh? Toshinori grinned. Some things never change.

"I see your habits haven't changed in the slightest since we last met, Stephen," Toshinori said as Strange and a fidgety Midoriya walked through the portal behind him.

The aperture slowed its swirling and fizzled out of existence. Strange clapped his hands, the floating candles shining brighter in response to better illuminate the room.

"What is it that Stark always says?" Strange said as he had his books flip shut with a wave of his fingers and levitate back onto the nearest shelf. "Do not fix what is not broken?"

"Don't forget that he also said to always improve whenever and wherever possible," Toshinori retorted jocularly. "A few light bulbs are not going to ruin your aesthetic...or is the Sorcerer Supreme worried about racking up a high electric bill?"

"Touché, touché," Strange conceded.

"Geez, how long has it been since I've even last been in here?" Toshinori asked aloud, mainly to himself, as he approached the dining room entrance and peered up the grand staircase toward the true Sanctum on the third floor. "It's been at least five years, I think."

It was right before 'that' day, Toshinori and Strange thought simultaneously.

"I figured it best to move our conversation to a place familiar to all three of us," Strange said, placing a reassuring hand on Midoriya's shoulder. "This way we may talk earnestly and comfortably amongst one another."

"Same 'ol Strange, always the rational one," Toshinori chuckled before turning his attention to a particular glass case tucked away in the corner of the room. Obscured by shadows it may have been, Toshinori widened his eyes as he still recognized the artifact locked securely within. "Is that—?"

"The Wand of Watoomb..." Toshinori repeated softly as he ran a hand through his scraggly hair, glancing down at the artifact with a nostalgic look. "Man, does that take me back..."

"Well, we'll have plenty to discuss with Izuku over some tea," Strange said, summoning a set of three already steaming cups and saucers onto the table with a snap of his fingers.

Oh please no, Izuku shuddered.

All three took their seats at the table, with Midoriya and Toshinori sitting across from one another and Strange sitting at the end, flanking Midoriya's right and Toshinori's left respectively.

"Tibetan butter tea, eh?" Toshinori said as he raised the cup to his lips, hesitating for a moment to allow the buttery steam to waft into his nostrils before taking an eager sip. He closed his eyes as the tea ran down his throat, warming his insides. "It's as good as I remember..."

Strange smiled, taking a gentle sip of his own tea as Midoriya stayed still where he sat, staring down into the creamy ether of his drink with a thoughtful expression on his face.

"Now, Izuku," Strange said, turning to his student. "I'm sure you have a few questions, but—"

"You and All Might know each other!?" Izuku exclaimed, slamming his palms down on the table.

I...should have figured he'd start with that one, Toshinori sweatdropped.

"It was not information you were privy to," Strange said nonchalantly, taking another sip of his tea. "It would not have impacted your training in any meaningful way, and, in time, I would have introduced the two of you regardless."

"I, uh, apologize for approaching your student with my offer so suddenly," Toshinori sheepishly interjected as he rubbed his head.

"Fret not, Toshinori," Strange waved off his concern. "Like Izuku here, you, too, simply did not know, and I cannot fault you for that. Although I must admit, events are moving far quicker than I had anticipated."

That much was definitely true, Strange pondered. It was only early April. Midoriya had just begun the first term of his final school year. There were still ten whole months left before the entrance exam. Which meant that Midoriya was not even halfway through his training, and all of this was already being sprung upon his shoulders.

Unanticipated, indeed...

"Still, the fact that you and All Might know each other is a bit...well, it's mindboggling to say the least!" Midoriya said. "I-if you don't mind me asking, sensei...how did you come to know All Might?"

Strange leaned back in his seat, a visage of reminiscence appearing on his face as Toshinori glanced back over at the Wand of Watoomb, sitting idly by in its container.

"That," Toshinori said as he delved into the story of his first encounter with the Sorcerer Supreme. "Takes me back nearly 20 years ago..."

"A smiling Symbol of Peace is no match for the Devil Incarnate!"
A large explosion rocked the museum surrounded by police and civilian spectators alike. The officers took shelter behind their armored vehicles as suffocating smoke and debris came erupting out of the building’s side. A lone figure, clad in a red suit with a blue cloak, soared out of the smoke, clutching a vintage box close to his body.

"Adios, All Might!" The rat-faced man sneered before flying off, quickly disappearing behind a row of nearby buildings.

Right as he vanished, a second, muscular figure burst forth from the blackened fumes. With grace, the man landed before the police force with an ever-present grin.

"It's All Might!" One of the officers exclaimed.

"Have no fear!" All Might, clad in his Silver Age costume, triumphantly roared. "For I am here!"

"That dastardly villain...!" All Might continued. "He managed to steal his target and fend me off with that tricky Quirk of his!" *Flight and energy bolts? What kind of Quirk allows one to do both?!*

"All Might!" The nearest officer grabbed his attention. "The criminal flew over the buildings in that direction!"

All Might beamed as he looked over to where the officer was pointing, crouching to prepare for a mighty leap. "Many thanks, officer! And worry not! I'll have that crook apprehended in no time!"

Said crook was elatedly flying loops across the sky and cackling madly to himself as he clutched his prize.

*Cyrus, you sly dog!* He thought to himself giddily as he tried to resist ripping the box apart right then and there. *With this relic, Stephen Strange is as good as dead!*

The man—Cyrus—seethed at the mere thought of that pompous sorcerer, Stephen Strange. Curse the Ancient One for taking such a pain in the ass under her wing! Time after time again, Strange meddled with his plans and obstructed his growth as a sorcerer! For too long has that man derailed his many plans for arcane advancement!

*But no more,* Cyrus raged as he landed on a nondescript rooftop. *With this artifact, I'll become nigh unstoppable! I will grind Stephen Strange into the dust! I will even—!*

"New Hampshire—!"

"Eh!?" Cyrus whirled around just as All Might's towering shadow came into view in the sky just above him.

"SMASH!" All Might roared as his bulk suddenly slammed into Cyrus's side, sending them both crashing into the alley below and kicking up a ton of dust. All Might was far more graceful in his own landing, rolling upright and skidding to a halt as he surveyed the damage he had dealt.

Incredulously, the crook struggled back to his feet.

*What was that I collided into?* All Might thought as he sized up his foe. *He actually managed to somehow absorb much of the force behind my New Hampshire Smash! No enemy I've faced has ever accomplished such a feat!*

All Might's quarry, Cyrus, looked worse for wear and was coated in dust, though he still managed to pick himself up as he crunched his options through his head.
I only just barely managed to summon a force field in time to take the brunt of his blow! Cyrus recalled the quick weave of his fingers that he gave right before getting slammed. *Damn him! This situation looks grim! My magic alone in these tight quarters might not be enough to stop this behemoth*!

It was then the man looked down at his feet and recognized the tiny splinters of the box he’d stolen—as well as the item he had sought to claim.

_Cyrus_ thought with a malevolent sneer as he reached down for the small tool that was freed from its confines. _This is the perfect opportunity to break this wand in like a new pair of boots!_

"Foolish All Might!" Cyrus cackled as he brandished the wand in his hand menacingly. "You will be the first mortal man in a millennia to suffer the nigh-omnipotent power of the Wand of Watoomb!"

All Might tensed his body, ready to shoot forward like a rocket. "Your paltry tricks won't work on me, villain!"

Cyrus extended the wand forward, a thick shield of energy erupting from the tip and blocking All Might's path.

"SMASH!" All Might cleaved his hands downward against the shield...and was abruptly sent flying back against a concrete wall. "Ngh!"

"Magical abilities? What are you raving about, you fiend!?" All Might said with a grunt as he shook the last remnant of dust from his otherwise unsoiled costume.

"Of course, a mere mortal such as yourself would be too unenlightened to understand what a sorcerer of my caliber is saying," Cyrus said mockingly. "But if it's a stress test you're seeking, then I'm more than willing to oblige!"

Cyrus gave a violent wave of the wand and a multitude of yellow energy bolts emanated from the head, zigzagging toward All Might. The hero effortlessly leaped upward to avoid the charged bolts, only to yell out in pain as the projectiles changed their trajectory and nipped at All Might's heels, striking his body with ethereal electric energy.

"Why you...! Texas...SMASH!" All Might swung his fist in a powerful straight punch that launched a massive gale straight toward Cyrus. But when the dust cleared, All Might grimaced as his foe had once again protected himself with that pesky near-impenetrable energy shield of his. He would have to work out this bothersome Quirk or else he'd have little hope of victory!

Not that Cyrus would give All Might much time to think. He waved his wand back and forth madly, summoning forth bolt after bolt to strike All Might with. All Might raised his arms across his chest and head, blocking what blows he could, but the bombardment of ceaseless energy soon pummeled him into the ground.
"Do you see now, hero!?" Cyrus snickered as he flicked the wand toward All Might's body, creating yellow glowing threads that ensnared the hero, wrapping around his limbs and neck. "You are no match for the mystic power that the Wand of Watoomb grants me! It was of no use being cooped up behind glass in a museum, but in the hands of an expert sorcerer such as myself, its limitless power can be brought forth without end!"

"An expert sorcerer such as yourself?" A wry voice suddenly sounded out. "You overestimate your capabilities, Cyrus."

Both All Might and Cyrus looked up in surprise as another man floated down gently before them both.

_Another Pro?_ All Might thought as he struggled against his bonds. He certainly had an appearance that indicated such—that blue tunic and red cloak seemed incredibly professional, if not a bit bizarre, even by All Might's standards. _I don't recognize him though._

The man, Cyrus—his enemy—certainly recognized him, however. "Strange!" He snarled and whipped his wand in a frenzy, shooting many electric beams at the young man.

"Watch out!" All Might managed to cough out. "Those projectiles can hone in on your position!"

"Worry not, All Might," The newcomer replied calmly. The younger gentleman simply raised his hands and deflected the energy beams right back toward Cyrus seemingly with his bare palms. Cyrus was quick to respond, leaping forward and raising up another force field to dissipate the repelled bolts.

All Might grunted in realization as he stressed the glowing bonds nearly to their breaking point, ready to jump in at any moment. _I see...I think I've figured out a weak point in his strategy! I'll wait for the right moment to make my move!_

"Cyrus Black!" The newcomer—Strange—exclaimed. "For too long have you conspired against the mystical balance of Kamar-Taj and the Ancient One! Your theft and subsequent misuse of the Wand of Watoomb shall not be tolerated!"

"Silence, Strange!" Cyrus raged, waving the wand and sending dozens of fiery, flailing lashes in Strange's direction. "Go crawling back to the Ancient One with your tail between your legs like the dog that you are!"

Time seemed to slow as Strange uttered an incantation barely discernible to All Might's ears:

> With shield alone I lack reprieve,

> From powers conceived of darkened lore,

> Grant me greater screens to weave:

> The Seven Rings of Raggadorr!

True to his incantation, seven resplendent rings erupted and spun around the man's body, fending off and redirecting every fiery lash sent his way. With a twist of his hands, the fiery tips spun right back around and went hurdling toward Cyrus.

"Pointless!" Cyrus spat, erecting another force field to keep his redirected spell at bay. "Not even you, for all your prowess, can completely overcome the wand's magic!"
"If you're going to erect a barrier," All Might shouted as he sprung into action, snapping his bonds off and lunging at Cyrus from behind before he could properly react. "You'd do well to not cover only your front and leave your back exposed!"

No...! Cyrus thought in alarm as the jaws of defeat came crashing down on him.

"Now!" All Might raised a single hand. "Feel my Missouri SMASH!" All Might slammed his hand against Cyrus's shoulder in a straight, focused chopping motion, sending his body hurdling into the nearest wall.

Strange flew into the air, capitalizing on All Might's attack so that Cyrus would not have any hope of recovery and retaliation. "In the name of the Eternal Vishanti, let loose the Crimson Bands of Cyttorak!" Said thick, crimson bands materialized from Strange's hands, circling down and ensnaring Cyrus's entire body before he could pick himself back up.

"This can't be happening...!" Cyrus shouted out defiantly. Strange squeezed his hands, resulting in the crimson bands tightening until Cyrus dropped the wand, letting it fall harmlessly to the ground with a 'clunk'.

"Omnipotent power?" Strange scolded as he approached Cyrus, plucking the wand off the ground. "The Wand of Watoomb certainly can offer such incomprehensible strength. But that wand is still merely a tool: only as good as its user."

"D-damn you, Strange...damn you—!" Cyrus began yelling, but was suddenly cut off as Strange tapped his forehead, sending him crumbling to the ground without another word of protest.

"Victory is ours, my friend!" All Might let out a hearty laugh as he slung the restrained Cyrus over his shoulders and extended a friendly hand to his unexpected ally. "Let us make haste then, Doctor Strange! We have a criminal to hand over to the police and an artifact to return to the museum!"

"You may take Cyrus, ' Strange said with a knowing look. "I've restrained his mental faculties so that he will no longer be able to use his powers. But I must return the Wand of Watoomb to its true rightful place."

All Might's trademark grin threatened to falter. "Now, now, that's not for us to decide, my friend! We cannot make those kinds of judgments as Pro Heroes! Come to think of it, I don't recognize you in the slightest...you must be a newer hero, correct?"

"I'm afraid I'm not a Pro Hero at all actually," Strange corrected him plainly. All Might seemed downright shocked at how casually Strange had admitted that. "If you are truly not a Pro Hero...then what you did was reckless! Not unappreciated, but extremely reckless nonetheless!"

"Tell me, All Might," Strange forced the conversation along. "What do you know of magic?"

"Pardon?" All Might said confusedly.
"Magic," Strange repeated. "Or at the very least, what do you think of it? Now that you've seen the mystical capabilities of both Cyrus as well as myself with your own two eyes?"

"Magic, huh?" All Might chuckled a bit. "I've never heard of Quirks referred to as such anywhere, let alone the States!"

As he chuckled to himself, Strange merely smiled, as if he were in on a joke that All Might was completely unaware of. With a quick rotation of his hand, Strange had opened a fiery portal before them, and suddenly All Might wasn't chuckling so much anymore.

All Might peered through the portal into what looked like a wide-open stone courtyard of sorts, and a frigid Himalayan breeze flew through, smacking All Might out of his stupor.

"We are very selective about which heroes we reveal ourselves to," Strange explained. "But this situation with Cyrus Black made for an excellent opportunity." Strange stepped through, motioning for All Might to follow. "Only the most trusted and pure hearted Pro Heroes are allowed a glimpse of the greater truth of the World so that they might better defend it."

At that time, All Might believed he was going against his better judgment in following this Doctor Strange fellow through the portal. And when he emerged from Kamar-Taj, with his captive Cyrus in tow, he realized that the greater World was so much bigger than he had ever thought possible.

Heroes and villains, by themselves, seemed small by comparison.

Midoriya sat completely slack-jawed and awestruck as All Might concluded his story. The man looked over to Strange in case the sorcerer would interject with his own details, but Strange simply nodded his head in remembrance.

"Good times," He muttered.

"And so Doctor Strange here introduced the concept of the mystic to myself and a select group of heroes," Toshinori explained. "The Masters of Kamar-Taj—Strange included—decided that magical threats against our world were too widespread for them alone to stand against. We have not been taught to wield magic as you have been, Young Midoriya, but we can better recognize when mystical forces or threats are on the move so that we may act accordingly."

That was...a lot to take in, if Izuku was being honest with himself. Mystical forces pose a threat to the world and it was up to Doctor Strange and those at this Kamar-Taj place to combat them, with certain Pro Heroes like All Might aiding wherever and whenever they can.

That certainly begs the question though...

"What other heroes are you involved with, sensei?" Izuku asked.

Strange began shaking his head and opened his mouth to speak, but Toshinori spoke up before he did. "Not many besides myself and the Avengers—"

"You know the Avengers, too!?" Izuku slammed his palms down on the table again in excitement. "The United States' premier Pro Hero group!? The group that All Might joined to help take down the villain Ultron!?"

Ah...he's a bit of a fanboy, isn't he? Toshinori thought before noticing a look of disapproval being cast his way by Strange. "Ah, my apologies Stephen...I guess you didn't want that revealed quite yet?"
"Those are stories for another time," Strange said with a tone of finality, shifting his stern gaze over toward Izuku to cease his questioning. "We're really here to discuss what occurred just earlier today."

Ah. The sludge villain incident and All Might's proposal. Midoriya looked down morosely and a stiff silence filled the room. No one knew who should begin this conversation. No one knew how to.

"I'm...sorry," Izuku decided to begin, with an apology no less. "I'm sorry for not trying to contact you sooner with the calling card, sensei."

Strange visibly relaxed and offered his student a smile in response. "It's nothing to apologize over, Izuku. While extremely precarious, you still came out of that situation safe and sound, not to mention that there was nothing I could have done to affect the situation directly."

"Huh?" Izuku looked up at Strange, puzzled. "How come?"

"Remember, Young Midoriya, that Strange here is not a legal Pro Hero like I am," All Might interjected. "He would not have been able to openly use his magic without catching the ire of the police and the eye of certain authorities."

"The best I could have done in that scenario would be to use my magic in extremely subtle ways so as to not catch anyone's eye, and my magic may have proven to be ineffectual if I tried to do that," Strange added.

Izuku nodded; that made sense, he supposed.

"I hope you are beginning to understand the importance of the subtlety and secrecy that is necessary when it comes to dealing with the mystical, Izuku," Strange continued. "All living things have an inherent connection with the natural mystic energies of the Universe. With enough time, dedication, and training...most people would be capable of utilizing magic to some degree."

Izuku gulped; there was a big 'but' coming here, wasn't there?

"But," Strange said. "If everyone were to learn magic, it would throw the mystical fragility of the world into chaos. We would undoubtedly be overwhelmed by the threats posed by those who would either not fully comprehend their own power...or by those who would use their powers for intentionally malicious reasons. Or even both."

Both Toshinori and Strange involuntarily thought of that accursed All For One in that moment.

"It's a secret to keep the world safe," Izuku muttered. "Because it's the world that could be at stake."

"The truth about magic will not be the only secret you will have to keep, I'm afraid," All Might leveled his stare at Izuku. "Young Midoriya, let us discuss what I had brought up earlier: my asking of you to become my Successor."

Izuku began fidgeting again; he knew that this topic was going to be brought back up, but he'd rather not even think about it. He didn't even know what to think about it!

"I'm sure one such as you has wondered about the nature of my Quirk, correct?" All Might asked, eliciting a nod from Izuku. "The truth is, mine is a special Quirk—it is one that can be passed on from person to person. It is called One For All."

Izuku’s jaw dropped. A Quirk that could be passed down!? How was that even possible—!? Oh, right, this was a world in which he was being taught magic of all things, of course something as amazing as this would also be possible.
"Wait a moment... "Does that mean," Izuku asked, his lip quivering as he connected the dots. "You were given One For All yourself?"

"Indeed," All Might nodded solemnly. "Like you, I was Quirkless myself before I inherited One For All from my Master before me."

Izuku nearly fell out of his seat. All Might...was originally Quirkless!? How many more revelations could his poor heart even stand to take anymore!?

"I'm not powerless, I'm—!"

"Quirkless," Izuku recalled what All Might had told him. Was that...why All Might inherited One For All himself? Had he considered himself powerless to help others because of the way he was born? It wasn't like All Might, like Izuku, could help being born the way he had been. For a moment, Izuku wondered how All Might might've been if he'd learned to use magic instead of inheriting a Quirk to call his own. The thought of a youthful All Might considering himself weak and powerless saddened Izuku a great deal. He could understand what All Might had gone through even if the man wasn't displaying any grief or melancholy over his past situation at the moment.

Izuku took in a deep breath, straightened himself where he sat, and looked back at All Might as best he could so he could give his answer.

"All Might," Izuku began softly. "I...can't even begin to describe how honored I am that you consider me worthy enough to inherit your power. I've always wanted to prove that I had what it took to be a hero, and hearing you say I did...it meant a lot to me. More than I can possibly express."

All Might smiled, bright and genuine. "Well, that's very good to hear, Young Midoriya—"

"But I cannot inherit One For All," Izuku said softly.

The room fell quiet enough for the rustling of Strange's cloak to appear loud and distracting. Both men were giving Izuku astonished looks. But Strange's face had a twinkling of pride in it.

"I-I'm sorry, my boy," All Might stuttered. "I'm afraid I'm not sure if I heard you correctly—"

"I can't be your Successor," Izuku repeated. "I cannot inherit your Quirk, All Might."

Seeing that both men were expecting a more thorough explanation, Izuku pressed onward. "Back on that rooftop, when I had argued with you that I wasn't powerless, you countered with me being Quirkless. You can understand my predicament and my feelings very well, can't you? The desire to do good despite not having a Quirk to help in any way...I understand completely why you inherited One For All. And I likely would have jumped at such a chance myself, if not for where I am now and the effort I've already put into all this. This is a path I've already started walking down and it's one I want to see to its conclusion. I'll prove to you yet...!" He said as a deluge of tears trickled down his cheeks. "And I'll prove to myself that Quirkless and Powerless are not one and the same! And I'll do it all with a smile on my face, just like you, All Might!"

Izuku...

Young Midoriya...

The room was silently stiff once more...until the walls reverberated with All Might's raucous and jubilant laughter, surprising Izuku out of his tears.

"A-All Might!?"
"That was quite a response, Young Midoriya!" All Might roared, poofing back into his buff form with that mighty grin of his etched on his face. "Even though I hardly expected being turned down, your speech has moved me immensely!"

"You're not upset I refused your offer...?" Izuku asked as he wiped his cheeks clean.

"Heavens, no!" All Might exclaimed as he stood up. "If anything, I'm even more convinced of your worthiness, but if you are already set on your current path, then my only option will be to support you every step of the way!" He flashed Izuku a thumbs up.

"I may not always be by your side, nor will you be my Successor proper, but I'll always be in your corner to support you if you'll have me, Young Midoriya!" All Might continued. "Also, please keep the true nature of my Quirk to yourself just like your magical training, understood? Fewer people know about my secret than about Strange's job as Sorcerer Supreme, after all!"

"Y-yes, All Might!" Izuku said excitedly, feeling thrilled at the prospect of All Might supporting his endeavors while also trusting him with his secret.

"And Stephen, my boy!" All Might turned his attention to Strange, giving his back a resoundingly forceful pat as he stood up, which almost knocked him down. "You've got yourself a fine protégé! I'm surprised you managed to snatch one up before me even!"

"I'm not that much younger than you are, Toshinori..." Strange grumbled as he rubbed his back.

"Come to think of it, I'd received correspondence from Stark not too long ago that he'd also managed to nab a protégé of his own!" All Might said as he rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "What was his name again...? Spider-Boy or something like that?"

"Ooh! Ooh! You mean Spider-Man!" Izuku piped up excitedly.

"Yes, that's it! Thank you, Young Midoriya!" All Might laughed as he turned back to Strange. "Well, I think we've settled everything nice and properly, don't you think so, Stephen? How about opening a portal for an old friend?"

Strange and All Might walked out into the front lobby of the Sanctum, where Strange obliged Toshinori with a portal directly into his meager apartment.

"Toshinori," Strange spoke up right as All Might deflated back into his true form and strode on through. "I just want you to know that I wouldn't have had a problem with Midoriya also wanting to be trained in your Quirk in addition to what he's learning here. I would have supported Midoriya's decision no matter what. I just wanted you to know that so you didn't think I was upset at all."

Toshinori gave Strange a grateful nod. "I appreciate it, old friend. Young Midoriya's words have only further inspired me to continue my quest for a worthy and a willing Successor. I was thinking about branching out further east from here. Perhaps I'll head to Chiba Prefecture and continue my search there."

"I wish you the best of luck," Strange said before closing the portal, allowing Toshinori to see a smiling and waving Izuku beckoning him off before it closed completely.

"Hey, sensei," Izuku said. "Did you mean what you said?"

"About me supporting your decision if you'd wanted to inherit All Might's Quirk?" Strange asked with a knowing grin. "Yes, I did."
"..." Izuku ran forward and threw himself into Strange, wrapping his arms around his torso in a tight hug as he buried his face in his blue vestments. The two were silent as Strange slowly returned the embrace. "I'll never be able to thank you enough for what you've done for me," Izuku muffled.

"Don't trouble yourself with thanks and things of that sort," Strange said as he gently pried Izuku off his tunic. "Let's get you home before your mother gets too worried, alright?"

"Ahh!" Izuku exclaimed as he pulled open the nearest curtain, thankful that the sun had not fully set just yet. "I'm sure she'll be calling my phone any minute! I need to get home right now!"

Strange chuckled and quickly summoned a portal to the living room of Izuku's home and the boy rushed in to face the panicked shrieks of his mother, and he was following close behind his student to explain the situation and assuage Inko's worries.

The rest of the week had passed by with little incident, although things at school were made tense again. Bakugo was as aggressive as ever, but tilted right on the border of open hostility, which meant the rest of the class did, too.

Midoriya was grateful when the weekend had finally arrived, which meant he could sweep his worries away by drowning himself in one of Strange's many books within the depths of the Sanctum rather than schoolwork for a change.

He flipped through several pages of a particular book he'd been looking forward to reading for quite some time. "Lessons on astral projection..." He drawled to himself as he descended the grand staircase toward the dining room. He never made it to the bottom step.

"What—!?" Izuku exclaimed as a blazing lasso suddenly wrapped around his body from behind, forcing his hands to his sides, which in turn forced him to drop the book. He turned his head to look at who was assaulting him from within the Sanctum. It was not someone he recognized: a rather portly looking Asian man, with a sternly intimidating face, was approaching from the direction of the Rotunda as he kept Izuku tightly ensnared.

"W-who are you!?" Izuku exclaimed in a panic.

"I am Master Wong, intruder," The none too pleased Wong said. "And I am the guardian of all mystical books under the purview of the Sorcerer Supreme."
Test of Heart

Chapter Summary

Master Wong, fellow Master of the Mystic Arts alongside Stephen Strange, has Izuku undergo a series of tests to determine whether he is worthy of additional training at Kamar-Taj, the main compound of Earth's sorcerers. In-between tests, Wong and Strange discuss the latter's true purpose for temporarily moving to Japan, including a search for stolen tomes and parallels between Izuku and a fallen sorcerer.

Casey Kinmont let out a groan as she stretched her limbs out, forcing herself to resist the sweet temptations of her wool bed. But the morning cold swept into her barrack and nipped her into alertness, and so she grudgingly slipped into her crimson robes as she freshened up for the day. She tried patting down several sprigs of cowlicks jutting out of her blue hair before giving up; she would just have to tolerate Master Wong's derision if he'd found her not properly presentable for training today. Fixing her glasses on her face, she strutted out of her barrack right as another female companion of hers exited as well.

"Morning Zelma," Casey grumbled as politely as she could. No amount of time spent here at Kamar-Taj was going to make her a morning person, but she did her best not to impose her moodiness onto others. What kind of sorcerer would she be if she did that?

The darker-skinned gal turned and flashed a friendly smile at Casey, flipping her smooth black hair out of her face. "Morning Casey! You look a bit worse for wear!"

"How could I sleep when I all have to look forward to today is another grueling studying session?" Casey grumbled as she slowly pulled the front barrack door open, shielding her face momentarily as the full Himalayan breeze swept down the stone corridor. "I'm no good with books!"

"I wouldn't be too worried about that," Zelma said knowingly as they stepped out of the barrack and into the courtyard only to find it practically barren aside from a handful of fellow apprentices making their way toward the great library. "Master Wong departed not too long ago."

Casey turned toward her friend in surprise. "Master Wong left? He almost never leaves the compound when there's training scheduled! Do you know where he went?"

"He went to check on Master Strange, I believe," Zelma replied.

"Ah...guess that's as good a reason as any," Casey said glumly as she looked around the nearly empty training courtyard. Daily lessons were only postponed under rare circumstances. "Master Strange has been away for well over a year. What do you suppose he's been doing?"

Zelma shrugged. "We're just apprentices, we're not exactly privy to the responsibilities Master Strange has as the Earth's Sorcerer Supreme. We should merely have faith in his abilities and carry out our training dutifully if we wish to do right by him."

The entire compound suddenly shook; the vibrations seemed to come from outside the compound as Casey and Zelma looked in the direction of a faraway mountainside that was still in view.
"See, Rintrah's got the right idea!" Zelma exclaimed as she waved her hands and opened a portal to said mountainside. "Let's go spectate while we have some time to ourselves!"

"Yeah...right behind you," Casey muttered softly as she followed her friend through the portal. She would enjoy her time off today, though she remained eager for her Master Strange's return.

Izuku slowly flexed his arms, trying to gauge how strong this Master Wong's ethereal bonds were as said Master approached him carefully and cautiously down the stairs, like a hunter about to ensure his prey's demise.

"Y-you've got it all wrong!" Izuku tried to say as calmly as he could. "I'm not an intruder! I'm a student of Doctor Strange!"

"A likely story," Wong responded, wrapping the fizzling rope tightly around one hand to keep it taut as his other hand shimmered. The energy he summoned forth took the shape of a Tao mandala.

Izuku recognized it—Strange had shown it to him many times and he had practiced shaping mandalas and using them as basic shields enough to be somewhat competent at it. But what unnerved Izuku was the edge of Wong's mandala: it was spinning rapidly, sending bright orange sparks flipping through the air as Wong raised his hand threateningly. It gave Izuku the impression that the edge of his magical shield was sharp. Like, a 'cut-off-Izuku's-head-cleanly' kind of sharp.

*Think fast Izuku!* He mentally screamed as Wong rushed him, ready to end it with one decisive blow.

But Izuku responded not by trying to distance himself, but by leaping up and toward Wong, which certainly caught the elder somewhat off guard. He twisted his body midair and let the spinning edge of Wong's mandala slice through the luminous threads keeping him ensnared.

Izuku managed to land on his feet, though not very gracefully. He channeled magic through his hands freely now, knocking them together as two brilliantly radiant mandalas of his own materialized over his fists, ready to defend himself from further attack.

Wong looked equal parts irritated and impressed. He didn't leap into action just yet, instead calmly studying his quarry like a hawk does a tiny snake. "You did well to avoid that, child."

Izuku, on the other hand, was shaking erratically, adrenaline coursing through his veins. *I can't believe that worked! If I hadn't timed that just right...I might've been cut clean in half!*

"You are not some mystic vagabond, after all," Wong continued, taking a step forward. Izuku instinctively took a step backward. "You've had a modicum of training."

"That's what I've been trying to tell you—!"

"Which means you're an even more dangerous intruder than I anticipated!" Wong yelled as he lashed his hands toward Izuku, materializing several more crimson bands his way.

Izuku flinched, raising his shields to deflect the bonds, but he hadn't anticipated them *sticking* to his mandalas. Wong yanked his hands backwards, literally ripping the shields Izuku had summoned from his hands.

*I didn't know you could do that!* Izuku thought in a panic as he hastily summoned two more mandalas to keep himself somewhat protected. *You can bond your magical energy to that of another person's and effectively use it against them as a larger extension of your own body!* That little tidbit was definitely getting added to his notebook on magic...if he survived, of course.
Wong didn't make that seem like much of a possibility. He clasped his hands together and swung the mandalas he'd ripped from Izuku's grasp before crashing them back down on the boy like a flail. Izuku gasped and again raised his shields up high to block, but they shattered like glass as Wong's makeshift magical flail made impact. Izuku yelled out in pain and crashed down on the stairwell. Wong was standing over him in an instant, his spinning mandala of death already prepped and pressed just above Izuku's throat. Izuku weakly raised his trembling hands as he yielded.

"P-please..." Izuku weakly croaked.

"Don't beg," Wong said sternly as the mandala suddenly fizzled out of existence and he roughly pulled Izuku to his feet. "A real enemy will have none of it."

A real enemy? "Wait, what?" Izuku asked, incredulous that he wasn't about to actually die.

"Quite an interesting one you've chosen, Strange," Wong suddenly called out as he turned heel and calmly descended the staircase. "But based on what I've already seen, I remain unconvinced."

Izuku blinked and looked just past Wong; there, at the bottom of the staircase stood his sensei with a hand rubbing his chin as if he were brooding and deep in thought. "Are you saying you believe my student performed poorly?"

Wong paused as he approached Strange's side before continuing onward into the dining area. "No. Just that I remain unconvinced that he deserves further training at Kamar-Taj."

Izuku felt his gut sinking at the prospect of being denied further training. The entrance exam was still only ten months away. Going by the timetable that had been set by Strange alone, he wasn't even fifty percent completed yet. The thought of the possibility of being forced to quit...Izuku gulped hard.

Strange gave Izuku a look that said 'stay where you are' as he turned and followed after Wong, ensuring their discussion could be held outside the range of Midoriya's prying ears.

"Don't you think you're being unnecessarily harsh toward Midoriya?" Strange asked.

"Don't you think you're being hasty taking a boy under your wing while you're already in the middle of an important task?" Wong retorted. "Were the forbidden tomes stolen from Kamar-Taj not the reason you temporarily relocated to Japan with the New York Sanctum in tow in the first place?"

Strange took a seat, feeling exasperated. "And I have been following what clues have been available with due diligence for the year and some change that I've been here."

"The Book of Cagliostro was recovered after that disaster nearly five years ago," Wong said. "But the Tentoria Tenebris...the Scriptum Mortem...and worst of all, the Darkhold. All were lost. All were scattered."

"They were not the only things lost," Strange said morosely, tilting his head down. "And I am reminded of Kaecilius's treachery and the monstrosity of All For One every day. Even my dreams are not untouched by their influence."

"And yet not only have none of the books been located," Wong pressed on, taking a seat across from Strange. "One is missing from the second floor study." Wong continued as Strange gave him a knowing look. "And I don't mean the book on astral projection your student has right now. There is another that is missing."

Strange knew precisely the book that Wong was referring to. He also mentally chided himself, knowing it would have been fruitless to try and keep such things hidden from Wong—the man was
not the guardian and keeper of the mystic texts for nothing. If a book goes missing, he would find out sooner or later.


"What happened to it?" Wong inquired, although Strange thought the man might have already had an inkling as to what his answer would be.

"Before I took Midoriya under my wing he was pressured into sneaking through the Sanctum by some unruly companions of his," Strange explained. "He went through, found the book, and felt compelled to take it."

Wong wryly chuckled. "That...shouldn't have been possible."

"I thought the same," Strange concurred. "It should not have been possible for anyone not mystically attuned to see through any part of the illusion I had cast over the Sanctum. No one should have been able to interact with anything inside, let alone remove it from the premise. And yet...Izuku Midoriya had."

"If that boy saw through the illusion with little to no exposure to magic beforehand," Wong said, stroking his chin contemplatively. "Then he was surely born with an aptitude for the mystic arts."

Strange nodded solemnly. "And by the time I had realized what happened, and rushed out to procure it...it was already too late. Midoriya was swept away, along with the book. I only managed to recover one of the two."

"All the more proof that you were too hasty in taking him on as a student," Wong said. "Now there are four texts that must be recovered."

"Now, now, you can hardly hold what happened against Izuku," Strange said defensively. "Besides, you saw how he fared better against you than you had anticipated. His progress has been nothing short of astounding."

"Even if I did believe that training him at Kamar-Taj would be worthwhile, would he be able to continue his lessons here until you saw fit to bring him over?" Wong asked. "The Sanctums are not meant to be kept out of alignment for extended periods of time. You will have to soon return the Sanctum to New York if your search fails to bear any fruit, lest the mystical shield protecting the Earth weaken."

Strange could not argue against Wong's reasoning. He, too, had felt the uneasy shifting in the magic that protected the Earth from extra-dimensional threats over the past few months. But he had thought it would be possible to postpone his return until at least the summer, when he was sure Izuku would be ready to continue his training at Kamar-Taj. Still, he was more than willing to compromise, since distance would not be an issue.

"Moving the Sanctum will not impede on Izuku's training," Strange said. "He is well acquainted with the interior and he can open portals just fine with a Sling Ring."

"Strange—"

"Why are you reluctant to allow him further training?" Strange asked a bit more aggressively than he had meant. "What have you seen that I haven't?"

"I believe I've seen only what you have seen," Wong said cryptically. "I am merely interpreting it differently than you are."
"What do you mean?" Strange asked with a bit of hesitation in his voice.

"What I'm trying to say is that Izuku is too much like that boy—"

"Izuku is not like Ikiji," Strange quickly interrupted Wong.

"Oh?" Wong asked, unconvinced. "A boy with crippled hands taken under a sorcerer's wing and tutored in the ways of magic. That boy, once powerless and alone, was given a taste of the power offered by magic...and he only craved more. His lust for power for his selfish ambitions allowed himself to be corrupted by Kaecilius's influence...and that boy soon became one of his most devoted zealots, turning his magic and his Quirk against Kamar-Taj without hesitation."

Strange sat, silently, brooding, as Wong recanted the tale of one of his biggest failures in life. But he would not make the same mistakes with Izuku, he swore.

"And now you've begun cultivating another boy who parallels Ikiji to a startling degree," Wong went on. "I saw Izuku's hands. Did you also promise to alleviate his powerlessness just as you once promised Ikiji? Is he not progressing nearly as quickly as that boy did just a few years ago? And should Izuku follow the same path...will you be able to do what you could not do before, and end his life?"

Strange looked down at the table and said nothing.

"That was not all I saw," Wong continued still. "I, too, looked into the Rotunda. I saw what you saw in there."

At that, Strange nearly jolted to his feet, the color drained away from his face as he turned toward his trusted friend, speechless and shocked.

"I assume Izuku hasn't been told," Wong said, a bit gentler as he saw how affected his friend was. "Has the boy ever glanced through the Rotunda of Gateways by himself?"

"...No," Strange said at last with a firm shake of his head. "He's been forbidden to use it until I deem him ready for a lesson on its proper use." He had only used it once with Izuku to provoke the boy into opening his first portal with a raging river, but the boy was not allowed to skim through the Rotunda by himself, lest he see what Strange had discovered...

"And when will his curiosity eventually get the better of him?" Wong asked. "Ikiji, too, was forbidden from freely using the Rotunda...and we both know what happened shortly afterwards."

"Izuku..." Strange took in a deep breath to calm his anxious heart. "Is not like Ikiji. Nor will he ever be."

"And how can you be so sure?" Wong challenged him.

"Izuku has what Ikiji didn't," Strange said with a smile. "A nearly indomitable heart."

"Heart," Wong repeated slowly, as if mostly to himself. He stood up, clasping his hands behind his back as he contemplated something to himself. "Then that is what I will test him for. I want to see his indomitable heart for myself. If he does as much...then I will gladly support his training at Kamar-Taj."

Strange now grinned a grin that was filled to the brim with confidence. Sorcerer Supreme he may be, but Strange cannot so flippantly ignore the concerns of his fellow Masters, especially one as loyal and steadfast as Wong. A chance was all Izuku needed. And Strange knew Izuku was not one to
waste them.

Izuku fidgeted in his white novice tunic as he stood at attention before Wong, who patrolled back and forth before him. The prospect of having his training finished so soon filled him with dread, but now he was being given an opportunity: an opportunity to 'test his heart' as his Master had described.

_Inhale. Exhale._ Izuku steeled his resolve and determination. He was no longer ignorant to the fact that the road to becoming a sorcerer would hold many trials and tribulations. This one, like many in the future, may have been unexpected and sudden, but he would get through it all the same. He would win this 'Test of Heart' and continue on with his training.

"This," Wong said while holding a wand-like object before Izuku's eyes. "Is a relic. The Wand of Watoomb, to be precise. Relics such as this are objects imbued with magic—sometimes magic so powerful that a sorcerer's body alone cannot handle the strain of it. There are countless relics, and while many can easily be used by most sorcerers, it is generally a rite of passage for sorcerers of Kamar-Taj to have their own unique relic."

Izuku's eyes brightened up. "Are you saying I'm going to get to choose my own relic!?"

"No," Wong replied with a wry smirk. "Today we are going to see if a relic here, within the Sanctum, is going to choose you to help you with the Test of Heart that you will need to complete."

"Choose...me?" Izuku asked confusedly.

"Correct," Wong said, holding the wand out for Izuku. "While relics do not typically discriminate, there is no denying that some sorcerers are more compatible with certain relics than others. Hold out your hand. Try to feel the wand...and see if it deems itself compatible with you."

Izuku did just that, closing his eyes and extending an outstretched hand toward the Wand of Watoomb. Izuku nearly flinched as he felt power—raw power—emanating from the wand in endless, ceaseless, undulating waves. Like a geyser with no end, Izuku felt the limitless possibilities that the wand offered. But...there was nothing that suggested a truly compatible connection between it and him. It did not come to him. The wand itself felt apathetic about Izuku reaching out to it.

"I...didn't feel a very strong connection," Izuku sheepishly admitted as he withdrew his hand.

"It would have been surprising if you did," Wong said earnestly, handing the wand back to Strange. "As far as relics go, the Wand of Watoomb is potentially one of the strongest out there."

And so Wong and Strange guided Izuku throughout the Sanctum—all three floors of it—leading him from relic to relic to see if Izuku could sense a connection that was being extended to him by any artifact he came across.

To his dismay, he felt no inherent connection with any of the relics being kept stored within the Sanctum.

Strange and Wong (surprisingly) did not seem too displeased over this revelation. It was almost as if this were expected, Izuku thought.

"Izuku," Strange finally spoke to his student as they descended back to the first floor. "I understand if you are feeling disappointed, but know that a relic isn't required for the test Master Wong has in store for you. This was merely to see if one had deemed you worthy by this point in your training. Do not fret: one will choose you, in time."
"You still be allowed the use of your Sling Ring," Wong added as Strange handed Izuku said ring.

"So...what exactly will be this Test I have to complete?" Izuku asked as he slipped the Sling Ring on the appropriate fingers.

Wong rotated his hand and opened a portal at the top of the staircase, parallel to the floor. A large metallic object slipped through and landed on the floor with a dull 'gong'. Izuku narrowed his eyes to get a better look: it seemed to be...a furnace pot of some kind? It was brightly bronze, with three legs and what looked like a lid that was in the shape of a golden pagoda of some sort.

"You will have to face off against that relic," Wong said before snapping his fingers, a dark, elongated sceptre suddenly appearing in his hands. "As well as this one."

"The Flaming Foo Furnace of Fujian and the Stygian Sceptre of Seamless Shadow..." Strange whispered as he realized precisely what test Wong had in store for his fledgling apprentice. "Wong isn't going to hold back with this test. He really does want to test Izuku's heart..."

T-those names really roll off the tongue, huh? Izuku thought dryly.

"Your Test!" Wong exclaimed. "Will be to reach the top of the staircase and close the Flaming Foo Furnace!" He gave an arcane posture with his fingers and the furnace lid suddenly levitated above the relic. An eldritch flame erupted from the depths of the furnace, roaring to life as its flames flapped and flew about, but strangely enough, they gave off no heat that Izuku could feel.

"Walk up there and close the furnace? Izuku furrowed his brow. No, it can't be that easy...

As if reading his mind, Wong elaborated: "The furnace and the sceptre in my hands will be obstructing you every step of the way." As if on cue, the flames erupting from the furnace began to take corporeal shape. Izuku looked on in shock as the flames formed two semi-hulking flaming beasts that flanked either side of the furnace.

Are those Foo Dogs!? Izuku thought frantically. Foo Dogs made of fire!?

"Izuku Midoriya!" Wong yelled as he slammed the bottom of the sceptre into the ground, clouds of darkness pulsing from the tip and racing toward Izuku as the boy switched glances between the Foo Dogs before him and encroaching darkness gathering behind him. "This is your Test of Heart! Begin!"

Izuku wasted no time in bolting up the stairs, intent on closing the furnace before the inky cloud behind him could catch up to him. The Foo Dogs had other plans; unleashing another mighty roar, both beasts simultaneously rushed down, slamming into Izuku's body before the boy could properly rotate his fingers and open a portal with his Sling Ring.

"Guh!" Izuku croaked out painfully as he was sent flying backward, straight into the waiting depths of the stygian cloud below. Izuku thrashed momentarily before realizing that the cloud wasn't obstructing his breathing in any discernible way—just his vision. He could only see a few feet in front of him.

At least, he began to think the cloud would only affect his vision.
He began rushing back up the steps, trying to be cognizant of the sounds of the Foo Dogs as he waved his fingers before him to open a portal directly to the furnace. Again, the beasts intercepted: Izuku yelled out as a large paw swiped his legs, knocking him off balance and back down several steps. Just as Izuku tried righting himself back up, the second beast's head appeared out of the swirling darkness, clamping its jaw down on Izuku's hand as the boy uselessly tried to thrash it off of him.

The beast suddenly released his hand from its flaming maw, and Izuku realized to his horror that the Foo Dog had yanked off his Sling Ring with its fiery fangs. Oh no...! The Foo Dog leaped out of the swirling cloud and promptly spat the Sling Ring out of its mouth. It was deftly caught by Wong, who grunted as if this was all going according to plan. Strange grimaced as he saw that his student was now disarmed. Your real test begins now, Izuku...!

"No! My Sling Ring...!" Izuku yelled out as he got back to his feet.

"Deku..." A familiar sneer hissed in Izuku's ear, causing him to freeze.

"K-Kacchan?" Izuku turned his head to where he'd heard the voice, only to be blindsided by another swipe of a Foo Dog's massive paw.

W-what was that...? Izuku thought as he tumbled back down the stairs, grunting in pain. That was definitely Bakugo's voice. But how...?

"How can you even play the role of a worthless wannabe hero when you steal things like a villain?" He heard Bakugo's sneer again, and whirled his head around—only to find darkness. He remembered when Bakugo had said that to him. It had been that day: the day his hands had been crushed. The day that started it all.

"No...you're wrong...!"

"Like a villain..." Bakugo's shadowy voice hissed again.

"I'm not like a villain!" Izuku yelled out, swiping around wildly as if that would dispel the taunting voice of his tormentor.

"I'm sorry, Izuku, I'm so sorry..." Izuku's breath caught in his throat. That was his mother's voice. It was from nearly ten years ago, when Izuku learned that he was unequivocally Quirkless. Izuku recalled her teary embrace that day as tight, but ultimately cold. Not reassuring. Empty.

"W-what's going on...?" Izuku squeaked out before bowling over from a blow that landed on his backside, knocking him down onto his knees.

"M-mom, can I be a hero, too?" Izuku clenched his eyes shut as his despondent childhood voice filled his ear next. He clutched his head, as if trying to literally squeeze every disdainful memory out of his head.

"Shitty Deku!"

"I'm so sorry, Izuku..."

"Can I be a hero, too...?"

As Izuku cracked his eyes back open and stared out into the whirling darkness, he saw all the terrible
memories he could think of dancing through the clouds, mocking him. He saw his weeping childhood self, his mother who—until his training with Strange began—had all but given up on his dream to become a hero, and he saw all the times that Bakugo and his cohorts tormented him for daring to dream. Daring to hope.

"I...I can't handle this...!" Izuku whispered, feeling the darkness before him part for what was undoubtedly one of the Foo Dogs rushing in to land another heavy blow.

But that hit never landed.

"Whoa!" Izuku exclaimed as something firm tugged on his shoulders, lifting him into the air and letting the Foo Dog pass by harmlessly underneath.

Izuku flailed about wildly to try and ascertain what had attached itself to him, but he found himself focusing on a familiar warmth that began spreading throughout his body from whatever was clasped to his shoulders.

"Please!" Izuku heard his voice echo throughout the darkness. "Teach me!"

Izuku peered through the sea of disdainful memories and saw the memory of himself in the hospital bed, begging Doctor Strange to teach him magic.

That was the start of it all, wasn't it? Izuku tearfully thought as other memories began floating out of the shadows, pushing the tormenting voices and sights away.

"As of this moment, we are Master and Student, Young Midoriya," he heard Strange's voice ring out, and he saw the memory of his mother embracing him and sobbing joyously over her son's revitalized dream.

"You look dashing!" He heard his mother's joyous cries, and Izuku saw himself from when he'd first put on his white training tunic, standing tall and proud as his mother snapped pictures.

"I-I did it!" Izuku turned and saw himself from when he'd successfully opened his first portal, and the look of sheer pride on Strange's face nearly drove him to tears as the warmth consumed him fully.

"I may not always be by your side...but I'll always be in your corner to support you if you'll have me, Young Midoriya!" All Might's words of endorsement bolstered him, and the last vestiges of doubt broke down entirely as a swath of resplendent energy coursed through his body.

From outside the cloud, Wong and Strange stood back in awe as Izuku's luminous magic shone through even the Stygian Sceptre's nearly impenetrable fog.

Yes, Izuku...! Strange grinned widely, almost dumbfounded by what had just transpired before his eyes. Show that indomitable spirit...that will make you a fully fledged sorcerer!

This won't stop me...! Izuku steeled his determination as he jumped straight up over another rush by one of the Foo Dogs. He angled his fingers as if he were still using the Sling Ring and envisioned the top of the staircase, narrowing his thoughts into a singular focus. Not Kacchan! Not anyone! Not even my Quirkless status!

Izuku grit his teeth as the golden sparks swirled before him, opening up and showing the floating lid of the furnace beneath him as he dropped toward his target.

"Nothing...will stop me from becoming a sorcerer!" Izuku triumphantly roared as he planted his feet on top of the lid, shoving it down and shutting it tight with his body weight. The shadows
immediately dispersed back into Wong's sceptre as the Foo Dogs howled, disintegrating away in a mist of fizzling embers.

"And nothing will stop me from becoming a hero!" Izuku screamed as he fell into a hysteric crying fit over his victory.

"You know, Wong," Strange called out to his trusted ally as Izuku cried. "Out of all the relics we tested Izuku with, it seems there was one in the Sanctum that we missed."

Wong nodded his head dumbly, no doubt equal parts impressed and thunderstruck at Izuku's victory. But more shocking to Wong than Izuku's victory was what had aided Izuku to rise up above the tormenting shadows: clasped firmly to Izuku's backside and shoulders, but hovering above the ground as it was a tad too big for the boy, was Strange's Cloak of Levitation.

The Cloak of Levitation, though closely bonded with Strange after many years, had also chosen Izuku.

Both Wong and Strange approached Izuku's sobbing form, which was being tended to by the ever-so gentle Cloak that was dutifully wiping away the never-ending deluge of tears from the boy's cheeks.

"D-did I pass?" Izuku hiccupped between sobs.

Strange and Wong gave each other a knowing look before snapping their fingers. Izuku looked down in astonishment as his previously white tunic was suddenly washed over by a scarlet bloom, turning his garments a deep, beautiful crimson.

"Izuku Midoriya," Wong said with a curt yet respectful nod. "You have passed the Test of Heart."

"You may now rise," Strange said elegantly. "No longer as a Novice, but as a formal Apprentice of Kamar-Taj and the Sorcerer Supreme!"
Wong and Inko both give their approval to have Izuku continue his training at Kamar-Taj for six summer weeks, though their doubts and worries remain readily apparent. Izuku gets acquainted with a few of Strange's other students as he gets settled into the compound, ready to begin the next phase of his training.

Izuku knew very little about Kamar-Taj; nearly half his time training for the Entrance Exam had passed by before it was ever even mentioned to him. All he knew was that it was the place where Doctor Strange, being the Sorcerer Supreme, held council with the other Masters of the Mystic Arts. It was also the place where—he had come to expect ever since his first encounter with Master Wong—he'd been trained throughout his summer break between terms.

A step up in training was something Izuku was particularly looking forward to. After passing the Test of Heart, Strange put his foot on the brakes slightly when it came to his training regimen, putting more of a focus back on some of the more basic skills in the three months that had passed since meeting Wong. Sure, Izuku didn't think it was necessarily a bad idea to do that, since now his practices moved on to manipulating magic without the use of a Sling Ring, but he was still more than a little bummed out. 

*I was looking forward to learning astral projection sooner rather than later,* Izuku had sighed to himself many times.

Training over the course of these last three months also felt...odd to him? Not because of what he was doing during said training; Izuku felt that it had more to do with the Sanctum being returned to New York shortly after Wong's visit. Izuku could freely admit to himself that it was an odd thing to get weirded out over. The interior of the Sanctum hadn't changed in the slightest, and he arrived to it the same way he always had (through the use of portals), but having to look out the windows or the front door to see a bustling street instead of the relative quiet of a forest was a change Izuku thought he'd never have to acclimate to.

It was a change that was comparable to walking into his own bedroom and somehow feeling as if all of his possessions had been replaced with exact replicas—the same but also not quite the same. It was indeed a bizarre feeling.

But as he felt bizarre about his training at the Sanctum, Izuku didn't really know what to expect about training at Kamar-Taj. Sure, he was excited about the prospect of honing his mystical skills further and adding to his repertoire of spells, but not knowing many facts about the place—where it was located, how living there was like, etc.—left him feeling anxious. Unknown variables, while fun to think about, always made Izuku feel anxious.

Slipping into his red Apprentice tunic made him feel better, though. Izuku couldn't help but always feel a surge of pride whenever he looked at himself in the mirror in his new garb. The red tunic was real, tangible evidence of his growth. His mother seemed to think so, too.

"Oh, Izuku!" Inko squealed as she snapped what had to be her hundredth picture of him that day. "You look positively dashing in your new tunic!"
"Mom, please..." Izuku said bashfully. They were currently waiting for Strange to come and pick him up. Today was the day Izuku was to be taken to Kamar-Taj and begin his training there at long last. He was granted a couple of bags to pack with some of his belongings.

Six weeks. That was how long Izuku was expecting to stay at Kamar-Taj. When Strange had approached his mother to pitch the idea of keeping Izuku under his wing there, he'd expected more open resistance from her. Doubtless, there was some hesitancy on Inko's part, though Izuku couldn't narrow down what she was hung up on more: the fact that she'd be separated from him for six seemingly agonizing weeks, or the fact that he could tell his mother would be worried about the risks that might be involved. Strange had told her straight up that there would always be risks when it came to training with magic and Izuku knew his mother had never really forgotten that.

Still, after a few days of deliberation and contemplation, Inko had granted her son permission to go along with this training trip.

"You're going to call back often, right?" Inko asked worriedly as she brushed her son's hair, much to his chagrin.

"I-I don't know how great the service will be there, mother..." Izuku said embarrassingly, trying to wave off her motherly hovering.

"Kamar-Taj has Wi-Fi, Izuku," Strange's voice sounded through the room as his portal opened up with a dazzling display of sparks as usual. "We're sorcerers, not savages, after all."

"Sensei!" Izuku called out before looking behind Strange with some confusion. "You came from the Sanctum? We're still going to Kamar-Taj, correct?"

"Oh, yes! There are just some things I have to get in order at the Sanctum before we leave," Strange explained. "The Sanctum will require some spells in place so as to not remain completely unprotected in our absence."

"Doctor Strange," Inko said, getting the man's attention. "Make sure you watch over my baby boy while he's over there!"

"I'm fifteen, mom!" Izuku whined.

"I will take care of your son to the best of my ability," Strange said with a chuckle. "Always. I swear. Shall we, Izuku?"

"Yes, sensei!" Izuku said as Strange walked back through his portal. He turned back to his mother only to have her scoop him up into a crushing hug. "M-mom! I'll be okay! I promise!"

"I know, it's just..." Inko trailed off. "This last year has been so hectic. Things are moving so quickly. I just want you to be safe if you're so determined to do this."

Izuku smiled; beneath all her anxiety, worry, and even doubt was just a mother who loved her son to the ends of the Earth. Slowly he managed to pull away.

"I promise I'll stay in contact as much as possible...!" Izuku said as he stepped through the portal after his master with his bags in hand, waving goodbye to his teary mother as the portal finally closed between them.

"I hope mother will be okay.." Izuku whispered to himself as he looked around for Strange. "Sensei?" He called out.
Said sensei was up on the second floor, approaching the Rotunda of Gateways where Wong stood, peering through the windows contemplatively.

"Thought I might find you here before we leave," Strange said as he stood by Wong's side, looking through the window before them guardedly.

"Have you contacted Drumm?" Wong asked, not straying his eyes from the ghastly sight on the other side of the window.

"Yes," Strange said with a nod. "He's agreed to watch over the Sanctum in my absence."

"Good," Wong said, switching the window before them to a different, albeit equally abhorrent display of blood and death. "Now what about the Cloak?"

"Izuki will not be allowed to use it over the course of his training at Kamar-Taj," Strange said, throwing a glance over his shoulder at the red cloak clasped comfortably around his shoulders. Despite 'choosing' Izuki during the Test of Heart, Strange was still able to return it to his side. "I want to avoid Izuki coming to rely on it until I give him hands-on training with his own cloak."

"His own Cloak of Levitation?" Wong asked, finally drawing his eyes away from the bloody window to Strange. "You had blueprints for a new cloak?"

"It took awhile to find them, but yes," Strange said with a small smile. "I sent them, along with my request, to Enitharmon the Weaver. It should hopefully be done within a few weeks, fewer if Enitharmon is as excited to weave it as I think he is."

Wong grunted in acknowledgement before turning his attention back toward the Rotunda.

"I thought we were past this," Strange spoke cautiously with a frown.

"Midoriya was impressive during the Test of Heart, but my worries cannot be assuaged over the events of a single day," Wong responded before turning the dial of the Rotunda and finally turning around to walk back.

Strange took one final glance at the mound of corpses and the figure standing atop it that were being shown through the window before turning after his comrade, trying to shake the sight from his mind.

"Izuku!" Strange called out, looking down the staircase at his pacing apprentice. "It is time for us to depart!"

"Sensei! And...Master Wong! I wasn't expecting to see you again until I got to Kamar-Taj!" Izuku said.

"Midoriya," Wong said with a curt nod. "I was only here to help ensure that the Sanctum would remain safe. Now that its safety can be assured, I will join you and Master Strange back to Kamar-Taj."

"Are you ready, Izuku?" Strange asked his student, and upon receiving an excited nod from him, promptly weaved his hands and opened a portal before the boy. Izuku was practically bounding in anticipation as he peered into the stone courtyard on the other side of the portal, only to have his enthusiasm somewhat curbed when a frosty breeze blew through and smacked him in the face.

"It's nice to see the place is still standing since I've been gone," Strange said as he strode in behind Izuku.
"Well, some of us do take our job here seriously, Strange," Wong jokingly chided.

As the two Masters bantered back and forth between one another, Izuku glanced all over the compound in wonder. In the center of the courtyard stood a massive, dropping willow that seemed mystical even though it bore no greenery whatsoever on its dangling branches. The courtyard was wide—very spacious—with various buildings surrounding it entirely. Izuku took note of the Tibetan architecture and the sloped ceramic roofs in particular. There seemed to be various stairwells that led up to the roofs—perhaps training was even done up there as well?

Another sharp breeze blew through, and Izuku instinctively wrapped his arms around himself. Despite it being the middle of July, it was still relatively chilly here. Izuku pondered where he was exactly; he at least knew he was somewhere mountainous, judging from the rocky and misty peaks he could see in the distance over the roofs of the compound.

"Master Strange has returned!" A voice suddenly called out from across the courtyard, snapping Izuku out of his thoughts. Looking over, Izuku nearly jolted as a multitude of men and women of various robe colors began rushing out of the surrounding buildings toward them.

"I hope your training has been going well—" Strange tried to talk but he was effectively drowned out in a chorus of greetings and questions. Izuku shrank behind Strange, feeling very uncomfortable at the close proximity of the students and generally disliking having attention drawn to him. "Please, one at a time!"

Having finally quieted down the crowd of practitioners, which Izuku noted as comprising of students who looked to be about his age as well as those who were older, Strange finally began to speak.

"I know that I have been away for quite awhile," Strange began as he looked across his many followers. "My mission away from Kamar-Taj has been long...but not entirely fruitless. I have returned with a new apprentice, Izuku Midoriya, in tow. He will be training with you all for the next six weeks."

A sea of curious eyes fell upon Izuku as Strange gave his explanation. The boy tried to introduce himself properly, if only to give off a strong first impression, but all he could was give a weak, nervous smile and shaky wave. "H-hello there—"

And in the blink of an eye, the chorus of questions and greetings that crashed against Strange soon battered down on Izuku instead, ranging from introductions to questions about his origins to inquiries about his skill in magic. Izuku could only shrink under everyone's intense scrutiny.

"Quiet down!" A voice boomed over all the others. The students immediately hushed up and also backed up, giving Izuku the space he craved as he looked over to who had spoken up. To his surprise, he saw that it was Master Wong. The other students bowed apologetically as Wong effectively took command of the gathering.

"I understand everyone's excitement at Master Strange's return, but do not let such enthusiasm undermine your attention to training!" Wong spoke firmly, with that intimidating gaze of his. "If you have studies and practice to attend to, then stop dawdling here!"

Nearly all the students—some respectfully and some fearfully—bowed in response and began filtering out of the courtyard, much to Izuku's pleasure. He took in a deep breath as the courtyard suddenly opened up once more.

"Jack!" Wong suddenly called out to a tall, lanky young man. "Escort Izuku to the barracks and help
him get situated in an available room. If Master Minoru questions your lateness, explain that you were merely carrying out a task at my discretion."

With a bow, Jack approached Izuku and helped him carry his bags toward the barracks that were on the other side of the courtyard. Turning back, Izuku saw that Strange was himself being approached by a small cadre of figures that had emerged from the largest building in the compound. The other Masters?

"Welcome to Kamar-Taj, Midoriya," Jack said as he extended a hand to Izuku. "My name is Jack Holyoak."

"I-it's a pleasure to meet you," Izuku stuttered, taking his hand and shaking it nervously nonetheless. He took note of Jack's garments: Jack, unlike most of the other students, was wearing a purple tunic with gold edges. Which had to mean...

"You're a Disciple, right?" Izuku suddenly asked. "Sorry, I just couldn't help but notice your custom tunic."

"No worries," Jack said with a chuckle. "Yeah, I just ascended to the rank of Disciple recently. And your red tunic means you've reached the rank of Apprentice." Jack gave Izuku a quizzical look as he continued. "It's pretty uncommon for Master Strange to take students under his wing personally when he's away from Kamar-Taj. So what was it about you that caught his eye? If you don't mind me asking, that is."

_I stole something from his own Sanctum and then he pulled me out of a watery grave, _Izuku thought but certainly didn't say. "He, uh...saved my life," Was all Izuku said, motioning to the scars on his hands.

Jack seemed to get the gist of it. "Say no more, friend. I understand." With that, he pushed open the large wooden door and led Izuku down the long dimly lit halls toward his personal barrack. His room was small, but not claustrophobic, fitted with a bed and desk. Lighting in the room was minimal, but there were additional candles to help compensate.

"If it makes you feel any better, the Masters' rooms are no different," Jack said as he gently set Izuku's bags atop his bed.

"Oh no, I wasn't going to complain!" Izuku said, waving his arms. "I'm perfectly fine with this!"

Jack chuckled. "I'll be right down the hall if you need me. I assume Masters Wong and Strange will give you the day to settle in before starting your regimen tomorrow." With another quick bow, Jack departed, leaving Izuku with naught but his own thoughts now.

_So this is Kamar-Taj, _Izuku thought as he peered through a small rectangular window etched in the stone wall, peering down at a row of hovel-looking buildings below (he was much higher up than he had initially thought). Mountainous, chilly even in the summer, moderately populated urban sprawl beyond the compound--Izuku had guessed he was somewhere in the Himalayan region, perhaps Nepal. **Home of the Masters of the Mystic Arts.**

_I've only had roughly a year of training so far, after all._
Izuku plopped down on his bed, staring up at the ceiling as the anticipation for the next day wracked his brain thoroughly. If he was going to be given the day to settle in, Izuku guessed he'd be better off getting as much rest as possible in preparation for whatever Wong and Strange had in store for him tomorrow.

He wanted to make a good first impression on the other training students, after all.
The Eye of Agamotto

Chapter Summary

Izuku's training at Kamar-Taj continues, and he becomes increasingly acquainted with his fellow practitioners at the compound. One day, though, Izuku's curiosity gets the better of him, and he inadvertently toys with the most powerful relic that Strange possesses, which nearly results in tragedy. As all this occurs, the League of Villains gathers its forces, preparing to strike directly into the heart of Kamar-Taj alongside a certain fallen zealot.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

After getting hurled to the ground for what had to be the thousandth time that week, Izuku wasn't feeling like he'd made a good first impression on the other practitioners whatsoever. Not that he was feeling bogged down by thoughts of inadequacy, he just...really wasn't expecting the training regimen that Strange and Wong had thrown at him. Or rather, the training regimen that was currently throwing him around the courtyard like a certified ragdoll.


And Master Minoru always made sure to pair him with the same training partner each and every time: that green, lumbering behemoth, Rintrah.

Izuku's brain fried the first time he'd been introduced to his sparring partner. Rintrah, unlike the other trainees, didn't look human in the slightest. Hell, he was hardly humanoid! He was a bull of a figure, literally: large and brawny, cloven feet, covered in coarse, green fur, and with a bull's head, complete with horns. Rintrah looked like a minotaur straight out of ancient mythology, and Izuku was expected to go toe-to-toe with this guy!

"Puny Green, meet Big Green!" Rintrah roared as he charged toward Izuku, who futilely tried to evade his massive, grappling hands (which were easily the size of his head, Izuku noted!) which twirled him through the air like a skinny twig before dropping him unceremoniously onto the stone tile below.

"I yield...!" Izuku cried out as he clutched his aching abdomen.

"Respite!" Master Minoru called out, and all the other partnered up trainees present ceased their physical sparring, walking and talking amongst one another as the slender, silver-robed master helped Izuku to his feet.

"Not bad, Izuku," She said, patting him on the back as Rintrah approached. "You've lasted a little bit longer and longer against Rintrah with each session. Master Strange said you had a never-give-up attitude, but even I'm impressed!"

Izuku's cheeks dusted a bit red at what he thought was undeserved praise, although it also felt nice knowing that Strange was essentially bragging about him to the other Masters.
"But I haven't even managed to land a single blow against him...!" Izuku said with more than a hint of frustration. "And my hands...well, it's more than a little difficult to throw a proper punch."

"Then don't throw a punch," Master Minoru said knowingly before skipping off to speak with the other students, leaving a slightly confused Izuku to ponder her words.

"You rush too much," Rintrah bellowed in his low voice as he sat beside Izuku, who was rubbing his sore side. "You are new to magic, correct?"

"Y-yeah," Izuku muttered. "I've only had roughly a year of training with Master Strange."

"Use of magic can be exhilarating, this I know for fact," Rintrah continued with his heavily accented voice. "Magic is tool for sorcerer. Is source of power for sorcerer. You are also frustrated at being forbidden to use magic all week."

"Was it that obvious?" Izuku blinked, surprised that the hulking Rintrah seemed able to pick up on his frustrations so easily. Izuku always did his best to not make such emotions evident.

Rintrah nodded and exhaled through his flared nostrils. "This no doubt why Masters started you here. You know how powerful tool magic can be, but you know little of most important tool of all."

"The most important tool of all?" Izuku repeated. "What would that be?"

"This," Rintrah spoke as he gave Izuku a hard poke against the boy's chest. "Body is most important tool of all."

"My body...?" Izuku muttered as he glanced down at the pitiful state of his hands.

"You underestimate body," Rintrah continued. "You see only hands and deem body as no good in fighting. This why you anticipate progress with magic instead. But too much magic will strain body in fight. Break body, no use of magic. No body...no magic."

"Use magic to support body, not other way around," Rintrah continued to a silently listening and contemplating Izuku. "Let magic guide body against enemy, instead of just body guiding magic to victory. Tomorrow we add magic to lesson. You think on my words."

"Let magic guide my body instead, huh...?" Izuku spoke quietly.

"Yes," Rintrah said with a solemn nod. "Sum is greater than whole of parts, after all."

"I think you mean 'the whole is greater than the sum of its parts'," Izuku chuckled.

"That, too," Rintrah said before hoisting himself back to his feet. "Tomorrow brings more training. Rest and think, Izuku. Body is strongest tool of all."

The next day brought about as much clarity as it did pain. Izuku was thrown back by his burly green-furred partner but managed to deftly roll to the side and avoid a charge from Rintrah, who struggled to skid to a halt with his cloven hooves.

*His strength is in his arms!* Izuku thought as he rushed at Rintrah while his back was still facing him. *And he may be fast, but his movements are linear enough for me to dodge!*

Rintrah pivoted back around with a roar, swinging his thick arms at Izuku who only narrowly managed to slide beneath his monstrous hands.
He doesn't employ kicks in his fighting style, only for his mobility! Izuku raised a foot and slammed the sole of his shoe against Rintrah's calf. That makes his legs a potential weak spot!

Rintrah grunted as Izuku's foot collided with the back of his leg but failed to fall down to even a knee. Snatching the boy by the scruff of his tunic's collar, Rintrah sent Izuku flying until he landed on his backside once more, wincing in pain.

No good...! Izuku wiped his chin clean as he studied Rintrah's posture, and vice-versa. His legs may be a weak spot for a more physically able person, but they're much too thick for me! Anymore kicks will hurt my legs more than his!

Rintrah snorted and geared up for another charge, leveling his horns straight at Izuku.

What I need is a weak spot that's not too thick! One where a solid blow should bring him down! Izuku scanned Rintrah for possible weak points as he rolled out of his way again. As the bull skidded to a halt, Izuku spotted one. The back of his head!

Izuku brought his fingers together and then dragged them apart, fiery magic sparking out as he formed an eldritch whip in his hands and hurled it toward Rintrah's neck or horns, hoping to hoist himself onto his backside to deliver a blow.

Rintrah wasn't having it; he reached behind and grasped Izuku's lasso with one hand and yanked the boy forward while extending his arm out, letting Izuku collide with it and fall to the ground. "Won't work against me, Puny Green," Rintrah chided him.

Dang it! Izuku picked himself up and jumped back, dodging a potentially match-ending punch from Rintrah. He's quick to turn around whenever I dodge a charge so his backside is never facing me for too long...think, Izuku!

"Let magic guide body against enemy, instead of just body guiding magic..." Rintrah's advice rang through his mind.

"I have to use my magic with precision in order to land a blow from behind...!" Izuku muttered to himself. "But how...?"

Rintrah readied himself for another charge, angling his horns down low. Izuku widened his eyes as an idea struck him.

Instead of waiting for the perfect moment to dodge roll out of Rintrah's way, Izuku instead charged right back at him. Rintrah certainly looked surprised, but only stamped forward faster. Only a few feet in front of his horns, Izuku suddenly fell his knees and leaned backwards, sliding across stone tile and between his hulking opponent's legs as Rintrah charged over his diminutive foe harmlessly. Before Rintrah could even process what had happened, Izuku was already ensnaring his legs with two fiery lassos, using his superior weight and momentum to pull him up into the air with a backward somersault. Izuku grinned as he smashed his feet against the back of Rintrah's head before he could reach around, bringing the colossal bull down to the ground with a deafening crash as he skidded to a halt. The other training pairs ceased their sparring and looked on in amazement as Izuku stood atop Rintrah's backside victoriously.

"I...yield," A dizzied Rintrah snorted out, and Master Minoru called the match amid a wave of audible gasps and cheers. Izuku Midoriya had done what few new Apprentices had ever done before: he'd toppled the brawny Rintrah and gotten him to yield.

"Now you know, Izuku," Rintrah grunted at a sheepishly smiling Midoriya. "Now you know how to
"This," Jack Holyoak showed Izuku a slender wooden staff marked with undecipherable engravings in his hands. "Is the Staff of the Living Tribunal, a powerful mystical relic. Master Strange says you've already had a relic choose you, correct?"

"Um, yes," Izuku said as he admired the staff. "But he doesn't want me using it quite yet. Says he wants me to have a basic understanding of relics first."

"That is because there are always risks when employing relics in combat, just as there are risks with using magic in general," Jack said with a nod. Gripping both ends of the staff, Jack channeled it with his magic and pulled from each end, causing the staff to extend into many glowing interlinked sections. He flicked the extended staff and it bended like a whip as it crashed against the ground, letting off an explosion of amber sparks upon contact. Naturally, Izuku jumped back in surprise.

"The Staff of the Living Tribunal allows its wielder to channel magic into it continuously, and then release all of that stored energy with a single, explosive blow," Jack explained as the staff retracted back into its normal state. "The extendable sections allow it to be used as a whip or flail, granting the user a greater range of motion while in combat. Here, why don't you try?"

"Wait, what—?" Izuku started to ask, but stopped short as he clumsily caught the relic in his hands when Jack tossed it to him unexpectedly. "You want me to use it?"

"Correct," Jack grinned. "Channel all the magic you can into the staff and see what happens."

Izuku exhaled and straightened his posture, gripping both ends like Jack had done. He focused his magic into the relic, feeling it flow from his hands into the staff. After several tense moments, Izuku could feel a building pressure of energy and decided then to unleash it. Extending it into many glowing sections like Jack before him, Izuku whirled the whip-like staff into the air and crashed it against the stone tile...only for the released energy to burst forth and send him sprawling to the ground, gasping for breath.

"W-what just happened...!?" Izuku groaned as Jack helped him back onto his feet.

"You see how it's not so simple?" Jack asked as he retrieved the staff from Izuku's grasp. "You see the risks involved with a relic such as this?"

"I put in too much magic," Izuku said as the realization dawned on him. "And releasing it all at once caused it to backfire on me, instead."

"Astute observation," Jack replied. "Yes, the staff's limits when it comes to storing magical energy are difficult to pinpoint, making it potentially dangerous for a wielder to use while in combat. Therefore, it's safest to channel and release minute doses of energy instead so the user is not harmed."

"It must take quite a bit of training to use a relic like that efficiently," Izuku panted.

"That's why Master Strange tasked me with giving you the basic rundown on relics," Jack said, sitting beside Izuku. "Learning about the relic and its potential drawbacks is just as important as learning how to actually use it in the heat of battle. It's a lesson I learned the hard way..."

"What happened?" Izuku asked, his curiosity piqued.

"Well..." Jack trailed off, looking off into the distance with a look of embarrassment. "I once turned
Master Strange into a frog..."

Izuku chortled. "A frog!? How did you manage to do that!?"

"I swear it wasn't intentional!" Jack waved his hands defensively. "In fact, that was the whole reason he had me study on relics for so long afterwards. He had guests arriving at the Sanctum but he was out patrolling through the astral realm and was unaware. I used what I thought was an astral wand to summon his astral form back to his body...but it was actually a transmogrification wand and...well, you can guess the rest."

"A-and how did you get him to turn back to normal?" Izuku said with barely restrained laughter.

"Well, being a magically enchanted toad and whatnot..." Jack trailed off, seemingly unsure of how to continue. "He had to be kissed to be returned to normal."

Izuku howled with laughter, unable to keep it contained any longer. "You gave Master Strange a kiss in order to turn him back!?!"

"No, no!" Jack waved his arms again. "As embarrassed as I was over the situation, all I had to was get his wife Clea to turn him back—"

The mood seemed to drop sharply as Jack turned away with a frown and fell quiet. "Probably shouldn't have mentioned that..."

That little tidbit sure caught Izuku off guard. "Master Strange is married?" He asked in surprise. In the near year that he'd been training at the Sanctum he'd never met a romantic partner of Strange's nor was she ever brought up.

"Was married," Jack quietly corrected Izuku before talking more to himself. "I think it's been over five years now since that day..."

Izuku gulped; he wasn't liking where this conversation was headed.

"Listen, it's really not for me to say and I fear I may have already said too much," Jack said, suddenly standing up. "Just...if I were you, I wouldn't even bring this up with Master Strange. It's something that everyone here at Kamar-Taj would much rather forget."

Just then, Izuku looked out across the stone courtyard and spotted Strange conversing with several students and masters alike as they congregated toward the great library. Giving the man a hard stare, Izuku thought back through the year he'd spent training with him and realized that still, to this day, there were plenty of things he didn't know about his relatively enigmatic sensei.

That much he understood.

"Hello?" Izuku called out as he peered into the dimly lit depths of Kamar-Taj's great library. The front desk was desolate and empty and Izuku dared not venture in further without Master Wong's express permission. Izuku clutched a stack of books he'd checked out close to his chest.

"Hello right back at ya!" A perky voice sounded out from behind a bookshelf. "Come on back here if you have books to return!"

Following the voice through the labyrinth of shelved tomes, Izuku stumbled upon a dark-skinned girl who had several tomes splayed out on the table before her in a messy, disorganized fashion.
"Right over here!" She called out to him with a brisk wave. "Zelma's the name! Zelma Stanton at your service!"

"I-Izuku—"

"Izuku Midoriya!" Zelma interrupted with a wide grin. "The talk of Kamar-Taj himself! Practically everyone's been wondering about you around here! After all, being hand-picked by the Sorcerer Supreme isn't something that occurs regularly."

"O-ok! I see," Izuku said nervously. Were people really talking about him a lot around here? He hadn't really noticed.

"Got books for me to scribe?" Zelma asked. "You can slide those over here!"

"A-actually, I'm just here to return these to Master Wong," Izuku said, setting the stack of books he'd checked out on the desk beside him. "Do you know where he is?"

"Probably out chiding Master Strange over something or other," Zelma said dismissively. "Great for me though, that means I have full reign over the library! Being the official Scribe and Secretary of Kamar-Taj has its perks, you know?"

"What do you do as the Scribe?" Izuku asked as he took a seat beside Zelma.

"Watch this!" Zelma ran her fingers across the page of a particularly archaic text she had laid out. To Izuku's amazement, the words lifted off the page and, one at a time, pressed down on an ink pad before floating over and pressing down on a cleaner, blank page before returning to the text they had originated from, albeit slightly splotched. "With my Quirk—Word Lift—I can effortlessly transcribe written spells and information from tomes ravaged by time and battle into newer, more sturdy facsimiles."

"What a useful Quirk!" Izuku exclaimed. He'd be sure to jot this one down in his journal later. "I bet a lot of information has been saved here because of what you do! It just goes to show how varied and diverse the world of Quirks really is."

"You flatter me, Izuku," Zelma said with a somewhat conceited grin. "How about you? Do you have a Quirk that caught Master Strange's attention?"

Izuku felt his breath catch in his throat. He remembered then: no one in Kamar-Taj had been told—as far as he knew—that he was actually Quirkless. He knew Doctor Strange was Quirkless, as he had confessed that when demonstrating his power back in the hospital, but he also didn't know how many people here were privy to that fact. How would they react? Would he be spurned here like in Junior High?

"I'm...actually Quirkless," Izuku said softly, bracing for imminent rejection.

"Huh," Zelma said after several tense moments of silence. "You're even more impressive than I thought."

"W-what did you say?" Izuku asked incredulously, unsure if he had heard her right.

"Did I stutter?" Zelma asked with a teasing smile. "You don't have a Quirk, yet you still managed to catch Master Strange's keen eye? He must see quite the potential in you, Midoriya...whoa, are you alright?"

Zelma had caught sight of Izuku's tears before even he had realized he was crying. "What is it?"
Izuku asked as he gingerly brushed a tear off his cheek before quickly wiping the rest away. "Whoa, get it together, Izuku..."

"You okay?" Zelma asked gently.

"Yeah, that just...really meant a lot to me, is all," Izuku sniffled. To actually admit that he was Quirkless to a stranger and be called impressive for what was a widely pitied status—Izuku could hardly comprehend his own joy at the moment. This was how he'd wished Kacchan and the others would treat him.

"I'll say he's impressive," Another jaunty voice rang out from behind them.

"Casey!" Zelma said exuberantly.

Izuku turned as a blue-haired girl approached them, pausing to peruse through the stack of books Izuku had brought with him.

"Casey Kinmont," The girl introduced herself. "These books you checked out—most of these are ones that Apprentices would normally be hard-pressed to get a hold of. Master Wong is a stickler when it comes to the books he lets us check out." She skimmed through some of the pages at random, eyes wide in surprise. "Some of these spells are forbidden to anyone lower than the rank of Disciple!"

"Y-yeah, I convinced Master Wong to let me read through them after I completed my training with Jack," Izuku said. "I read through but they weren't exactly the spells I was interested in learning at the moment."

"You should read over the spells you choose carefully, Izuku," Zelma warned. "It's a quirky thing about spell books, especially those at Kamar-Taj: the warnings usually come after the spells."

"You would definitely know better than anyone," Casey said with a wry chuckle.

"Oh?" Izuku perked up. "What spell did you use?"

"God, I hate telling this story..." Zelma muttered. "Okay. One day a little while back I woke up with a massive—and I mean massive—migraine. I combed through a spell book that may or may not have been above my rank and found a spell that dispelled migraines."

"...And it backfired on you horribly," Izuku guessed correctly.

"Hell yeah it did," Casey snickered.

"Shut it!" Zelma barked. "Anyway, I cast the spell and boom! Migraine gone! But a few hours afterwards, I start to feel this itch on my head...and then another. And another. And before I knew it, I had maggots crawling out of my head! Mind Maggots! I didn't read the warnings on the next page that detailed how the spell would summon magical Mind Maggots to literally eat my migraine and they were now popping out of my head by the dozens!"

"You should've seen Master Strange in particular, zooming around the compound trying to collect all the little bastards," Casey chortled, eliciting a chuckle from Izuku.

"Alright, since we're telling stories at our own expense, how about you tell Izuku about the vanishing spell you abused!?" Zelma pointed at Casey accusingly.

"D-damn it," Casey straightened right up, her humor quickly giving way to irritation. "Fine. About a
year ago I was assigned to help clean up the compound's barracks and thought I'd pull a fast one over Wong and Strange by using a vanishing spell to get rid of all the garbage and dirt."

"But...?" Izuku cracked a smile.

"But...!" Casey grit her teeth. "The spell, I would soon discover, didn't just cause things to vanish. It was actually a very specific teleportation spell that sent 'vanished' items into another dimension. And the demon in charge of that dimension was not happy with me sending garbage into his domain."

"You were in deep shit over that incident," Zelma teasingly chided her friend. "Master Strange was infuriated."

"Don't remind me..." Casey groaned.

"Infuriated?" Izuku blinked. "Was Master Strange really that angry?"

"Yeah, but I think his anger was caused more by the demon than Casey," Zelma added. "The demon in question—Baroshtok—he and Master Strange don't get along in the slightest. Because Casey was abusing a spell into his domain, the demon Baroshtok caused it to rain squid over Kamar-Taj for a week."

"No, Master Strange was still plenty angry with me," Casey grimaced.

"I don't think I've ever seen him get to the level of anger you're describing," Izuku said. "I mean, sure, he's scolded me, or I've disappointed him from time to time, but I've...never caused him to be infuriated."

Zelma and Casey shared a look between the two of them. "And we hope you never see him like that," They both said simultaneously.

"Master Strange—his rage is like a cold yet righteous fury," Zelma shuddered.

"His judgment against those that would abuse dark magic or threaten Kamar-Taj or the Sanctums is swift and oftentimes merciless," Casey added.

"Such judgment and swiftness is befitting of our Sorcerer Supreme," The stern voice of Wong suddenly spoke from behind them, causing all three trainees to nearly jump out of their seats.

"Casey," Wong focused on the blue-haired girl first with his intense gaze. "Are you here to check books out?"

"N-no, Master Wong—"

"Then you're dismissed," Wong cut her off. Casey needn't be told twice as she scurried out on her way. "Zelma, are you finished transcribing the tomes you were asked to?"

"Almost done, Master Wong—"

"Finish quickly," Wong then turned his attention to Izuku, who was shivering where he sat. "Midoriya."

"M-Master Wong?"

Wong said nothing as he reached over to the stack of books Izuku had checked out and slid them over to him. He scanned through the books one at a time.
"The Book of Benediction," Wong began with the top book. "The Cryptic Codex. The Ledger of Ashes." He placed a hand atop the stack of tomes and gave Izuku look of both skepticism and incredulity. "You read all of these?"


"...Follow me," Wong said after a few seconds of silence, motioning for Izuku to follow him further into the library. Izuku and Zelma offered each other a meek wave of goodbye as the boy followed the Master to the end of the library and then down a flight of stairs into a deeper section of the library Izuku had no idea existed before now. A room more dimly lit than upstairs, it had markedly less shelves and an abnormal pedestal with a familiar relic resting in an even further back room.

"This section is normally reserved for masters, but others may study these books at my own discretion," Wong explained as Izuku moved from shelf to shelf, perusing the tomes with wonder. "You should start with the Flamebound Primer," Wong continued as he pulled an orange grimoire from a shelf.

Izuku gravitated to the back of the room toward a wrought iron shelf with books chained and hooked into place. "What are these?" He asked Wong curiously.

"Those books," Wong said as he approached Izuku with another stack of tomes. "Are Master Strange's private collection, which he inherited from the previous Sorcerer Supreme."

"So...they're forbidden, right?" Izuku asked, feeling slightly disappointed.

"No knowledge in Kamar-Taj is forbidden, Midoriya," Wong responded with a wry smile. "Only certain practices."

Izuku certainly perked up at that, and he quickly unhooked a golden blue tome from its chained resting place before scanning his eyes across the rest of the shelf.

"Some of these slots are missing tomes," Izuku said. "Does Master Strange check out his own books for study from time to time?"

Wong paused, giving a look over toward Izuku and the shelf with missing tomes before speaking. "No...those books are missing because they were stolen."

Izuku immediately shrunk back, feeling a pit open up in his stomach as he was instantly reminded of his own unwitting theft of a tome from Strange's Sanctum.

"Over five years ago," Wong explained. "A great battle took place here between the Masters of the Mystic Arts and a group of Zealots led by one named Kaecilius. He led the Zealots that had defected from our own ranks into dark and unsavory practices, and in the aftermath of the battle here, several Great Tomes of Power were lost. The only one that was returned was the tome you now carry: the Book of Cagliostro—the study of time.

"It was with the forbidden rituals in that book that Kaecilius was able to sway many others under the ways of black magic," Wong continued. "But not before, of course, relieving the past librarian of Kamar-Taj of his head."

Izuku gulped nervously as Wong leveled his intense gaze toward him. "I am now the Guardian of Kamar-Taj's lore. And should anyone try to steal a tome from this collection, not only would I know about it, but they would be dead before they could ever leave the compound." Wong snatched the Book of Cagliostro out of Izuku's hand just as the sound of footsteps could be heard coming down.
"Master Wong!" Zelma raced downstairs, panting. "Master Strange is requesting your presence!"

"Your timing is as odd as ever, Stephen..." Wong muttered before placing the Book of Cagliostro back onto the chained shelf and turning to Izuku. "You have your tomes, so you may see yourself out Midoriya. I expect those tomes back by the end of next week."

And with that, Wong tuned heel and headed out with Zelma in tow, leaving Izuku alone in the master's section.

Izuku straightened the small stack of books Wong had handpicked for him...but he felt an enigmatic allure coming from the Book of Cagliostro that he couldn't quite shake off.

*Master Wong might be gone for awhile if Sensei called him away,* Izuku thought as he approached Strange's collection. *A quick look wouldn't hurt...right?*

Checking back to make sure no one was coming down the steps, Izuku foolishly allowed his curiosity to take command as he unchained the Book of Cagliostro down from its rightful resting place and set it on the nearest desk.

Izuku skimmed through the book, reading through spell after spell, ritual after ritual with fascination, until he stumbled across one that seemed highly familiar to him.

"The Eye of Agamotto...?" Izuku uttered as he perused through the ritual more carefully. "The eye that opens a window through time..." Izuku glanced up toward the pedestal centered in the back of the room.

*Is that what I think it is...?* It was. Sitting forlornly atop the pedestal was the relic described in the book: the Eye of Agamotto. *Does Sensei leave it down here with his personal collection when he's not using it as well?*

Izuku briskly walked over and, ensuring that Wong or no other master was descending the stairs, quickly scooped up the relic and brought it back over to the book. Why did it seem so familiar? Then it hit Izuku. *Strange was wearing this relic back when I was in the hospital...!*

Izuku studied the relic curiously and then glanced back over to the ritual he had stumbled across in the tome. His curiosity was getting the better of him again. *Just one try couldn't hurt...could it?*

Izuku quickly draped the Eye around his neck and read through the first steps of the ritual that had enraptured his interest. "First, open the Eye of Agamotto..." He wasn't perfect with his Sanskrit, although he still managed to make out the proper finger movements, connecting his fingers and then sliding them past one another as the tome described. Izuku gasped as the desk and tome before him were suddenly radiated by a resplendent emerald light that he'd seen before. He had successfully opened up the Eye.

He couldn't find it in him to stop now. "Bring your hands together, like so..." Izuku read off the next list of instructions, rotating his opened palms until he had constructed a brilliant emerald mandala. He pulled back one hand, dragging the shimmering energy until it formed something akin to a bracer over his other arm, just as Strange had shown him nearly a year ago.

Shaking with excitement, Izuku decided to proceed. He directed the Eye's energy to the desk before him. As he rotated his hand to the right and slowly clenched his palm shut, Izuku stared on in amazement as the wood of the desk seemed to crumble and rot before his eyes. Reversing his hand's movement reversed the damage, restoring the desk to its normal state.

"Oh my goodness," Izuku whispered incredulously at his feat. He had to make sure he was doing...
what he thought he was doing. Directing the Eye toward the Book of Cagliostro itself, Izuku again repeated his hand movements, causing the book to crumple and wither with a full turn to the right, and restoring it by turning back to the left.

Izuku had no doubt now—he was definitely controlling time. The Eye of Agamotto allowed the user to manipulate the flow of time itself.

"What else can the Eye do...?" Izuku muttered as he scanned down the page. "Time Slips? Removing people and objects from forward or reverse motions through time?" Izuku's mind was positively spinning now—it was all simply too much to take in!

Izuku brushed his hand across the page, accidentally flipping it as something on the new page caught his eye—and his terror. "Dormammu?" Izuku asked unsteadily as he gazed down at the new ritual. "The Dark Dimension...realms beyond time?"

"It was with the forbidden rituals in that book that Kaecilius was able to sway many others under the ways of black magic," Wong's words echoed through his mind as his hands began to shake harder and lose control over the Eye's magic...with nearly disastrous results following.

Izuku flinched as the emerald brightness seemed to burst with greater illumination. A multitude of shimmering threads erupted from the Eye, running into the walls and ceiling as Izuku desperately tried to futilely rein the relic back under his control. Looking through the sea of threads, some movement on them caught Izuku's attention: on every thread he saw he could make out...himself? He saw himself also handling the Eye of Agamotto. It didn't seem like a reflection. Izuku reached out to grasp the nearest thread...

"STOP!" The severe voice of Wong sounded out. Izuku flinched back as the magic ritual ended abruptly, the Eye snapping shut as the various threads dissipated in an instant. Whirling around, Izuku saw Wong, Strange, and Zelma rushing over to him.

"Tampering with temporal continuities is forbidden!" Wong rasped.

"I-I was only doing exactly what the book said!" Izuku cried out, bewildered.

"And what did the Book of Cagliostro say? Hmm? About the dangers of performing such a ritual?" Wong asked as he snapped the tome shut.

"...I hadn't gotten to that part yet," Izuku said meekly.

"What did I tell you about warnings in spell books, Midoriya?" Zelma chided. "Do you not know the risks that could’ve been incurred with what you did? Unstable branches in time! Dimension-breaking spatial paradoxes! Neverending time loops! You could’ve been stuck reliving the same moment over and over, or worse, never having existed at all!"

"...You know, the warnings really should come before the spells..." Izuku muttered.

"Foolish boy," Wong scolded. "Your curiosity nearly had you killed! The Eye of Agamotto does not allow one to manipulate the space-time continuum, it allows one to break it!"

"How did you even manage to do that?" Zelma asked wearily. "The litany of magic required to pull off such a ritual is beyond what Apprentices are normally capable of."

"I-I just read what was in the book," Izuku said timidly.

"What you just did takes more than a good reading comprehension," Zelma retorted.
"Izuku has a knack for the Mystic Arts," Strange spoke up for the first time since they had arrived to cease Izuku's meddling with the Eye. Izuku looked up, expecting his sensei to be furious with him, but was surprised to see that Strange was relatively calm, looking him over with an inquisitive eye.

"Yet my hands still shake..." Izuku muttered under his breath.

"Why did you really go through the Book of Cagliostro?" Strange asked his student. "Why did you use the Eye?"

"I..." Izuku sighed in defeat. "I guess the idea of studying time itself seemed impossibly appealing besides just sating my curiosity. Magic that can reverse time? I guess I was thinking that the Eye of Agamotto could be used to save lives, is all..."

"Sorcerers of Kamar-Taj do not abuse Natural Law!" Wong rebuked. "They defend it!"

Strange's eyes, however, gleamed as if pleased by Midoriya's answer.

"Zelma," Wong turned to his assistant. "Escort Midoriya out with his books. See to it that he makes his way back to his barrack."

"Yes, Master Wong," Zelma said, motioning for Izuku to follow her.

Giving a deep, apologetic bow, Izuku gathered his books and swiftly followed Zelma up the stairs, only for her to elbow him in the stomach lightly.

"Ow!" Izuku grimaced. "What was that for!?"

"You're crazy, you know that?" Zelma snickered. "Going through Master Strange's personal tome and using the Eye of Agamotto? You're the wildest student we've had here since Wiccan!"

"Huh?" Izuku blinked. "Who's Wiccan?"

"I'll tell you later," Zelma said. "First, I just have to tell Casey and Jack about what you did!"

Not gossip... Izuku thought miserably as Zelma led him out of the library.

"You did that on purpose," Wong whirled on Strange the moment Zelma and Izuku were out of sight. "Leaving the Eye of Agamotto down here—something you never do—and then calling me away just so Midoriya could be tempted by his curiosity."

"I wasn't exactly trying to hide my intentions from you, Wong," Strange replied.

"Midoriya could have gotten himself killed!" Wong said angrily. "If he had grasped any of those temporal threads, he would've been sucked into the gaps of space-time!"

"If he had, I would've retrieved him," Strange said calmly...a bit too calmly for Wong's liking.

"You seem...pleased by this result," Wong said quizzically.

"I am," Strange said before continuing with his explanation. "You see, like you, I still worry about Midoriya's penchant for the Mystic Arts and his parallels to Ikiji have not wholly escaped my attention."

"So you let him perform the ritual in the Book of Cagliostro to see if it would affect him," Wong filled in the gap, but remained displeased. "That was reckless of you, Strange."
"Izuku did not view the Eye as a relic for personal use or as a means for carrying out selfish desires," Strange continued. "But instead as a means of saving innocent lives."

"That's Toshinori's influence for you," Strange said with a chuckle.

Wong seemed to ponder over that. He couldn't deny that Izuku's heart and capacity for goodness continued to distinguish him from Ikiji.

"Still," Wong said. "I would've appreciated being informed of this extra...'test' you had in store for the boy."

"I know, and I apologize," Strange conceded. "I suppose I was in a hurry and wanted to see this play out before I travel to Enitharmon's realm tonight."

"Oh?" Wong asked. "Enitharmon has already completed Izuku's Cloak of Levitation?"

Strange nodded with a smirk. "He was adamant that he cease all current projects and work on that without delay. He promised perfection with every weave and thread of his. I'm sure Izuku will be surprised when I return."

If Tomura Shigaraki were to be asked if he preferred the dirtiness of Yokohama City or that of Kathmandu, he'd choose Yokohama without missing a beat. His choice didn't necessarily stem from the longstanding familiarity he had with Yokohama, either. Yokohama—Kamino Ward in particular—just had a certain seediness to it that lurked just underneath its otherwise plain streets and neighborhoods. It was...appealing, to say the least. The decadence was charming to him.

Kathmandu was just filthy. Filthy roads, filthy buildings, filthy people. It irritated him to no end how time seemed to march in place here so long after the advent of Quirks.

He couldn't even understand why his sensei had sent him here with Kurogiri and their new cohort to begin with. Well, that wasn't entirely true—they and the rest of the League were here to carry out an operation, but since he wasn't in charge, what was the point? Being told that he wasn't the leader of the assault was bad enough, but being informed that he was to carry out a strictly non-combat role as well?

Shigaraki scratched his neck in agitation as he forced his way through the throngs of people, turning a corner and descending past a row of hovels. "It's basic gaming logic," Shigaraki growled to himself. "You need to fight in order to gain EXP."

"Kurogiri!" Shigaraki yelled as he kicked the door of their rundown hideout open and sauntered in. "I grow impatient. When are we carrying out this little 'assault' of his?"

His black-misted companion, Kurogiri, sat beside a desk with a small monitor as he read through some papers while methodically cleaning a wine glass. Perhaps to soothe his nerves since he was so far from home and his precious bar? Who could say.

"Keep it down, Shigaraki," Kurogiri calmly chastised his young charge. "Our companion is still resting."

"I am awake," A gravelly voice called out. Both Shigaraki and Kurogiri turned toward the voice. The young man in question was currently meditating—levitating—in the middle of the room with his back facing both of them. His brown and golden robes fluttered as he gently bobbed up and down while in midair, his jagged white hair remaining motionless all the while. "And we attack tomorrow, Shigaraki."
Shigaraki's hands twitched vehemently, wanting nothing more than to strangle that man and watch him disintegrate into dust all at once. "Still," He growled in annoyance. "I don't understand why I am being kept from the fighting!"

"It's simple, Tomura," A sickeningly sweet voice flitted from the blank monitor. "This is all a necessary part of your training."

"Sensei," Shigaraki and Kurogiri spoke in surprise. The robed meditating man inclined his head, silently acknowledging their ringleader.

"I understand your desire to jump straight into the fray," Sensei spoke. "But one must learn to follow before they learn how to lead."

"I understand, Sensei..." Shigaraki spoke with a deflated voice as he took a seat beside Kurogiri.

"Besides," Sensei spoke up again. "You are too important of a piece to risk losing in this match. You are necessary to opening the point of entry into Kamar-Taj for our comrade here, but you will go no further than that. You are King and Castle both, Tomura. Remember that."

The monitor fizzled as it finally went silent. There was a tense quiet that settled between the three individuals in the rundown hideout, all mentally going over their role for the upcoming attack.

"Very well then," Shigaraki spoke as their companion finally settled on his feet and turned to face them, his eyes fierce and full of vengeful fury. "I guess I can tolerate you being tomorrow's Player One...Ikiji Kokotsu."

Chapter End Notes

I'll add this note here like I did on FF: the character known as Master Minoru shares no familial relation with Mineta. Minoru is Mineta's first given name and Minoru is the surname for the character in this chapter. Sorry for any confusion.
Chapter Summary

Ikiji's past with the sorcerers Stephen Strange and Kaecilius is explored as he prepares for the upcoming operation with the League of Villains against Kamar-Taj.

"Stop that thieving brat!"

The small boy, emaciated and scrawny, pushed his way through a sea of turned heads and condescending glares as he made his grand escape with his prize in hand: a small bag of rice. This particular outdoor bazaar was a favorite haunt of his—easy to slip into and easy to slip out of, regardless if he was caught in the act of stealing or not.

But that didn't make the stares and whispers anymore tolerable. Oh, no one ever dared to stop him, but he absolutely abhorred being looked down upon by others just because they were so much better off than he was. So beneath them he was, not worthy of intervention or the slightest bit of compassion or, worse than that, pity. He would take pity over this any day of the week.

But no, they never gave him pity. Just their contempt, without malice. The one thing the masses gave freely and it was the one thing he didn't even want, let alone ask for. No, they never gave him anything. All he knew in life was loss, so it only made perfect sense to the boy that the things he needed and wanted—those things had to be taken.

There can be no winners without losers. One cannot be rewarded with gain without another having loss inflicted upon them. And he, a boy with naught but a name and the rags on his back, was tired of losing throughout his life.

As he darted through throngs of shoppers, the boy made sure to scarf down the rice as quickly as possible. He always made sure to eat as soon as he stole, lest he lose his prize as well, especially if he were to be caught and beaten. He could at least fight back against angry vendors, but hunger? Starvation was not an enemy he could punch into submission.

Slipping through mounds of garbage in an alleyway, the boy stopped for a brief respite once he was sure the vendor he'd pilfered from this time had either lost him or was no longer giving chase. He never rested for too long—the sky still shone with sunlight, and so long as the sun hung in the sky, there was time for him to steal—to gain.

Tossing the empty rice bag into the nearest garbage heap, the boy peered out across the nearest string of shops, his eyes vigilantly looking out for his next target. He soon found it: perusing through a roughshod vegetable stand was a man wearing an odd assortment of brown and golden vestments—obviously a man possessing wealth, wealth that would soon be his for the taking.

Closing the distance with his target, even through crowds of shoppers, was easy enough. Slipping his fingers into the man's pocket and swiftly pulling out the first object he had come to grasp was even easier—pickpocketing was a science he had long mastered.

Snickering at the ease of his crime, the boy slunk back to the alleyway he had first emerged from to inspect his prize.
What the heck is this? He thought as he scrutinized the object—a double-looped ring of some kind. Its luster was extremely poor and the inscriptions engraved on it were nearly unreadable. Bah! This catch was worthless! He wouldn't be able to barter this piece of junk for any food!

No matter, The boy thought as he pocketed the ring. I'll just double back around and see what else I can take from him—oh, no.

The boy was scanning the crowd for the man he had just stolen from only to find the face of said man staring intently right at him. He had been found out, and his pickpocket victim began rushing through the crowd straight toward him.

"Shit!" The boy swore as he bolted back down the alley, looking back in horror as his pursuer effortlessly leaped over the swarm of shoppers, landing steady on his feet and barreling straight towards him.

Turning back to focus on running away, the boy's feet suddenly connected with some debris in his path and he collapsed to a painful halt. As he picked himself up, a harsh hand gripped him by the shoulder.

"You've nowhere to run," The man he'd stolen from said sternly. "Now return what you've stolen."

"Let...me...go!" The boy angrily cried out as he swiped at him with his hand, instinctively activating his Quirk. The man swiftly jumped backward, eyeing the boy in surprise. The groaning boy picked himself up and was now clutching his bleeding, scarred hand. It happened every time he used his accursed Quirk.

"Damn you..." The boy said with a pained groan. "Now I have to steal medicine before the day is done..."

"Wait—" The man said, but the young thief would have none of it.

He took off again, this time using the debris to his advantage as he knocked over whatever he passed and kicked up as much dirt as possible. Emerging on the other side of the alley, the boy instead stuck to the side of road instead of diving into the crowd of people. Following the road until he reached a drain opening, the boy hurriedly squeezed his way into the sewer drain just as his pursuer reached down for him, grasping him by the scruff of his neck.

"No!" The boy cried out, knowing he'd have to activate his Quirk again to get away. And activate it he did, howling in anguish as his chaser released him with a surprised gasp. Now his neck was bleeding as well as his hand, and he cursed the golden robed man as he squeezed his scrawny body down the pipe and into the dampened cistern, limping his way back to his safe haven.

Rain—or just the sound of dripping water—was always soothing to him. It was why he enjoyed sleeping beneath bridges. The water that dripped down and collected, or the current that flowed right on by—it never failed to calm his nerves. He would need that, as he emerged from a drain pipe and sloshed his way through the runoff to his encampment of rusted bins reinforced with cardboard and newspaper.

The blood had long stopped flowing, but the protrusions on his neck and hand had yet to retreat, which only served to draw out his torment. He was unable to secure any medical supplies before night fell; he would have to settle for ripping off pieces of what little clothing he wore and wrapped it around his injured skin.

Settling in for the night, the boy mentally went over his winnings for the day, all of which he'd
quickly eaten: a couple of potatoes, some unidentifiable greens, and a bag of rice. Not a great haul, but not a bad one either.

*Oh yeah,* The boy thought as he fumbled with the weird ring he'd nabbed from the robed gentleman. *Then there's this.*

He was still sour over that. On top of taking an object of seemingly worthless value, that man had given chase and forced him to use his Quirk twice on top of that. But if the man gave chase, then that had to mean this ring-like object held some kind of value, right? Maybe it would be useful for bartering, after all...

No matter. He would dwell on that tomorrow, after some well deserved rest. He nestled underneath some ratty blankets and closed his eyes, focusing on the methodical dripping of water. Only it was pretty hard to focus when a bright red light was illuminating your face.

The boy jumped to his feet as a vortex of bright red sparks opened before him and the man he'd stolen from casually walked through, staring him down. Before he could turn tail and run toward the drain pipe, the fire from the portal encircled around his fingers and he launched it, ensnaring the boy's legs in some kind of flaming whip.

"Unfortunately for you," The man said as he kneeled beside the boy. "I don't require a Sling Ring to open a portal."

*A Sling Ring?* So that's what he'd stolen. But why would it be required...?

The boy yelled out in defiance as the man roughly searched his pockets until he'd retrieved back his 'Sling Ring'. He panted and rubbed watery muck out of his wild, white hair as he noticed the man was still looking down at him, seemingly still unsatisfied.

"What more do you want!?" The boy screamed as he huddled, bringing his knees to his chin as he glared up at the man. "You got back your stupid ring, now leave me alone!"

The man did not budge.

"A-are you going to beat me? Kill me?" The boy gave an empty laugh. "Go ahead and take my life. It's all I have left to lose..."

"Where are your parents, child?" The wizened man asked as his demeanor calmed remarkably.

"...What parents?" The boy spat after a moment of silence. "I've been alone out here for as long as I can remember."

"You are injured," The man said softly, motioning to the boy's hand and neck.

"My Quirk does that whenever I use it," The boy responded, showing the man the bloodstained protrusions still jutting through his skin. "My Quirk...is Bone Spurs. I can manipulate the bones in my body, but...you see what happens when I do."

The man said nothing but instead reached for something in his back pocket, causing the boy to flinch. "Relax," He said as he showed the boy a bundle of cloth. "I'm just applying some clean bandages for you."

The boy struggled slightly as the man removed his dingy wrappings and secured the clean bandages in place. He was not being openly defiant...he was just mostly confused. Why was this man helping him? He'd stolen from this man! The boy was expecting a beating, not...whatever this was.
"...Kaecilius," The man said as he secured the last bandage around the boy's neck.

"What?" The boy blinked in surprise.

"My name," The man—Kaecilius—replied. "Surely someone such as you, who has known nothing but loss, has not lost something as precious as their name?"

"...Ikiji," The boy replied cautiously. "Ikiji Kokotsu."

"It is a good name," Kaecilius nodded as he released his fiery bonds around the boy's legs, freeing him at last. "It is a name befitting one that displays the kind of strength you do, struggling from day to day."

"What do you care?" Ikiji spat maliciously, wrapping his arms around his legs as he watched Kaecilius carefully. Kaecilius, however, remained unperturbed by his asocial demeanor.

"I care because you have a strength in you, boy," Kaecilius said plainly. "And it would be a devastating waste for such strength to die in these alleys or beneath a bridge."

"I'm not going to die here—"

"Eventually you will," Kaecilius quickly interjected. "The next time someone you steal from finds you down here, it's very unlikely they'll offer you bandages."

"And what would you have me do about that?" Ikiji mumbled, his eyes softening in abject sorrow. "This place...is all I know. Whether I like it or not, this place is...home."

"It doesn't have to be," Kaecilius said.

"...What did you say?" Ikiji asked, startled.

"This 'home' is a place where all you've known is loss and pain," Kaecilius said. "The place that I once called home was very similar to me as well. But I soon found a place where I could try to find meaning in my pain and loss. That place is 'home' to me now. And if you'd like...it could be your home, too."

Ikiji was staring up at the man in amazement. A place to call home? A place to find meaning in all of his pain and loss? Ikiji shut his eyes and shook his head. "You don't have to lie, you know," Ikiji said, eliciting a frown from Kaecilius. "You don't have to make stuff up just to try and make me feel better."

"Ikiji, I assure you—"

"How could you even say that to me with a straight face!?" Ikiji exploded with indignant anger, glaring daggers at Kaecilius. "How could you look at my predicament, and at me—" He held up his scarred, bloodstained hands. "—and tell me that I could possibly have something better!?"

Kaecilius was still and silent as Ikiji laid bare the frustration and bitterness that had enraptured his heart so thoroughly.

"I don't want to hear any of that!" Ikiji shrieked. "I don't need you feeling sorry for me!"

Ikiji raised his shaky hand, struggling to keep his fingers curled as he pointed at Kaecilius accusingly. "I. Don't. Need. Your. Pity!"

Kaecilius abruptly stood up, shocking Ikiji and fearing that he'd lash out in anger. The wizened man
instead swirled his fingers and opened a ring of fire around Ikiji, causing him to fall through the ground with a yell. He landed in the middle of a stone courtyard, looking around in shock at the sudden change in his surroundings.

"W-where am I!?!" He demanded as Kaecilius jumped through the portal, closing it behind him as he stood before Ikiji.

"You seem like the kind of child that needs to see in order to believe," Kaecilius said. "And I do hope you put as much effort into learning magic as you do your anger."

"Magic...?" Ikiji asked, dumbfounded.

"Yes, magic," Kaecilius responded as a sea of curious faces emerged from the various buildings surrounding them. "Welcome to Kamar-Taj, Young Ikiji."

Ikiji was...dubious, to say the least, when he'd first arrived at Kamar-Taj. Kaecilius had promised him a way to search for meaning behind the pain and grief in his life, how would parlor tricks help him with such a task?

Oh, how little he knew, and how large his world—and mind—became over the course of a single day. After witnessing the feats of the Masters of the Mystic Arts, and learning of other dimensions and realms, he was begging the Masters to take him in.

The Masters—Master Strange in particular—seemed more than eager to take the young orphan under their wings. Master Strange viewed Ikiji's ruptured hands with sympathy, as he'd suffered from somewhat similar injuries in the past.

"Listen, Ikiji," Strange had pulled him aside to speak with. "When you complete your training, you'll not need to feel powerless in regards with your Quirk anymore. This, I promise you."

Ikiji was loathe to admit it, but he'd cried many times during the beginning of his stay at Kamar-Taj. To be so readily welcomed and offered help by so many people at once...the feelings of sympathy and compassion were foreign to the boy, and he was slow to understand them at first.

One thing he was not slow to understand, however, was magic.

He was praised, by masters and fellow students alike, as a prodigy or the Mystic Arts. It came so easy for him, gathering energy in his hands, watching the fires he conjured dance between his fingertips like tiny fireflies—some said it came to him far too easily, and Masters such as Master Wong and the Ancient One herself began training him less and less, much to his smoldering frustration.

He ascended the ranks seamlessly from Novice to Apprentice and then from Apprentice to Disciple, far quicker than any student in the history of Kamar-Taj as Strange and Kaecilius noted.

And as Ikiji ascended further and further above his peers, so too did his desire for knowledge ascend to new heights. Knowledge was an equivalent to power, after all, and it was only with power that he could hope to understand the meaning of all the loss he'd suffered in his life.

Why had his parents seemingly abandoned him? Why couldn't he remember them? Why was he supposedly destined to a life of poverty, struggle, and torment?

And the more knowledge and power Ikiji attained, the harder it became for the young boy to find any reasonable answers to his existential queries. And the harder he struggled, the harder it became
to approach his fellow peers and his masters for help with these questions. The other trainees did not understand pain and grief like he did, and the only Master that he felt a semblance of kinship with was Master Kaecilius. Sure, Master Strange definitely knew pain—his hands were proof of that—but the man had not lived through pain like Ikiji had.

But Master Kaecilius was different. He was the only other man who was at Kamar-Taj for the same reason as Ikiji: to search for meaning in the loss inflicted throughout his life. Over time, Kaecilius had opened up to the boy about his own dejected past, about his son and wife whose lives were ripped away from him; lives that he was powerless to save.

Ikiji could see the similarities they shared: they both had lived lives marked with untimely suffering and pain, coupled with an inability to understand the meaning behind any of it. Their frustration only grew as their search for answers seemed impeded by the other Masters time and time again.

"You think the answers you seek lie within that ancient tome?" He recalled the Kamar-Taj librarian scolding him as he tried skimming through the Book of Cagliostro. "Such knowledge is forbidden to anyone beneath the Sorcerer Supreme herself."

But why? Ikiji thought to himself angrily as he paced back and forth across his barrack. Why would knowledge that he might need be deemed off limits? By what right did the Sorcerer Supreme and the other Masters have in keeping the answers he sought away from him!?

His frustration had reached a boiling point when he was approached one night by Master Kaecilius...along with a group of other trainees he'd recognized.

"Lucian? Adria?" Ikiji questioned two of the trainees when Kaecilius approached him slowly. "Master?"

"Do you remember what I offered you over two years ago, the day I brought you here, Ikiji?" Master Kaecilius asked quietly.

It would be hard for Ikiji to forget. "You told me...that this place would help me find meaning and truth in the suffering of my life. That it would help me find answers."

"And do you feel that you have found the truths and meaning you had sought out when I brought you to Kamar-Taj?" Kaecilius asked.

"...I haven't," Ikiji gulped and replied honestly.

"And if there were more that I could teach you...?" Kaecilius asked. "If there were answers we could retrieve—together—that others would seek to hide from us?"

Ikiji stared into his Master's imploring eyes with understanding as he nodded. "Then I would be eager to learn."

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Time. People were so quick to think in terms of good and evil, but really, time is the true enemy that Ikiji faced. It is time that kills everything, it is time that inflicts loss, it is time that imparts suffering unto all.

It all made sense now. The answer he and Master Kaecilius had sought for so long, an answer to the suffering they could not wrap their minds around until now. To be subject to time is to be subject to death and the suffering and pain that follows it.

To transcend death—to rise above the waves of suffering that wash over the world each and every
day—one must transcend time itself.

"And how will we accomplish such a feat, Master?" Ikiji asked hopefully.

"We will summon a timeless savior to our world, Ikiji," Kaecilius spoke resolutely to the boy and the rest of his fellow Zealots. "We will summon Dormammu and, with the help of a newfound ally of mine, merge our world with his Dark Dimension, a realm beyond time, where we will be gifted with life eternal!"

Ikiji could only grin at the prospect of life eternal in a world above time itself, and by merging their world with Dormammu's, it would ultimately save every person in the world from the horrific grip of death! Before the coming day was over, the very ideas of time, death, and suffering would be the thing of myths and legends.

And so into the library Ikiji, Kaecilius, and the rest of the Zealots snuck into, stringing up the Head Librarian that had denied them the answers they sought with their eldritch whips.

Without a word, Kaecilius reached behind him, pulling out his fabled Scythe Daggers—twin curved blades of magical might—andbrandishing them before the Librarian. Kaecilius gave the man an amused look before slicing both blades toward his neck with accurate precision and power, severing his head clean off his shoulders.

As the man's head hit the floor, Ikiji gave his Master a stunned look as he turned to face him unapologetically. Ikiji hadn't been expecting such swift brutality.

"A noble first sacrifice for our worthy cause," Kaecilius spoke firmly, easing any concerns and doubts the rest of the Zealots might've been having.

Further down did the Zealots go, until they finally reached their destination: the Ancient One's personal collection of times, hooked and chained in place. Kaecilius unchained several of the books, stacking them on the nearest desk before pulling down the book they truly sought: the Book of Cagliostro. Kaecilius mindlessly skimmed through page after page until the sketch of a certain symbol caught his eye.

"Gather around, my students," Kaecilius said as he set the book down, displaying the ritual for all there to see. "For with this spell we invite immortality into our realm."

In a circle the Zealots gathered, their hands in the proper positions to begin invoking Dormammu as they began the incantations listed in the Book of Cagliostro.

Some of the other Zealots seemed doubtful, weary, fearful even, but not Ikiji. As he recited the incantations, he thought back to how Kaecilius had introduced him to this world in the first place, how it was because of him that he could gain the power and knowledge he so desired, and now, standing alongside his Master, they could free themselves—the world—from the pain of time and its shadow of death.

He would place his complete and utter faith in Master Kaecilius. He was ultimately the only one he could rely on for answers, not the Ancient One, not Wong, not even Strange.

Ikiji winced as he felt the symbol of Dormammu burn into his forehead upon contact with the entity. It was small, fleeting, but it was enough. He could feel what power could be imparted into him through Earth's mystical defenses flowing into his body. But the power of the Sanctums kept the immense bulk of Dormammu's power—and the promise of a timeless eternity—at bay.

As the Zealots each inspected themselves and each other over the changes the ritual had bestowed
upon them, it had become startlingly clear what had to be done in order to complete the pact with Dormammu: they had to tear each of the Sanctums down in order for the Dark Dimension to merge fully with their world.

And they would've set out to accomplish this feat posthaste had the Ancient One and the Masters of the Mystic Arts not burst into the library right as the ritual ended, their magic and spells blazing with infuriated furor.

With a pained groan, Ikiji forced a piece of rubble off his head, his mind swirling in disorientation as he struggled to regain his senses. He thought he could make out the form of his Master in the distance, but..he couldn't be sure.

Ikiji stood up but quickly crouched back down as thick smoke smacked against his lips and nostrils, burning at his already irritated eyes. He coughed as he crawled his way through the debris of what remained of the library, using his hands to feel his way to safety.

His hands grasped what felt like a singed tunic, prompting Ikiji to tug on the person he'd somehow latched on to.

"H-hey!" Ikiji cried out as his eyes slowly regained focus. "Get up, we have to—!

His heart sank into depths of pain he'd dreamed of escaping for so long. "L-Lucian!" Ikiji tugged on the body of his fellow student, but to no avail. There was neither breath nor life to be found anywhere on Lucian's stunned, quiet face.

"No, no, no..." Ikiji whimpered as he saw Adria's body nearby, her once flowing hair and fair skin rent asunder by flame and debris. "T-this can't be happening...!"

Glancing around wildly as his eyesight returned to him, Ikiji could only yell out in anguish as he was surrounded by the corpses of his fellow practitioners, crushed under red hot rock or scorched by eldritch magic.

"Why!? Ikiji thought dejectedly as he sobbed over his allies' bodies. All we wanted was to escape the suffering of this world!

He looked across the barren room, through the pungent fog as he caught sight of his Master valiantly resisting the combined onslaught of Strange, Wong, and Clea. The Ancient One was nowhere in sight. His brows furrowed in unkempt anger and rage.

"What was so wrong with that, that you had to kill us all!?"

"Ikiji!" The voice of his Master rang out across the room, snapping the boy out of his rage. "You must flee from here!"

"No, Master!" Ikiji yelled back, trying to crawl his way over to him through the fiery ruins. "I won't leave you to die...! We were supposed to escape our pain together!"

"Promise after promise has been made to you, but so far every single one has been irreparably broken," Kaecilius mused as the Masters he faced down combined their magic into a flaming vortex that was beginning to suck Kaecilius into its swirling embrace. "I hope you will forgive this old man who disappointed you so, Ikiji."

Kaecilius bowled over as he swirled his fingers beneath him in a tight circle, resisting the pull of the vortex just a little while longer. Ikiji flinched as a fledgling portal opened up above him, and three
objects fell through into his hands: Kaecilius's Sling Ring and his twin Seythe Daggers.

"You must run, Ikiji," Kaecilius reiterated as he looked down at his student through the portal apologetically.

"But you're the one who led me this far!" Ikiji cried out tearfully. "How can I go on without your guidance!"

"You will survive this!" Kaecilius yelled. "You're a survivor, Ikiji Kokotsu! You will survive this and gain guidance from another!"

Ikiji slipped the Sling Ring on his appropriate fingers and tearfully looked back up at his Master one last time before turning to flee.

"You must find the ally I spoke of earlier!" Kaecilius yelled as the vortex's strength proved too powerful, pulling him into its molten core. "You must find the man...called All For One!"

Ikiji woke up with a start, panting wildly as the nightmare soon passed into memory. He grasped the arm of the chair he drifted to sleep in, keeping himself grounded and sure of his surroundings as his pulsing heart stilled and the adrenaline faded.

With a quick glance, he confirmed his location: he was still in the hovel that he, Shigaraki, and Kurogiri had appropriated for their upcoming operation. He heard a series of clinking noises coming from downstairs: undoubtedly Kurogiri, early bird that he is.

"You must find the man...called All For One!"

Ikiji shook his head, desperately trying to shake the nightmarish memory from the front of his mind. Over five years had passed since that day, and with the help and shelter of his Master's old ally, he finally felt ready to move against the Masters of the Mystic Arts.

The symbol of Dormammu, displayed proudly on his forehead, burned fervently as if in anticipation as the door into his room was knocked on and then summarily kicked open. Clad in his usual dark hoodie, Shigaraki strolled in and gave a strained smile to Ikiji with those appallingly cracked lips of his.

"Rise and shine, Player One," Shigaraki sneered. "Today's the big day."
Izuku vs. Ikiji

Chapter Summary

Ikiji and the League of Villains commence their assault on Kamar-Taj, culminating in a vicious showdown between Strange's newest pupil and his former, fallen apprentice.

"This is it?" Shigaraki asked in a tone that could be taken as either incredulous or insulted.

Ikiji looked over to his left and gave his impulsive comrade a passive stare as they grouped together for their assault. Kurogiri flanked Ikiji's right, and they had all donned blackened cloaks to somewhat mask their appearances and to avoid drawing attention to themselves.

Kurogiri because he valued anonymity and he was unwilling to draw curious eyes with his anomalous mist-like body. Ikiji because they couldn't risk any practitioners from Kamar-Taj recognizing him if any were stalking the streets of Kathmandu, which Ikiji knew they were frequent in doing. Shigaraki...well, he only ever wore a cloak to conceal himself whenever he was denied the embrace of Father, an order he was loathe to comply with, even if it had come directly from his precious 'Sensei'.

All three villains stood together, huddled close across the street from the door that gave entrance into Kamar-Taj. It was a dingy wooden door—more like a slightly sturdier plank bolted in place—and the building that it accompanied looked impossibly unimpressive, as squalid and unkempt as any other hovel within the confines of this Himalayan city. It was small, crammed in between two larger residences that seemed to crush it from both sides.

"I thought you said this place was a compound," Shigaraki hissed, his fingers twitching in agitation. Whether he was going to attack his neck, or a comrade, Ikiji was unsure. "This is just a hovel as nondescript as any other in this dump."

"It is a compound," Ikiji reaffirmed. "And make no mistake: that door is the entrance into Kamar-Taj."

"I assume the size discrepancy is the result of their...magic?" Kurogiri added to the conversation, his hesitancy at the end of his statement showing how even he, after all his time spent with Ikiji, could not fully wrap his mind around the very concept.

"Correct," Ikiji nodded. "The Masters of the Mystic Arts conceal themselves well wherever they go, and their compound and Sanctums are no different. What you see before you is merely an illusion, one designed to fool the ignorant passerby and the purposeful seeker alike. One does not comprehend the sheer size of Kamar-Taj until they have already entered its halls."

Ikiji leveled his glare directly at the door, recalling its interior and layout, it's winding stone corridors and passageways, its meditation rooms, burning with the stench of incense, and its expansive library, packed to the brim with the knowledge he had starved of for too many years now.

"Under normal circumstances, one does not simply enter Kamar-Taj," Ikiji continued. "They must be invited in, either from the inside, or by accompanying a Master."
"Well then," Shigaraki's hideously cracked lips twisted into his trademark ghoulish grin. "We'll just have to invite ourselves in, I suppose."

"Shigaraki," Kurogiri said warningly. "Have you already forgotten the plan Sensei and Ikiji laid out? The moment you play your role, you will be whisked back to the bar to await our return."

"Sensei's orders, I know," Shigaraki growled in annoyance, his fingers twitching more erratically now.

"If the door were to be forcibly opened, any intruders would be faced with the illusion of a barren hovel, denying them access to the compound within," Ikiji explained. "This is because of a magical seal laced over the other side of the door that protects Kamar-Taj—the Seal of the Vishanti."

"But there are ways to get around this Seal, as you have explained, correct?" Kurogiri inquired for affirmation.

"That is where Shigaraki comes in," Ikiji replied. "He will dissolve the door from the center just enough to expose the Seal. With my spatial magic, I can disrupt the seal just long enough for you to enter before the illusion is activated. Once you are inside..."

"Chaos reigns," Shigaraki finished Ikiji's statement, reveling in the thought of how much disarray and panic will be sown with the attack. The confusion as Kurogiri warped Ikiji and their waiting allies in from as many points as possible. How annoying, he thought, that he would not be allowed to contribute to the carnage directly, that he would be denied the sweet sensation of crumbling flesh falling between his calloused fingers.

"Make sure you warp me in first, Kurogiri," Ikiji turned to face the Black Fog, ensuring the mist man was nodding in confirmation. "Warp the rest of your allies in after, and avoid battle until I make my way to the library."

"All this meticulous planning just to check out a book," Shigaraki said with a grunt. "And I'm being forced into NPC status for this quest. This book better be worth it."

"This is all necessary for my plans, as well as the League's," Ikiji whirled on Shigaraki. "Or do you object to using what power is available to grant a semblance of new strength unto your Sensei?"

Shigaraki glowered at Ikiji, his fingers flexing and tingling in a mad dance of depraved digits, before he suddenly lunged. Not toward Ikiji, but rather, the door into Kamar-Taj, slapping his hand onto the center of the wooden surface is it crumbled without hesitation. Kurogiri's fog roared to life as it circled Shigaraki, ready to whisk him away to safety now that everything was being put into motion.

"Return me home then, Kurogiri," Shigaraki called out as Ikiji took a stance, the space around his hands rippling unnaturally as he prepared to pierce through the Seal. "I can't stand being around this Player One any longer."

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When the first shockwave rumbled through his barrack, Izuku didn't think much of it. He'd figured Rintrah—hulking behemoth of a fighter that he is—was merely giving it his all in training. That, or he'd triggered another landslide again outside the city while training in the mountains, which sparked Izuku's worry just a tad. Figuring it was ultimately nothing to get too worked up over, Izuku settled back on his wool sheeted bed, intent on resting before his training for the day.

It wasn't until a second, stronger, closer shockwave quite literally lurched him off his bed that he knew something was wrong.
Izuku face planted onto the stone floor as he flailed off the bed, picking himself up with a groan as he rubbed his sore nose and cheeks.

A chorus of panicked screams made Izuku perk right up, a flash of fear jolting down his spine. The entire barrack rumbled a third time, bits of dust and debris sprinkling down from the ceiling and onto his messy green hair as it groaned and shook. Izuku glanced out his sole window as he brushed the dirt off of him, a cloud of acrid smoke obstructing the morning light and his view.

What on Earth is going on!? Izuku thought as he rushed out of his barrack and down the long, dark, stone corridor without another thought. Approaching the door to the outer courtyard, Izuku could definitely hear a cacophony of whooping, yelling, the loud crashing of bodies, and the fiery whizzing of magic flinging through the air.

Izuku pushed the large door open as quickly as he could with all of his bodily weight. Forcing himself out into the courtyard, Izuku yelped and darted behind the nearest stone pillar as a burning substance landed right next to his feet. Izuku sweated in a panic as he glanced down to see what had nearly struck him, and he paled as he saw a flaming acidic blob burning through the stone tile.

Izuku peered out from behind the pillar; the courtyard was being overrun by nearly a dozen unruly figures whom he didn't recognize in the slightest. Many of his fellow practitioners were engaging the strangers in the courtyard, beneath the shade of the walkways, and Izuku could even see duels raging through the windows of the upper floors as well. Izuku caught sight of a sadistically grinning man covered in tattoos waving his arms around as his body pumped noxious smoke through the crowded courtyard. Only Rintrah, his bulky sparring partner, stood tall above the all-consuming smoke in the courtyard's center.

W-we're being invaded! Izuku realized with a pallor of dread washing over his face. Kamar-Taj is under attack!

Just then, a swirling black mass opened in the air in front of the boys' barracks and six people came pouring through the dark void before it dissipated back into nothingness.

S-someone is warping people in!? Izuku thought as he observed the new throng of people splitting up, three rampaging into the barracks and the other three bulldozing towards Rintrah. I've never seen a portal like that! Was that caused by magic...or from a Quirk?

"Aw, no need to be shy, little boy!" A deep voice drawled from behind Izuku, and before the boy could whirl around, his entire body was ensnared by slinking, constricting limbs that yanked him into the air. Izuku yelled out in pain as his assailant, a wide-eyed balding man with a horribly crooked smile, tightened his elongated arms around Izuku's body, crushing the breath right out of him. "I promise to make this quick!"

C-crap! Izuku tried moving his arms to conjure some magic—any magic—to help him, but they were firmly clamped shut within his attacker's coiling embrace. Another constricting squeeze made Izuku yell out, his pained shrieks drowned out by the crescendo of chaos unfolding all around him.

"Izuku!" A voice sounded out from the encroaching smoke, garnering the attention of both the boy and his attacker. From out of the fog, a bright glow emerged, followed by a long wooden object snaking out and wrapping around the constrictor's neck.

"W-what the hell—!?!" The constrictor choked out as the luminous object tightened around his larynx, forcing him to release Izuku as he struggled to regain his own breath. Izuku plopped to the ground on his hands and knees, taking in deep breaths as he rubbed his pained abdomen.
"Away with you!" Jack Holyoak leaped out of the fog with the extended Staff of the Living Tribunal already wrapped thoroughly around the thug's throat, its glowing segments churning out smoke itself as it burned into the man's exposed neck. With a roar, Jack lifted the man into the air with his end of the Staff and sent him crashing into the ground, the glowing segments erupting in a fierce burst of energy as Jack released all the magic he'd stored within its links. The constrictor wheezed out a puff of smoke and fell limp as he fell into unconsciousness.

"J-Jack!" Izuku sounded out with cough, Jack standing over him defensively as he caught his breath and shakily returned to his feet. "Thank you..."

"Don't thank me yet!" Jack yelled as the floor above erupted in a torrent of flames, debris from stone and wood alike raining down on them like tiny meteors. Izuku jumped to Jack's side, erecting a mandala shield to deflect the flaming rubble and the waves of heat undulating from the top of the building.

"Where is Master Strange!?" Izuku yelled out as the raining debris trickled to a halt, prompting him to lower his defenses for the moment.

"...He's not here," Jack said morosely after a second of silence. "It makes me wonder if this attack was purposely coordinated around his absence."

A flash of realization struck Izuku as he buried his hands in his pockets, desperately digging around until he pulled out a card. "I-I can summon him with this!"

"You can what!?!" Jack yelled out, his strained face threatening to erupt into a grin.

"Y-yeah!" Izuku nodded. "Master Strange gave me this card months ago, and I can use it to summon him if I were to ever find myself in danger!"

Wasting no further time, Izuku flipped the card over to the side displaying Strange's Sanctum Seal, circling his thumb clockwise around the seal as he'd been instructed to do and waited for...nothing to happen. No portal opened up beside him as Izuku was expecting and there was no Sorcerer Supreme in sight to right the chaos being strewn about. Izuku's heart sank, as did Jack's hopeful face.

"T-this doesn't mean anything!" Izuku cried out to Jack, gripping his shoulder. "He's on his way, I just know it! We just have to hold out long enough for him to reach us in time!"

"Then I'll go make sure the barracks are clear—" Jack began before a deep bellow echoed throughout the courtyard, followed by a deafening crash within the plume of smoke. Jack and Izuku looked over to see that the towering form of their bullheaded comrade was nowhere to be seen. The Mighty Rintrah had somehow been toppled.

"Rintrah!" Both boys yelled out together as they rushed through the smoke, using Rintrah's rumbling groans to pinpoint his position. Izuku nearly gagged as they ran through the fumes; they weren't suffocating by any means, by they sure were noxious and putrid.

Approaching Rintrah's downed, Izuku spotted three villains keeping their comrade restrained. One was a masked man whose fingers took on the shape of thick ropes, and he had used these to ensnare Rintrah's arms. The second villain was a loosely dressed woman with snakes for hair, and the dozens of tiny serpentine threads were wrapped around Rintrah's neck and biting into his face. The third villain was a portly man with a glue-like body, his viscous body plated firmly sticking Rintrah's legs to the ground.

"Get away from our friend!" Izuku roared as his magic flared to life in his hand. Jack similarly had
his Staff blazing once again with energy as they charged the villains keeping Rintrah subdued.

Izuku leaped atop Rintrah's body, magic mandala blazing in his hand as he brought it down above the female villain's scalp, severing all the snake-headed tendrils with a swift slicing motion. The woman shrieked in pain, clutching at the bleeding serpentine stumps on her head as she fled into the smoke.

Jack launched his Staff forward the rope finger villain, the glowing links extending as they caught all the rope-like appendages and burned them away with a sizzling snap, causing the masked man to leap back and shout profanities at Jack.

The glue body villain, his sludgy eyes widening at the sudden assault by the two boys, suddenly found himself hanging on for dear life as the green furred bull he had just helped bring down after a long struggle slowly but surely got back up on his two massive cloven feet.

"Guh, no hard feelings pal?" The goopy man gurgled out, earning a hard stare from the bull before being flung high into the sky and out of the compound with a rough kick by Rintrah, who kicked his feet several more times to rid his fur of the mucilaginous residue that was left behind.

"Rintrah, you okay buddy?" Jack asked as he inspected the wounds littered across the bull's body by the villains. Blood oozed from his face and arms, staining his green fur somewhat red, but Rintrah snorted defiantly, peering through the smoke with squinted eyes.

"Rintrah is fine," Rintrah bellowed before patting both Izuku and Jack on their shoulders. "Rintrah is thankful."

"Smoke is bothersome," Rintrah flared his nostrils and exhaled, momentarily displacing the smelly gas before it quickly filled back in the space around his nose.

"I have a solution for that," Jack said as he looked over at Rintrah. "You think you got enough energy in you for that spell?"

Seeing Rintrah nod in confirmation, Jack turned to Izuku, who appeared confused. "Stay behind us, Izuku!"

Jack and Rintrah stepped forward and, side by side, made identical hand motions and incantations as a vortex of energy whirled to life in their hands at once.

"Winds of Watoomb, build and swell, and swirl at our command...!"

Together, Rintrah and Jack extended their opened palms forward, the magic gathered in their hands thrusting forward in the form of a huge gale of turbulent energy that seemed to latch onto the rancid smoke and carry it high into the sky, clearing the courtyard in an instant.

Izuku crossed his arms over his eyes to shield himself from the roaring wind, but as he cracked his eyes back open he was stunned to see the courtyard clear of any obstruction. Every intruder and ally could clearly be seen now, and Izuku saw the tattooed man who was spawning the smoke with his Quirk gritting his teeth in frustration as new wisps of the fetid fog began rolling off his body. The fighting had only halted for a moment as villains and disciples alike collected their bearings before clashing against one another once more, though the tide of battle in the courtyard seemed to swing firmly on the side of the sorcerers.
"Smoke Man is mine," Rintrah snorted angrily as he prepped for a charge.

"Hold on, Rintrah!" Jack hollered, grasping his friend by the arm. "Before we go charging back into battle, we need to know where the Masters are!"

"Masters Minoru and Hamir went toward the entrance," Rintrah said, his fury and desire to jump back into the thick of it barely being constrained. "Master Wong went toward the library. Rintrah knows not where the other Masters are."

"Izuku, head to the library behind us and inform Master Wong of the situation out here," Jack ordered while keeping his focus on what was ahead of him.

"What!?" Izuku cried out in protest. "I can't just leave you both out here to fight for yourselves! I can fight—!"

"Don't get me wrong!" Jack yelled, stifling Izuku's protests. "You are...undoubtedly strong, Izuku. I can see the potential that Master Strange sees in you. But you still have a long way to go. If helping us is what you want to do, then help us by helping Master Wong secure the library and not letting any of these villains get to the tomes inside!"

Izuku trembled at the thought of any of the magical books escaping the confines of Kamar-Taj or being stolen away like the one he had taken nearly a whole year ago out of Strange's Sanctum. He had taken that book out of ignorance, but if any of these villains were to take one with their malicious intent...Izuku didn't even want to think about the repercussions.

Filled with renewed determination, Izuku nodded and bolted for the library as Jack twirled his Staff between his fingers and Rintrah readied his charge.

"You called dibs on Smokey, right?" Jack said with a grin. Receiving a snort for verification, Jack grinned. "Shall we, then?" Both practitioners charged headfirst into the throng of villains with a fierce battle cry, rallying their comrades together against the hapless invading thugs.

"You're on the wrong side of history, Master Wong," Ikiji spoke as he slowly approached one of his old teachers who stood in his path. Wong took a defensive stance before Ikiji, blocking his way toward the forbidden tomes of Strange's collection.

"The gall of you to return here, Ikiji," Wong uttered vehemently. "I always knew Strange made a mistake by untethering you instead of killing you all those years ago!"

"You cannot halt the march of progress," Ikiji said as he pressed his palms together, readying his attack."You can impede it...you can slow it, like you did us...but you cannot stop this. This is all inevitable."

"We will see about that," Wong spat as his fists burst with the bright energy of the Ruby Rings of Raggadorr.

Ikiji slid his hands apart, conjuring a translucent shard that shimmered and rippled the very space around it. Admiring his handiwork for little more than a moment, Ikiji raised his blade directly at Wong. "Such a shame that you will die before this world ascends to its rightful place."

"Heretic!" Wong yelled as he and Ikiji charged each other at once. Stout though he may be, Wong was swift and agile and could pack one hell of a punch. He crashed his Ruby Rings against Ikiji's Space Shard, resulting in a mystical impasse as Master and fallen Apprentice struggled against one another.
"I will not let you succeed...!" Wong rasped as he began pushing Ikiji back with his sheer bulk. "I know what you have come for! The Book of Cagliostro will not fall into the hands of a Zealot once more!"

"Very intuitive, Master Wong...!" Ikiji growled back, struggling against Wong's might as the tip of his Space Shard pressed against his rings but could not pierce them. "But as I said...this is all inevitable!"

Ikiji suddenly ceased his pushing and leaned far backwards, allowing the bulk of Wong's momentum to barrel over him. A swift knee to Wong's gut knocked the breath out of the portly man and he suddenly found himself thrown across the room before he could properly recover.

"Now Kurogiri!" Ikiji suddenly yelled out as Wong was dazed from the blow. The space near the back of the room erupted in a back swirling mass, reforming into the vague shape of a human as it approached the forbidden shelf, perusing the books calmly before locating its target.

"The Book of Cagliostro," Kurogiri said as a foggy appendage reached out to undo the chains and take hold of the tome. "This will serve the League of Villains well."

"No...!" Wong cried out as he sent a fiery lash hurtling toward Kurogiri's body. The lash stopped just short, however, and Wong cried out in agony as Ikiji's Space Shard pierced into his right shoulder, prompting the man to fall to his knees as the Shard faded and lost its tangibility.

"Seems it went well," Kurogiri said, regaining his composure after nearly being entangled by flame. "Shall we depart posthaste?"

Ikiji, however, seemed none too rushed to leave. "You know, last time I was here this place was in ruins," Ikiji said, slowly stepping toward Wong. "Fire. Debris. Oh, and how could I forget the corpses strewn about?" He stared down at the writhing form of Wong and pressed his palms together, conjuring a second Space Shard to finish the deed. "I think that look suits this place." Ikiji raised the Shard, about to bring it down to end Wong's measly life—

"STOP!"

Ikiji ceased his attack and looked toward the stairs, perplexed at the voice that interrupted him. A green-haired boy, slightly younger than him from the looks of it, jumped down the stairs to confront him.

Announcing your presence with a desperate shout and jumping down to confront a man who just defeated a Master that bested him as quickly as he was bested by this stranger was probably not the best idea, but Izuku Midoriya would have been loath to simply stay hidden as one of his Masters was struck down.

The man—no, boy—who looked only slightly older than himself turned to face Izuku with a studious glance. Izuku was met with jagged white hair, a face full of freckles much like his own, and piercing, cracked eyes that made Izuku take a step back in intimidation. It was as if the skin around his eyes was a mere shell, and the silver cracks belied a violet monstrosity lurking just beneath its human host.

"A new face," The boy said with a slight chuckle. The black mist man—Izuku assumed he was the one ultimately responsible for warping the villains into the compound—stood silent as he observed this interaction. "The Masters of the Mystic Arts sure do like to get them young, don't they?"
“Step away from Master Wong!” Izuku yelled, trying his best to marshal his courage against what he knew to be a superior opponent.

The white-haired boy seemed none too keen to comply and instead pressed on with more questions. “With those red robes you must be an Apprentice, correct? You are very brave to stand against one who bested a Master before your very eyes. I would commend you if I knew your name.”

“M-Midoriya,” Izuku said with a blink of surprise. “Izuku Midoriya.” He didn’t really know why he was entertaining the questions of this villain, but if the other boy was not going to make an aggressive move against him, then he would be fine with that.

_I just have to buy time until Master Strange returns...!

“Kokotsu,” The boy said with a mocking bow. “Ikiji Kokotsu at your service.”

“G-get away from Master Wong!” Izuku repeated a second time, sliding into a combat stance and steeling his nerves as best he could against such an eerily calm and calculating opponent.

Ikiji, however, seemed either unimpressed or unworried. Or perhaps both. “Cease your hostility, Izuku Midoriya. Your fighting will get you nowhere, and it certainly will not stop this.”

“This? This?” Izuku said shakily, motioning toward the cacophony of fighting happening right outside and above their heads. “I don’t even know what this is! What was the point of all this!”

“This? This is the end, Izuku,” Ikiji spoke. “And the beginning. The many becoming the few, becoming The One.”

“...You’re not making any sense,” Izuku said, shakily maintaining his stance as he shot a look toward the black mist man in the back of the room, who seemed motionless and unwilling to intercede in any capacity.

“The One being the benevolent Dormammu, Izuku, the entity that will save this world from the time that enslaves it,” Ikiji explained, causing Izuku to stand still in shock. The shock did not go unnoticed. “...You know who I speak of, don’t you?”


“Very good, Izuku,” Ikiji said with a pleased grin. “I am pleasantly surprised that revolutionary minds so similar to mine are still cultivated in such a stagnant place such as this.”

“My mind is nothing like yours,” Izuku said fiercely.

“No, Izuku, you are a spitting image of myself from just a few years ago,” Ikiji rebuked. “Naive, willful, full of promise...and broken.”

Izuku shook and looked down at his scarred hands, something that Ikiji picked up on as well, raising his own scarred hands for Izuku to see. “Sorcerers like Strange are people who like to collect broken things, Izuku. We are all led to Kamar-Taj with the promise of being healed, of being given renewed purpose, but all he and the other Masters have to offer us are parlor tricks and the joke that is their morality. They try to make us think in terms of good and evil, but time is the true enemy, time is what enslaves all who walk this Earth, time is the source of all our suffering and pain, time is an all-consuming insult that kills all that we hold dear!”

Izuku stepped back in the middle of Ikiji’s rant as a lone tear cascaded down the zealot’s cheek. He’s
"Izuku," Ikiji continued. "I don't wish to rule or ruin this world, I wish to save it, to have this world
join alongside so many others in the Dark Dimension, to be free of time and suffering and pain alike
for all eternity as part of The One."

"You say time kills what we hold dear, but what about the people you killed!?" Izuku retorted,
recalling all the carnage he saw just moments prior, how his friends were fighting for the very lives
all throughout the compound. "What about the lives you've ruined in your so-called quest to save the
world!?"

"All worthy sacrifices for my noble cause," Ikiji said with a callous smirk.

"You're insane," Izuku uttered, tightening his stance.

"You will eventually see things my way," Ikiji responded, extending an open hand toward Izuku.
"Once you side with me."

There was a moment of silence that befell the room as Izuku studied Ikiji's open hand, an earnest
invitation that he felt was sincere and honest.

Not that Izuku bought it for a single second.

Swirling his hand, Izuku opened a portal beneath Wong's crumpled form and let him fall through,
away from the soon-to-be confrontation between him and Ikiji. The black misted figure tensed up,
preparing to leave or enter the fray, Izuku wasn't sure.

"...Leave us, Kurogiri," Ikiji hissed dangerously as he glowered at Izuku. The black mist—Kurogiri,
Izuku was sure to remember that name—nodded and disappeared in a dark swirl of his own bodily
mass, vanishing with the Book of Cagliostro in tow. Izuku was none too pleased to see the forbidden
tome whisked away by a villain...but he had bigger problems to worry about right now.

"If you will not help me rid the world of its pain," Ikiji said, sliding his palms together. "Then I will
rid you of yours."

Both Apprentice and Zealot alike surged themselves with magic: Izuku summoned his shimmering
mandalas over his fists and squared off against Ikiji who conjured his translucent Space Shard that
rippled through space like an existential error.

Izuku took a defensive posture as Ikiji took the approach of a direct assault, battering the boy's
mandalas repeatedly with his strange, rippling blade. It was a magic unlike any Izuku had ever seen
before and it frightened him a great deal.

"Your mandalas will not repel my blade like Wong's Ruby Rings did!" Ikiji yelled as he gave a
piercing thrust, nearly splitting Izuku's shield down the middle with the edge of his Space Shard.

Izuku gasped as the tip of Ikiji's blade stopped short mere inches from his face, and the energy that
constituted his defenses began to fade as Ikiji destroyed them utterly. Thinking quickly, Izuku
recalled what energy remained to his hands, coalescing it into the fiery whips he was familiar with.
He swiftly wrapped the fiery lash around Ikiji's arm, locking his elbow so Ikiji could no longer flay
him with his blade.

With his opponent all but disarmed for the time being, Izuku quickly capitalized with a few well-
aimed punches to Ikiji's side, hitting flesh twice but striking something incredibly hard upon the third
punch, causing him to recoil in pain. Ikiji yanked himself free of Izuku's sizzling bonds and he
whirled in the air, bringing his blade up in a slicing motion to cleave Izuku in two.

Izuku recovered from his pain, however, and nimbly took advantage of Ikiji's spin by lashing him across the face with his flaming whip when he turned back around, knocking him to the floor. Izuku adopted his defensive posture yet again as Ikiji launched himself back up on his feet, showing Izuku the extent of the damage inflicted on him.

"Y-your face...!" Izuku exclaimed.

Latched onto Ikiji's cheek was a singed, bony plate that soon popped off his face and landed on the floor with a clatter, exposing perfectly unharmed skin where Izuku's lash had landed.

"Yes, that is the work of my Quirk: Bone Spurs," Ikiji said with a confident grin. "My training here at Kamar-Taj helped me hone the power of my Quirk as well as my magic. It is no longer the...debilitating curse on my body that it once was. So hit me with your strongest punch, land what paltry magic you possess against my indomitable body. You are little more than a paper tiger before a storm, Izuku."

I-I need backup! I can't beat him on my own! Izuku thought as he turned to escape up the stairs, sweat pouring down his forehead and back as the pallor of dread swept across his body. He didn't make it very far.

Ikiji waved his palms before bringing them together, stretching them toward the staircase as the entire room seemed to creak and groan. Izuku raced up the staircase, but realized he wasn't getting closer to the upper floor. Glancing down as he raced upward, Izuku was stunned to see the floorboards of the stair rapidly moving downward as if it were an escalator. Izuku was essentially running in place as the descending floorboards kept him for ascending; it might have looked comical were it not for the evil sorcerer trying to skewer him.

Resigning himself to his fate, Izuku ceased his running and allowed the moving floorboards to carry him back down to the floor before Ikiji. All of the floorboards seemed to alter in shape as sharp ripples tore them out of their stillness, rocking the numerous bookshelves in the room to and fro. The walls, too, seemed to ripple and warp as if they possessed the consistency of waves prepped to crash against the shoreline.

"W-what are you doing...?" Izuku dared to ask, horrified by the display of magic before him.

"You see now the strength that Dormammu grants me?" Ikiji boasted, causing the walls and ceiling to violently convulse with a squeeze of his hand. "I can bend space as easily as you might bend rubber!" The ceiling suddenly grew taut and regained its solidity with another flex of Ikiji's hand. Horrifying Izuku yet again, Ikiji suddenly leaped up to the ceiling and flipped himself upside down, landing on it as if it were the flat floor. "And his power allows me to nullify the effects of gravity on myself as I see fit!"

Ikiji took off in a sprint toward Izuku, closing the distance before the boy could muster up a strong enough shield. He coated and closed his hand into a bony plate before crashing it against his mandala, punching straight through and landing a solid direct hit onto Izuku's cheek. Grasping the boy's shoulders as he recoiled in pain, Ikiji violently tossed him into the ceiling before letting him collapse back down to the ground.

But Ikiji's onslaught did not end there. Raising his hands as if framing for a picture, Ikiji rotated them to the left and to the right, causing the room to rotate and spin as his hands did. Izuku tumbled helplessly as he rolled from floor to wall to ceiling and back to floor repeatedly, his body slamming into sliding bookshelves and being pelted upon by airborne books sent flying from Ikiji's spatial
magic. Ikiji righted the room suddenly, sending Izuku's battered body and the splintered and rent remains of the room's bookshelves crashing back down to the floor.

Still, Ikiji was not yet satisfied. He would make this boy suffer for his insolence.

Ikiji raised his hands and tilted them down, the room mirroring his hand movements as it, too, began to tilt. Izuku clawed for something to grasp onto as he slid helplessly against the wall, what was now the bottom of the room. With a yell, Izuku rolled to the side, just barely avoiding a falling pile of hard cover books and splintered shelves before Ikiji suddenly tilted the room yet again, this time tilting his hands up as the room began to shift once more. Izuku jerked as he suddenly found himself falling, falling, directly into the bony grasp of Ikiji, whose osteal hand clenched his throat in an iron-like vice.

The room suddenly jerked back to normal, shelves, books and desks all guided by gravity as they crashed to the ground once more in abysmal heaps. Ikiji slammed Izuku into the ground and knelt down, digging his knee into the smaller boy's gut to keep him firmly in place. Ikiji released Izuku's throat and swiftly conjured a Space Shard with his palms, staring down at his sibling student with pitiful disdain.

"It's a real pity," Ikiji said as he raised his Shard above Izuku's head, readying it for the killing blow. "I can see in your eyes that you've experienced a great deal of pain and suffering in your young life. You have my sympathies, Izuku Midoriya, but not for long, as your pain will soon be over in an instant."

"Fade into the timeless void of Death!" Ikiji yelled as he brought down his wrathful Shard upon Midoriya's bloodied head...only to have his arm and blade entangled and halted by a dark green fabric of some sort, keeping the tip of his piercing Shard hovering an inch above Midoriya's eye.

"You have my sympathies, Ikiji Kokotsu," A deeply stern voice sounded from behind him, laced with a boiling fury that he hasn't had the misfortune of sensing in over five years. Ikiji dared to spare a glance behind him as a levitating Stephen Strange bore down on him furiously, blasting him away from Midoriya with a burst of ethereal lightning. "But not for long!"
Chapter Summary

As Doctor Strange fends off Ikiji, a desperate Izuku attempts to use the Eye of Agamotto to retrieve the Book of Cagliostro back from the villains—with nearly disastrous results.

Chapter Notes

This chapter has references to other fanfics both on here and/or FF that have influenced me and inspired me to make this one.

Ikiji let out an agonizing yell as the lightning collided with his backside. The force of the spell's impact sent him skidding to the floor, momentarily stunning him as his forehead hit the ground. Shakily picking himself up, Ikiji turned his head to assess the damage: his golden and brown robes were completely singed off his backside and his skin was blistered and burnt, smoking slightly from the heat of Strange's furious bolt of energy.

Even though I managed to plate my entire backside under a thick layer of bone at the last second, his lightning still seared right through it! Ikiji thought incredulously, wincing in pain as he turned to face Strange. Damn him...!

Strange was kneeling over Izuku's bloodied body, his fingers pressed against the boy's neck and checking for a pulse. A wave of relief washed over the man's visage, though it was short-lived. The indomitable fury returned with a vengeance and Strange hovered ominously in the air before Ikiji. His scarred hands pulsed with what had to be powerful eldritch energies.

The deadly focus in Strange's eyes made it absolutely clear: there was no more room for words, no monologues to be had, no rights to be read, no pleas to be heard. Izuku's sprawled, dazed body on the ground was all the motivation Strange needed.

"Feel the searing sagacity of the Seven Suns of Cinnibus...!" Strange placed his fingers together before slamming them to the ground. Streams of crimson heat and plasma violently erupted from the stone tiles and spiraled straight towards Ikiji.

No...! Ikiji defiantly steeled himself as he flexed his hands to mount a defense. I've come too far to fall now!

Yanking his hands up, Ikiji caused the ground between him and Strange to bend upward, directly in the path of Strange's incinerating spell. To Ikiji's shock, the rushing bolt of plasma collided with the curved ground and ricocheted right off. Strange curved his fingers, as if guiding the path of the spell, as it bounded off the room's walls, floor, and ceiling. The plasma blast suddenly bounded to the wall behind Ikiji and he could see where its trajectory would lead to next.

No time...! Ikiji raised his right arm in front of his body to shield himself as best he could. "Ivory
Aegis!" Ikiji shouted as the skin of his arm, shoulder, and upper torso sprouted thick, whitened layers of bone.

The rushing plasma enveloped its target and Ikiji let out a gut wrenching scream as Strange's mystical might burned straight through the bone plating on his arm and shoulder—his Ivory Aegis, his strongest defensive technique. The blast propelled Ikiji across the room and the young man thrashed in agony as the spell's fizzling embers dug into his skin, littering his arm with horrific third-degree burns that exposed his body's shifting flesh and bone.

Strange gave him little time to further inspect his injuries. In the span of a single blink, Ikiji found himself waylaid by a dozen copies of the Sorcerer Supreme, each one ensnaring a portion of his body with the Crimson Bands of Cyttorak.

*The Images of Ikonn...!* Ikiji recalled that there was such a spell that could allow a Master of the Mystic Arts to create temporary mystical duplicates of themselves to stymie an adversary.

His body thoroughly encased in a thick cocoon of crimson bands, Strange and his duplicates heaved and lifted Ikiji into the air before slamming him against the ceiling and ground repeatedly.

Ikiji grunted in pain after the seventh pummel, gritting his teeth in frustration. With his hands bound by his side, he could not manipulate magic or the space around him to his advantage. But he still had his Quirk, he realized.

Tightening his focus and digging in deep, Ikiji could feel every bone in his body rattle, the muscles and tissues layered above them instinctively parting for the coming eruption.

*Bone Bloom...!* Ikiji grunted as dozens of pointed bone spikes exploded out from all over his body, piercing through the crimson bands restricting his movement. His body adopted a devilish appearance as he tried wrenching himself free, with bone spurs jutting out from his cheeks and two long spikes emanating from his forehead, emulating horns almost.

Strange remained undeterred, marshaling his strength and whirling the still entangled zealot around the room with one hand and conjuring an orb of fire with the other. Tossing the orb onto the ground, Strange gave a yell as he chucked Ikiji toward it, causing it to burst into a raging conflagration upon impact.

Blood flowed from Ikiji's mouth as the fire ran its course, burning the crimson bands off and roasting his torso beneath them. The tips of his bony protrusions cracked and broke when he was slammed into the ground one final time.

*Master Kaecilius...!* Ikiji's mind raced as the fire obscured his sight, recalling the memory of his master succumbing to a fiery vortex. Am I going to die here? Death isn't how I wanted to free myself from suffering...! *All For One!* Were the last five years not enough!? I don't want to die...!

A pounding of the head. A shrill ringing in the ears. A blurriness of the eyes that almost mirrored inebriation. Izuku Midoriya groaned and coughed his airways clear as he slowly but surely regained his senses.

*What happened?* Izuku wondered as he managed to roll himself over on his stomach. Something fluid ran down his face as he absentmindedly raised his forearm to wipe it off. *Blood? Is that...my blood?*

Now he could remember. He opposed Ikiji...and was thoroughly thrashed by the zealot's superior magic skills and Quirk for daring to do so.
The room lit up with the brilliant orange and yellow hues of a raging inferno, catching Izuku's attention as the boy looked over toward the commotion. His eyes widened at the sight: Strange, his sensei, thoroughly dominating Ikiji and pummeling him silly with his sorcery, scorching him with merciless fire. The rage being exuded by Strange was...frightening, to say the least.

Master Strange—his rage is like a cold yet righteous fury, Zelma's words echoed in his brain.

His judgment against those that would abuse dark magic or threaten Kamar-Taj...is swift and oftentimes merciless, Casey's voice also piped in, shaking Izuku to his core.

"S-Sensei!" Izuku yelled out as he forced himself to his hands and knees, resisting the urge to collapse where he was.

Doctor Strange turned his eyes toward Izuku's struggling form before leaning back to dodge a fiery lash hurled his way by Ikiji, whose charred body was finally freed of the crimson bands. The flaming serrated edge just narrowly missed Strange's neck, instead catching and slicing through the band of the Eye of Agamotto, cutting the necklace loose from Strange's body and sending it clattering to the ground. Strange immediately renewed his assault on Ikiji, constricting his burned body with crimson bands of intensified strength before he could even think about launching another sneak attack like that again.

The Eye...! Izuku scrambled over to it as Ikiji violently tugged against Strange's bonding spell, yelling belligerently. Izuku shifted his trembling hands through singed wooden splinters and crumbled stone as he took the relic in his grasp.

A relic that can reverse time... Izuku clutched the Eye as he did something he would make a habit of in time, much to the dismay of his friends and loved ones: he came up with a recklessly foolish plan.

If I use this to reverse time, Izuku thought. Can I undo my mistakes? Can I...bring the Book of Cagliostro back? Can I use this to beat Ikiji and undo all the damage done to Kamar-Taj?

And so Izuku mustered his resolve and pooled what strength he had, picking himself up and facing the back of the room, where the dented iron wrought shelf containing the rest of the forbidden tomes lay, battered and forlorn. Izuku slipped the Eye over his neck, reconstituting its ripped lace with a fiery strand as he ran the particulars of the ritual through his mind.

As if sensing his intent, Strange whirled toward Izuku just as he opened the Eye with the proper finger movements.

"Izuku!" Strange yelled, struggling to bring Ikiji's thrashing to a halt. "Stop that this instant!"

"It's okay, sensei!" Izuku replied faintly, already in the midst of weaving the reversing ritual. "I-I can bring the book back! I can beat Ikiji with this! I can fix everything with the Eye!"

"No you can't!" Strange shouted. "Don't you remember your lesson from before!? You cannot control the power of the Time Stone—!"

Strange's protests never reached Izuku's ears as the Eye activated with its resplendently emerald sheen of luminescence. The swirling green bracer materialized over Izuku's right arm and he began shifting his hands from right to left, the reversal starting slow but accelerating with each passing moment.

Izuku winced as splinters from the desk cut against his cheek, and he narrowly ducked under a myriad of tomes as they flew through the air, returning to the reformed shelves from whence they rested. Izuku struggled to maintain his balance as the ground shook and warped around him; he
remained singularly focused on the spot where he knew the mist man—Kurogiri—would reemerge.

"I-zu-ku-!" Strange's warbled voice pierced through the spell; Izuku spared a glance back and shuddered as Strange and Ikiji's bodies were oscillating in place with otherworldly vibrations. Izuku could barely recognize their visages in the distorted mess.

Izuku groaned as a grueling strain suddenly surged throughout his body, his grasp over the Eye loosening as it began shaking out of his control. Seeing the space before him open up and the blackness of Kurogiri's body reappearing, Izuku foolishly fought through the unearthly stress bearing down on him to finish his retrieval of the Book of Cagliostro. It would be one of his greatest regrets for years to come.

"I see the book...!" Izuku muttered through grit teeth, shifting his hands for the next part of the spell. "Now...for a Time Slip!"

Izuku planned to use the Time Slip technique he read to pull the tome out the temporal reversal that he was weaving, so Kurogiri would not be able to whisk the book away a second time. His senses began to dull rapidly as he reached out to the tome, rotating his palms to free the book from his time shifting.

"Just a little bit further...!" Izuku yelled before he was suddenly bathed in the light of endless emerald threads. The floor beneath him gave way and Izuku plummeted into darkness.

"And what did the Book of Cagliostro say...about the dangers of performing such a ritual?"

Where am I? Izuku weakly thought as he struggled to even crack his eyes open. He was sinking and yet he felt...weightless. He could feel his blood pumping but he felt...lifeless. What is this place?

A Void. An infinite vacancy of swirling dark green hues that Izuku Midoriya was slowly sinking through. All around him were countless shimmering threads that stretched on as far as his eyes could see, emitting bright green incandescence as they floated motionlessly in the void.

"Do you not know the risks that could've been incurred with what you did?"

Izuku glanced at each of the threads he sunk by curiously through glazed eyes. These threads...where did they come from? And where did they go? Did they have a beginning? Or an end?

"Unstable branches in time!"

Izuku parted his lips to gasp as he bumped into a thread as he sank, only to have his vision engulfed in a bright light. He saw...himself? And All Might was in front of him. He was on his knees, sobbing inconsolably before All Might's withered form. The hero made no move to help Izuku back on his feet, but his lips were moving. Izuku couldn't hear what he was saying. But he could just somehow tell that whatever his hero was saying was what was causing the Izuku he was seeing to weep tears, presumably of joy.

Bumping into another thread as he descended, Izuku was graced with a bright flash, followed by another vision. A very different vision. This time he saw himself clad in a suit of armor decked out with plating and hydraulics that he couldn't even begin to describe. Beside him was a peculiar pink-haired girl as they both tinkered on the suit. He caught sight of a banner before the vision faded into obscurity that read Project: Indestructible.

Another thread, another vision: in this one he saw himself working with various equipment and training tools in a large warehouse-looking gym. The Izuku in this vision set down his duel Escrima
sticks and bowed to an older man overlooking his training. Wait...was that—? Was that the Pro Hero Eraserhead? The vision faded and a glimmer of excitement surged through Izuku's otherwise lethargic body as he drifted down through the void. Personally training with a Pro Hero...how cool that world must've been.

And so Izuku plunged further down into the timeless abyss, bumping into thread after thread and witnessing vision after vision of worlds and possibilities he had never even thought probably beforehand. Some inspired hope, including visions of a boxer Izuku, an Izuku struggling to be a hero despite possessing a Lovecraftian Quirk, and an Izuku in Quirk Intelligence operating under the name Agent Deku of all things.

Other visions, however, were far less appealing...and far more terrifying: an oni masked killer violently ripping people apart and putting their mangled corpses on gruesome display for the authorities, an Izuku engulfed in impenetrable shadow, dark hands crawling over him possessively, and plenty of visions where he was simply...dead. No more.

"You could've been stuck reliving the same moment over and over, or worse, never having existed at all!"

So many threads to see. So many worlds and visions—endless possibilities—to be shown. What did it all mean? Was any of that real? Were all those truly roads he could have taken, paths splintering from the lane of his life like splayed threads from an undone bundle of yarn?

It was all so...tiring to think about. There's no time to think about it. In fact, there's no time at all. So why not rest on it Izuku? Just close your eyes...that's it. Let the darkness cradle you in eternal slumber as you drift forevermore down through the timeless quintessence.

No more threads, Izuku thought drowsily. No more visions.

All Izuku wanted was to drift and sleep. Unfortunately, he would be denied his desire for dormancy, at least if the blemished hands reaching through the somnolent sea to grasp his tunic had anything to say about it.

Izuku awoke on the broken stone floor with a thrashing motion, gasping for breath as if he were going to asphyxiate at any moment. Throwing wide-eyed glances around the room to regain his bearings, Izuku saw that he was still in the rubble of Kamar-Taj's library. Casting a glance toward the back of the room, Izuku saw the Book of Cagliostro splayed open on the floor, though it gave him little comfort as it appeared that there were now rips and tears in the book that were not present before.

With a sinking feeling in his gut that something had gone horribly askew, Izuku looked ahead of him. A panting, winded Doctor Strange was walking away from him and toward Ikiji, who was on his knees and firmly secured by a multitude of blazing lashes. Surrounding him on all sides were Zelma, Jack, and Rintrah—each appeared bruised in some capacity but they remained steadfast in their imprisonment of Ikiji. Jack and Rintrah in particular were glaring down at Ikiji with marked disdain.

It shocked Izuku to see just how terribly Ikiji had been ravaged by Strange's magic. His once golden brown robes—what remained of them anyway—were singed black. A bloodied scar had appeared on his face, spanning from underneath his left eye down to his jawline. His right arm and shoulder looked positively charred—goodness, he's been burned down to the bone!—from Strange's fire. And yet...Ikiji seemed unperturbed by the carnage, smiling up at his former teacher with an eerie calm etched on his burned face.
"Congratulations," Ikiji coughed. "You managed to save him after all. How...sentimental."

"It's over, Ikiji," Strange panted as he stood before his fallen student. "You and your band of thugs have lost. Victory is ours."

"Victory?" Ikiji asked, his lips twitching as he grinned. "What you call 'victory' is nothing more than the opening salvo of a war five years in the making! You and the rest of the Masters planted the seeds of this conflict all those years ago, and me?" Ikiji paused to chuckle. "I am merely what has blossomed. The fruit of your foolishness."

Strange raised his hands, as if preparing to dispatch Ikiji once and for all with a finishing spell, to strike this zealot down and cleanse the Earth of his darkness...but he hesitated.

"Pity will stay your hand again, even after all these years?" Ikiji asked softly. "You couldn't bring yourself to kill me last time, either."

"How I despise that look in your eye," Ikiji continued. "How I loathe that your pity holds your hatred back. How disappointing."

The ground beneath Ikiji suddenly oozed with black fog that began pulling him into its depths, the fiery bands constricting him severed as the stygian mist cloaked his body in shadow.

"I will wipe off that pitiful face and instill in you a look of terror, Strange," Ikiji hissed as the dark fog sucked him in. "One day...one day..."

Ikiji Kokotsu was gone, whisked away by the swirling black vortex, leaving behind a bristling Strange and several nonplussed practitioners behind in the rubble of his machinations.

"He's gone," Izuku cried out weakly, eliciting a grimace from Strange. "I-I'm so sorry sensei, I thought I could—"

"No, you didn't!" Strange yelled as he briskly turned toward the boy, approaching him with barely restrained indignation. "You were not thinking at all, Izuku Midoriya!"

Izuku flinched, the Sorcerer Supreme's ire welling up a great surge of guilt and regret within his pounding chest. He was unable to look his teacher in the eye and so he let his gaze drop to the floor.

"I allowed you to be tempted by your curiosity when you first used the Eye of Agamotto," Strange said, towering above Izuku like a figure bestowing judgment. "So that you might understand the severity of using magic so recklessly!"

"Especially magic that you know you can't properly control!" Strange continued, kneeling down to Izuku's level. "You knew you lacked the skills to sufficiently harness the power of the Eye, yet you chose to do so anyway in a foolish attempt to retrieve the Book of Cagliostro!"

Izuku bit his lip and trembled as the magnitude of his actions began to dawn on him. He clenched his hands into fists, shaking with frustration.

"Did you think I would be upset with you that the tome was stolen?" Strange placed his hands on Izuku's shoulders, a voice of anger melting away into one of solace and relief. "No tome in this library is worth more to me than your life, Izuku."

Izuku gasped as Strange embraced him in a tight hug and the boy could feel the weight of his worry that he had inadvertently placed onto Strange's shoulders. As upset and disappointed as Strange may have been, Izuku could feel that his fear and anguish over almost losing his student exceeded that by
several orders of magnitude.

"You are far too reckless and self-sacrificing for your own good," Strange lamented.

"I'm sorry," Izuku sobbed as he sank into his teacher's embrace, whimpering against the fabric of his tunic. To risk one's own life for the lives of others...that was the virtue that All Might had spoken of, but Izuku now realized he had gone too far today, with almost disastrous repercussions. "I'm so sorry."
In the aftermath of the League of Villains' attack on Kamar-Taj and a standoffish encounter with agents of S.H.I.E.L.D., Izuku finds his summer training cut slightly short. Meanwhile, a direly wounded Ikiji is chided by the leader of the League for his failures, preparing the fallen zealot for the next operation they've got planned.

It was not until after their consolatory embrace had ended and Izuku got the last of his apologetic tears and whimpers out of his system did the boy realize the high-strung silence permeating the room. Not just the room, in fact: the silence was hanging dreadfully over the entirety of Kamar-Taj. There were no more commotions echoing in from above ground, out in the courtyard. All of the fighting had ceased by this point. Not even an occasional cry or yell reached Izuku's ears, strained as they were.

*Does that mean we've won?* Izuku thought hopefully. Strange's sudden arrival and triumphant takedown of Ikiji certainly made it seem so. Ikiji himself had been whisked away by the mist man—Kurogiri—presumably, driven from Kamar-Taj while the Book of Cagliostro remained within the grasp of the Masters of the Mystic Arts. Against all odds, and in spite of Izuku's reckless ploy, had victory been assured?

Rintrah meandered over to the tome, the heavy clops of his hoofed feet reverberating throughout the annihilated archives. He passed by Strange and Izuku without a word, patting his gargantuan hand on Izuku's shoulder before moving to scoop the Book of Cagliostro off the floor. Despite the force nearly causing him to collapse again, Izuku still felt somewhat relieved by the gesture; it was simply Rintrah's way of showing he cared, he supposed.

"Master," Rintrah beckoned Strange to come over as he thumbed through the tome, which definitely looked worse for wear after Izuku's stunt. The boy wondered if he'd inadvertently caused the sudden deterioration by overextending with the Eye. Rintrah had skimmed through each and every page before suddenly coming to a halt, his eyes narrowing considerably as he called for Strange. When Strange approached Rintrah's side, the sorcerer could plainly see what the issue was: a page from the book had been ripped out.

And not just any page, either: it was the page containing the ritual necessary to contact the entity Dormammu. Strange stroked his chin patch, contemplating this newest revelation. It appeared as if Ikiji and his allies were not entirely unsuccessful after all.

"Oh my gosh," Izuku said ashamedly, appearing by Strange's side and peering into the frayed interior of the book. "Did I cause that?" Strange could see that he, too, recognized which page was missing.

"No, your overuse of the Eye is not the prime reason for the page's disappearance," Strange said, turning to Izuku with a quizzical look. "Izuku...what was the last thing you remember before losing control of the Eye of Agamotto?"

"I saw the warping man reappear," Izuku said, straining his mind to remember. "I used a Time Slip to pull the book out of the reversal. I saw the book hit the floor and then..." Izuku trailed off, not
feeling entirely comfortable discussing his descent through the Timeless Aether.

Strange seemed to get the gist of it and pressed no further on Izuku's memories. "What happened," Strange continued with his explanation. "Was that your spell ended the moment you fell out of this realm. The mist man, panicking as Ikiji and I resisted the spell's effects, opted to merely rip the page he sought out instead of taking the whole book again."

"Then we can still get the page back, can't we?" Izuku asked, hope in his voice. "You're much more skilled at using the Eye, right, sensei?"

Strange paused, as if pondering Izuku's request, before offering his student a gentle smile that belied a deeper sense of foreboding. "I think the Eye has been used enough for one day, Izuku."

"But—! But—!" Izuku tried protesting.

"What I said about the book moments ago also extends to that page as well," Strange quickly interjected. "We have more pressing priorities to attend to: namely, seeing to any injured within the compound."

As if on cue, the other practitioners present hastily made their way up the stairwell to carry out Strange's prerogative; Rintrah opened a portal due to his size. Only Izuku remained, clenching and unclenching his hands and stewing in what Strange could only assume was self-doubt.

"If you're worried about those villains stealing the ritual, then don't be," Strange said, gripping Izuku's shoulders again to console him. "Whatever it is Ikiji and his band of ilk are planning, he will fail. We will see to it eventually."

Seeing a modicum of ease returning to Izuku's face, Strange nodded and turned to open a portal of his own. "You've...been through more than most today," Strange said, speaking as if he were trying to choose his words carefully. "Take some time to rest here and then return to your barrack if you can, I don't want you doing any sort of drudgery today."

Izuku plopped down onto the nearest and most comfortable pile of rubble the instant Strange vanished on the other side of his portal, shifting what splinters and debris he could out of his way as he sat. He tenderly slid his fingers over his face, grimacing at the realization that most of what blood there was had dried by now. Izuku spent the next several minutes using salivated fingers to rub as much grime off his cheeks and forehead as he could.

As Izuku surveyed what remained of the decimated library, he wondered how the rest of Kamar-Taj fared by comparison. He had only seen a glimpse of the carnage in the time he'd spent out in the courtyard, and he silently worried if there were those that were seriously injured, or worse, dead. Despite the unmitigated thrashing he'd received from Ikiji, he'd only received bruises on his chest, sides, and legs, and cuts on his scalp and cheeks that had already clotted. Given the state of disrepair the library was now in, Izuku felt that he'd gotten off easy.

Leaning back, Izuku felt something light pressing down on his sternum. Looking down, he saw that he still had the Eye of Agamotto draped around his neck. Izuku summarily yanked it off of him as his shame and guilt returned with a vengeance. His immediate instinct was to throw it as far away from him as physically possible, the sheer rashness of his actions still weighing fresh on his conscience, but he resisted the urge to.

As he gazed at the relic, Izuku thought back to Strange's reluctance to use it himself to retrieve the lost page. His reasoning for dealing with higher priorities such as the wounded seemed solid, but Izuku couldn't shake the feeling that there was something...more to it. It almost seemed that Strange
wasn't *unwilling* to do it as much as he was somehow *unable* to do it. But he was surely more skilled in using the Eye, right? He was Sorcerer Supreme, after all.

*It's precisely because he's more skilled that he knows not to try using it,* Izuku suddenly realized as he studied the relic. Temporal paradoxes, time loops, the threat of existential erasure—Izuku heard all those warnings from Wong and Zelma when he'd first toyed with the Eye, but there must still be other risks to using the Eye that he was still unaware of. Risks that Strange, being Sorcerer Supreme, would definitely be privy to.

"I...shouldn't even be holding this anymore," Izuku said aloud as he forced himself to his feet, pushing through the slight pain in his legs. Izuku slowly but surely made his way toward the very back room, where the pedestal he'd plucked the Eye from the first time stood forlorn, a tower amongst the surrounding rubble.

"A wise choice," A familiar voice of sternness sounded from behind Izuku, causing him to jump right as he set the Eye down.

"M-Master Wong!" Izuku exclaimed as he spun around to face the man.

Wong looked exhausted, though he looked far better than Izuku, as his head and face remained mostly unblemished and uncut. The shoulder where Ikiji had stabbed him was buried under bandages and his corresponding arm was secured in what looked like a hastily constructed arm sling. Izuku was just glad to see that Wong was still alive.

"I was just..." Izuku gave one final glance at the Eye of Agamotto before turning back and bowing before Wong. "Returning what I should have never used to begin with. I understand now how foolish my actions have been. I apologize for all the trouble I have caused!"

"Ease yourself, Midoriya," Wong said with a curt nod, one side of his lips curling upward. "What matters is that you are alive and that you seem to have learned from your foolishness."

"I'll never use the Eye again, I swear..." Izuku muttered.

"I'm sure you will," Wong retorted, standing by Izuku's side. "Strange and I recognize your potential, as do the other Masters as well as your peers. In time, as your skills grow, I'm sure Master Strange will see fit to train you in properly using the Eye."

*Until then, no need for anymore curious Apprentices to be wielding the powers of an Infinity Stone,* Wong ruminated. *You are not yet ready to know of such things, Midoriya.*

A slight fluttering noise interrupted the tense silence and a dark fabric-like object suddenly emerged from the shadows of the room. Izuku yelped as it zipped in their direction, flapping and fluttering in the air ecstatically around him.

"I see your new cloak made it through the battle unscathed," Wong observed as the seemingly sentient cape swooped down before Midoriya.

*E-eh? "My new cloak?"* Izuku blinked and examined the floating cape closely. In terms of appearance and sentience, it was practically identical to Strange's Cloak of Levitation aside from its size and color. It was far smaller than Strange's—designed specifically with his bodily dimensions in mind, Izuku figured—and instead of being a bright red, this cape was a beautifully deep shade of emerald green, complimenting Izuku's hair and eyes perfectly.

The cloak floated closer to Izuku and extended one of its tips toward him, as if offering to shake his hand.
"Hello there—" Izuku chuckled and reached a hand out to shake the cloak, only to have the mystical garment immediately nuzzle against his cheek before hastily securing itself to his backside, clasping firmly over his shoulders and around his neck. Izuku instinctively tried to yell out as the cloak's sudden movements caught him off guard, only to be soothed back into a state of calm. Much like Strange's cloak, this cloak also offered an ethereal warmth that proved quite pacifying.

"Did you think that because you were denied the use of Strange's cloak during training that you would be left without a relic of your own to use?" Wong asked with the slightest tinge of amusement in his voice. "Not so, Midoriya."

Before Izuku could formulate a response, the sound of a gong sounded nearby. The dark timbre caused both Wong and Izuku to tense up momentarily. Both had panicked thoughts running through their minds. Was another attack commencing?

"That came from the antechamber," Wong uttered, summoning a portal to the building with his uninjured non-dominant hand, a feat Izuku was particularly impressed by.

Wong and Izuku rushed through the portal and into the compound's antechamber, the large vestibule that served as the formal entrance into Kamar-Taj. The smell of singed wood and stone was as prevalent, if not more so, than in the library. The entrance, to their surprise, was wide open and Strange was standing before it, speaking rather firmly to someone not immediately visible to them.

"I will not repeat myself, Pandora," Strange said agitatedly. "You and your agents will not be allowed entry into Kamar-Taj!"

"Sensei!" Izuku exclaimed as he and Wong rushed out together to see what the commotion was. Wong's expression visibly soured when he saw who Strange was warding off at the front door, while Izuku seemed somewhat intimidated.

Hunkered out on the road before Kamar-Taj's secret entrance were several black trucks, blocking the street from all other commuters, on foot or not. The people that said trucks had ferried before them all donned black and blue suits with white belts and white boots. The faces of all but one of them were covered in masks, rendering them unidentifiable. Emblazoned on each of their chests was a symbol that Izuku recognized instantly.

*That crest—the encircled eagle,* Izuku thought in surprise at the sudden turn of events. *What are Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D. doing at Kamar-Taj!?* The Strategic Homeland Intervention, Enforcement, and Logistics Division was known the world over as the head authority of all things related to Quirk Enforcement and basically controlled the bureaucracy of all things Pro Hero-related. But why were they here...?

"Ooh, 'sensei'?!" The sole unmasked person, a dark skinned woman with her hair tied in a bun said amusedly, eyeing Izuku mischievously. Her suit, unlike the other agents, was sleeveless, and her arms were covered in many black runic tattoos. Izuku also noticed that the woman had a gnarled wand tucked into her whitened belt. "I see you've picked up a new student, Steve-o, and as expected it looks like he's been put through the ringer here."

"So how about it, kid?" The woman asked, sauntering over to Izuku and staring him down. "Think you can talk your 'sensei' into letting us in to do our jobs?" A smirk graced her face. "Simon Says—"

"Don't even think about it, Pandora," Strange all but growled.

The woman—Pandora—only giggled in response, giving Izuku a curt bow. "So grumpy, isn't he? But alas, where are my manners? Pandora Peters, Director of W.A.N.D. at your service!"
"W.A.N.D.?” Izuku asked questioningly. Was he mistaken by the emblems they were wearing?


Sorcerers? Izuku was bewildered. *So these people can all use magic, too!? To think that such a department existed under S.H.I.E.L.D.!!*

"Geez, Wong, spoil all the mystery for the little guy why don't you?” Pandora rolled her eyes. "By the way, you didn't hurt that arm of yours rolling around while hibernating, did you?"

"For your information," Strange quickly interceded before Wong could get off anything more violent than a growl. "Kamar-Taj was just attacked. Though I think you already knew that, didn't you?"

"S.H.I.E.L.D. sends its most clandestine department to offer help and you rebuke us with skepticism?” Pandora said mockingly. "You know, Director Fury gave me this assignment himself!"

"My skepticism stems from the fact that you only bothered showing up *after* the battle had already concluded,” Strange said unwaveringly. "And no department of S.H.I.E.L.D. would be this organized if they didn't have a bevy of information ahead of time."

"You knew Ikiji was planning to assault Kamar-Taj,” Wong said accusingly.

"We received intelligence informing us that he was somewhere in Kathmandu,” Pandora corrected. "While we were aware of the possibility of an attack, we had no way of confirming this, let alone knowing it would take place *today."

"You could have informed us regardless," Strange angrily retorted. "I can assure you none of this would have happened if you'd been forthcoming about what you knew."

"You're one to talk about being forthcoming, Strange," Pandora retorted right back with a wry smirk. "With how many secrets the Sorcerer Supreme is burdened with and whatnot."

Strange was silent for a split second before striding toward Pandora. Everyone present bristled somewhat as Strange leaned in to whisper softly to her. "If you and Fury had known ahead of time what Kaecilius and All For One were planning that day over five years ago, would you have intervened or waited for afterwards like you did today?"

"...I guess we'll never know, Steve-o,” Pandora whispered back.

Scowling, Strange turned heel and walked back toward Wong and Izuku. "We'll allow you to take what intruders are still alive," Strange said. "But you will still not be permitted entry."

"A reasonable compromise, unfortunate as it still is," Pandora replied, signaling to her agents to make preparations for prisoner transport.

"U-um, excuse me?” Izuku timidly called out. "Director Peters? Are you really a sorceress that can use magic?"

"Oh, what a silly, cute, little student you've picked up, Steve-o!" Pandora cried out, approaching Izuku and pinching his cheek, which promptly sent the boy scurrying back to Strange's side, face flush with timidity. "And to answer your question with another question: did you really think Kamar-Taj had a monopoly on magic?"
"Sucks to see your stay here cut short, Izuku," Jack said dolefully.

A week had passed since Ikiji's incursion and what villains that were captured by the Kamar-Taj practitioners were transitioned into W.A.N.D. custody—bureaucrats with wands, as Wong so unflatteringly called them. Given all that had transpired, Strange deemed it necessary to wrap up Izuku's training at Kamar-Taj early and return him home before the second term of his final year of Junior High began. Thankfully, Strange gathered Izuku's closest acquaintances for a proper farewell. Rintrah, Jack, Zelma, Casey, and Wong had all come to see Strange and Izuku off.

"Izuku grown strong," Rintrah snorted, crossing his arms in front of him. "Izuku grow stronger, hear?"

"We didn't get much time one-on-one while you trained, so next time you come around here you'll have to show me your skills in a duel, Izuku!" Casey yelled.

"And make sure you read through all your spells completely before trying any of them out!" Zelma chided.

"Don't disappear for over a year again," Wong chimed in, his statement undoubtedly directed at Strange. "I'll be checking in regularly to ensure you're still carrying out your duties as Sorcerer Supreme."

"Oh ye of little faith," Strange muttered, swirling open a portal back into his esteemed Sanctum.

"Everyone," Izuku choked out, a few wayward tears dripping down his properly patched up cheeks. "I...I don't even know how to express how grateful I am to all of you. You didn't just show me, you taught me. You didn't just tolerate me, you accepted me. You didn't just make me feel welcomed, you made me feel as if I belonged here. You guys...are the first real friends I've made in a long time."

"No tears, Izuku," Casey said gently, lightly punching Izuku's arm. "This ain't goodbye, you know! You'll be back eventually!"

"R-right!" Izuku scrubbed away any tears that threatened to run free, looking up at all those that had helped him get one step closer to attaining his dream with red, puffy eyes filled with determination. "I promise! Next time we meet I'll definitely be accepted into U.A.'s Hero Course!" Snatching up the bags carrying what belongings he'd brought with him, Izuku deftly whirled around and quickly strode through the portal with Strange in case he failed to keep the rest of his tears subdued.

As the portal closed, Izuku glanced around the Sanctum—virtually unchanged and untouched since he was last here several weeks ago.

"Damn you, Drumm," Izuku heard Strange mutter. Looking over in his direction, Izuku saw Strange reading a note on a nearby desk. The note was situated next to a plate of what looked like...voodoo doll cookies? "And I was looking forward to introducing you to my apprentice, too."

"Cookies?" Izuku asked inquisitively, scooping one off the plate and sniffing it. They still seemed warm.

"Hmm?" Strange turned his attention to the plate. "Oh, they're safe to eat. Or at least, they should be anyway..."

The cookie Izuku was holding dropped back onto the plate with a crumby clatter.

"Anyway," Strange said, stuffing the letter into a pouch for later. "We should probably get you home as quickly as—"
"Can you teach me that lightning spell of yours next?" Izuku abruptly asked, garnering a quizzical look from Strange. Izuku fidgeted under his gaze.

"What...brought this about?" Strange asked his student.

"I just..." Izuku sighed. "So far my repertoire only includes portals, shields, and fire lashes. All fairly standard skills for sorcerers. And none of it seemed to help me against Ikiji. He outclassed me in every way."

"And you want to be prepared for if—or when—you face him again, correct?" Strange guessed correctly as Izuku nodded in confirmation. "Offensive spells like the Bolts of Bedevilment will flesh out your magical repertoire immensely, but you must remember that the versatility of magic resides not just in the sheer number of spells that exist but also in the sheer number of ways the skills you already know can be used."

"So I'm not utilizing my current skills to their fullest offensive potential?" Izuku said, scrunching his brow in contemplation.

"If what you told me is how you truly believe, then yes," Strange said. "I'll teach you the basics of the Bolts of Bedevilment but we'll also round out what you already know on top of training you on how to battle with your Cloak of Levitation effectively. These last seven months will be significantly harder than your first eleven. With your school work on top of all this, will you be able to handle it Izuku?"

"Yes, sensei!" Izuku exclaimed as Strange prepared to open a portal directly to the boy's home. "Wait a moment!

"Hmm? What is it, Izuku?" Strange asked, hands slowing to a halt.

"Um...there's something I've been meaning to ask you ever since the day Ikiji attacked," Izuku said, fidgeting with his fingers as he looked up at Strange. "Were you...not able to use the Eye of Agamotto to bring the stolen page back?"

Figured something was amiss, did you? Strange thought as he released a ragged sigh. "To move through time is to move through space, Izuku. When you manipulate time in a given area, whether it be forward or backward, the space of that area is also inadvertently manipulated as well."

"Does that have anything to do with the spatial paradoxes Zelma warned me about?" Izuku asked.

"No," Strange shook his head. "The dangers I am referring to has less to do with paradoxes and more to do with rupturing. The nearly irreparable rupturing of the very fabric of space-time, Izuku."

Izuku gulped. "Is that what happened to me when—?"

Again, Strange nodded solemnly. "You slipped through a rupture of your own unwitting creation and fell into the Timeless Aether, a void between all possible times. You see, as skilled as I may be with the Eye, there is only so far back or forward one can go before the space containing the flow of time being manipulated starts to become...distorted. Beyond repair, even. And that conundrum only gets multiplied when targeting people capable of warping their bodies through space, Izuku."

"I get it," Izuku said, eyes widened in realization. "Since I was focusing the reversal spell on returning the warp Quirk user back into the library—"

"It only destabilized your control over the Eye that much quicker," Strange finished for Izuku. "When I deem you ready for training with the Eye, I will teach you how to properly focus—"
"I don't think I should ever use the Eye of Agamotto again," Izuku dejectedly interjected.

Strange fell silent, studying the doubt and disillusionment on his apprentice's face. "Fret not, Izuku," Strange said at last. "We needn't worry about using the Eye for a good while. In fact, the only thing we should be concerning ourselves over is how to explain what occurred to your mother."

"Y-you intend to tell her everything that happened!?" Izuku exclaimed.

"When I convinced your mother to allow me to train you, I was fairly forthcoming about the risks involved," Strange said. "That is a level of transparency that cannot be so willingly discarded. Especially not for a woman like your mother who worries about her son so much."

Izuku, crestfallen and anxious as he was, knew that Strange was right. They would simply have to tackle this newest, unforeseen obstacle together and simply be honest with his mother.

"But not when you're all wound up." Strange spoke as if he read Izuku's mind. "Take the day to relax. I will inform your mother that you'll be coming home early and then we'll see what tomorrow brings, alright?"

Izuku nodded and quietly carried his bags upstairs to the second floor guest room, feeling slightly less apprehensive about facing his mother tomorrow.

Strange whisked himself away into his personal room as soon as Izuku disappeared from view. Collapsing at his desk as the exhaustion of the past week's events suddenly caught up to him, Strange steeled himself and opened his personal laptop to construct a short, succinct e-mail for Inko. Strange paused as he skimmed through his contacts and saw Toshinori's at the top of the list.

_I'll have to inform Toshinori of what transpired at Kamar-Taj as well_, Strange mused as he thought about how best to begin his e-mail before pausing again. Toshinori had sent him an e-mail himself just a day ago. Curious, Strange opened the electronic correspondence.

_Stephen, my boy!

I have found my successor!

Sincerely,

Toshinori Yagi_

Strange saw that there was a single image file attached to the e-mail. Wasting no time further, Stephen opened the file with a quick click. He studied the boy pictured for a good several minutes, mentally ruminating over Toshinori's pick.

"Seems I am not the only one who picked an interesting protégé," Strange chuckled. "The day your new student meets mine will be an intriguing day indeed, Toshinori."


All For One sat in his chair, hooked up to his many medicinal machines as he silently perused through the book laid out before him, illuminated solely by the glaring monitor before him. The monitor cast a sickly green luminescence across an otherwise pitch black room, deepening the decrepit shadows on the man's disfigured visage.

Flip.
All For One turned the page again, this one briefly appearing blank like all the others he'd looked at before the kanji seemed to bleed onto the page from nonexistence, filling the sheet with dark knowledge. As he read, the man's fingers gingerly ran across the now disgusting contours of his face, sliding underneath where his eyes had once been present. Every day for five years straight did he seek an escape from the torment that followed his now pitiful state; every night did he awake at least once calling out for the annihilation of the two men who'd put him in such a state of bodily tarnish.

"All Might! Stephen Strange!"

But now...his years of patience and meticulous preparation were beginning to pay off. Tomura, despite all the work still needed, was developing quite well in his growth. He was steadily drawing allies to the League's cause, with his sensei pulling the necessary strings when required, of course. Their underground machinations were generating a profit and were out of the periphery of Pro Heroes, sorcerers, and the ever watchful eye of S.H.I.E.L.D. agents alike. And then there was the boon that was Ikiji Kokotsu...

"Sensei," Kurogiri spoke reverently as he warped into the room. His fogged form was barely visible in the sanctuary's darkness, though his piercing yellow eyes gave away his position in the shadows. "Ikiji is...sufficiently recovered to see you now."

"Thank you, Kurogiri," All For One spoke suavely, as he usually did. "Send him in."

With a quick bow, Kurogiri seemed to sink into the darkness as he mostly vanished, a swirling mass of warping shadow replacing where he once was. The limping form of Ikiji Kokotsu slowly emerged before the vortex dissipated entirely, leaving the last zealot alone with the greatest evil.

All For One didn't turn to face Ikiji, nor did he rush to acknowledge him in any way. Instead he flipped, flipped, flipped through his ancient book some more. He didn't need to face the bandaged boy, he was already aware of the extent of his injuries: third-degree burns on his right arm, a scar on his face, second-degree burns all over his backside—contusions, concussions, abrasions, and lacerations aplenty.

"You knew I wasn't ready," Ikiji finally spoke. His tone wasn't accusatory, though that was most certainly his intent. He was frustrated beyond belief and Shigaraki repeatedly taunting him by saying he got 'steamrolled' wasn't helping in the slightest.

"Correct," All For One said plainly, turning another page of his tome. "I knew you weren't fully prepared."

"Then why did you agree with my plan if you knew I still didn't stand a chance against Strange!?!" Ikiji cried out in frustration. "I was so sure of my victory, yet securing the pages of the ritual we needed mostly came down to sheer luck...!"

"Do you know what the Montesi Formula is, Ikiji?" All For One asked out of the blue. The man continued when he heard nothing but silence from the boy. "The Montesi Formula is said to be the key to eradicating the world of all its vampires. I'd heard that it was scribed in this tome, yet it's nowhere to be found. I can say the same for many other pieces of knowledge I've searched for in these pages, yet they seem to be irreparably lost to time. Don't you find it ironic? A book of nearly infinite knowledge...and it's missing pages."

"And what does that have to do with me?" Ikiji inquired. "Or with what happened at Kamar-Taj?"

"The Darkhold may be missing pages but that has not stopped me from using it for my own benefit,"
All For One explained. "I may be missing variables—knowledge—but that will not prevent me from carrying out my objectives. I am not crippled by uncertainty like you are."

"I am not crippled—!"

"What would you have done if I hadn't supplied your foolish operation with my unconditional support?" He asked Ikiji. "You would have done nothing. You would have bid your time, and bid your time, and bid your time until you would have been out of time. Is it any wonder why I forbade Tomura from participating in an operation doomed to fail?"

"We didn't fail," Ikiji growled. "I secured the ritual for you—"

"Your plan had two explicit objectives in mind," All For One interjected. "Secure the ritual and kill Doctor Stephen Strange. One out of two is the equivalent of fifty out of one hundred. That's a failing grade, Ikiji."

Ikiji Kokotsu said nothing, stewing in his own frustration.

"Ease yourself, Ikiji," All For One said, one side of his lips curling upward. "What matters is that you are alive and that you seem to have learned from your foolishness."

"...What of the ritual?" Ikiji asked cautiously.

"I take it you want to perform it right away?" All For One asked. "Is this you assuming you have every variable accounted for? Is this a methodical Ikiji or an arrogantly overconfident one?"

"Master Kaecilius sent me to you for guidance, not quandaries," Ikiji growled.

"And guide you I shall," All For One replied. "Just as I am guiding Tomura to his true purpose, you, too, shall be guided to yours. What you lack—what you need—to fulfill that purpose is an empirical mind and a willingness to act despite a risk of failure."

"Empirical?" Ikiji asked confusedly.

"An...experiment," All For One clarified. "To test this ritual. To see for myself if it would be wise to perform such sophisticated magic on one such as I, who is not proficient in the mystic arts whatsoever."

"And do you have an idea in mind?" Ikiji asked.

"Patience, Ikiji," All For One gently chided. "That day is still a few months away and you will need to be sufficiently recovered in order to carry out this task. And though not specific, I have indeed selected a target. Tell me: have you ever heard of Project Pegasus?"
Chapter Summary

Disturbed by recent events and becoming increasingly distracted during training, Strange Izuku a day off and allows him to explore the Stark Expo which is currently underway. Meanwhile, Ikiji further spreads the corruption of the Dark Dimension to an unsuspecting soul...

"Are you ready, Izuku?" Strange asked as he stood before his apprentice in the Sanctum's foyer, his back to the staircase. "We're still going to keep it small, staying within the confines of just my Sanctum for this exercise."

"I'm ready!" Izuku said with a firm nod. He was clad in his red apprentice tunic with his personal Cloak of Levitation clasped firmly around his shoulders.

Nodding back, Strange raised his right arm and gave a swift chop to the space before him. The air seemed to shatter like glass and Izuku's ears were filled with the sound of violent cracking. Izuku remained calm and stood his ground as the cracks spread outward, enveloping the entire visible room before churning and fading like a kaleidoscope that stopped working. Izuku knew the transition posed no danger to him or Strange, but phasing into the Mirror Dimension never ceased to fascinate him.

"The Mirror Dimension is the perfect training ground if you wish to prepare for an opponent like Ikiji," Strange said as he began hovering in the air. "In here I can manipulate space as readily as he can in the real world."

Strange raised two fingers and the entirety of the foyer began to undulate and ripple as if it had adopted a strictly fluid-like state. The ripples extended outward, with Strange as their epicenter. The foyer began to grow and stretch, the steps of the staircase trickling endlessly like a wild stream to the floorboards, which also burbled tumultuously.

Izuku steeled himself and focused his mind, syncing himself with his cloak as per Strange's instructions and allowing it to feel his crystal clear intent. Izuku jumped into the air as the burbling floorboards reached his feet and he managed to sustain levitation, his green cloak fluttering lightly behind him.

It's as I suspected, Izuku thought as he watched the ground beneath him wash away in a tumultuous sea of swirling tile. Ikiji can only spatially manipulate solid matter but not the air itself! If I remain levitating in the air then that should negate his advantage over the terrain!

"Feeling safe, Izuku?" Strange's voice sounded out from somewhere within the turbulent maelstrom he had created. Snapping back to attention, Izuku saw his master was nowhere to be seen; he had already hidden himself in the disorienting maze. "You may have long since figured out a limitation to spatial manipulation, but victory is by no means assured. You know the rules, Izuku!"

"Right!" Izuku responded. "Stay off the ground no matter what!"

The foyer had expanded rapidly and the staircase alone looked as if it were hundreds of feet wide,
the elongated steps cascading down like stone rapids. Seemingly far behind him, the door into the Sanctum loomed large as if the Sanctum were now home to giants. The faraway walls and ceiling all rippled like water blown by wind, and Izuku knew he could be struck by anything and at anytime. And Doctor Strange was concealed in this dimension...somewhere. Waiting to be found, or waiting to strike.

Figuring he could maximize his advantage in the center of the room, Izuku flew in that direction, keeping his eyes and ears peeled for any sudden movement, though that was easier said than done when everything was seemingly moving.

"Placing yourself in the very center of the room?" Izuku could hear Strange's voice, but couldn't pinpoint where it was coming from. "Not necessarily a bad strategy...if I were an amateur."

Izuku paled as the cascading staircase suddenly surged upward, rising far above him like a tiled tidal wave, nearly scraping against the ceiling as it accelerated back down.

"But placing yourself in the dead center of the room makes you equally susceptible to an attack from any direction!" Strange proclaimed as the stone wave crashed down, forcing Izuku to hurriedly fly through the tunnel to avoid capture.

_Holy crap!_ Izuku thought as he instinctively zoomed toward the dining room, which also seemed to expand alongside the foyer and the rest of the Sanctum, its entryway ominously arching wide in the air as Izuku approached it. *Master Strange is going all out!*

Izuku yelped as a pillar of wood erupted through the wave as it crashed behind him, bisecting the tunnel cleanly as he flew through it. Izuku glanced back and suppressed a yell of terror as similar pillars sporadically burst through the tunnel and slammed through the other side. Whether they were primarily for capturing him or simply slowing them down, Izuku was unsure, though he knew they were definitely obstructions.

Too bad he thought they were only behind him. An 'oof' was all Izuku could groan out as he collided with a pillar that emerged directly before him. Stunned from the impact, Izuku was sure the wave would crash down and close the tunnel around him entirely, but his cloak had other plans. As if sensing its master's distress, the cloak seemed to take control as it wrapped itself around Izuku's body and sped over the pillar, zooming toward the narrowing end of the tunnel with increasing acceleration.

"T-thanks!" Izuku stammered as he regained his composure, trying to take control back from his cloak. "I'm fine, so you can s-slow down now! Cloak!"

Izuku yelled as he tussled with the cloak for control, bumping into the sides of the tunnel repeatedly before twirling and crashing to a halt meters from the tunnel's shrinking exit. Izuku and the cloak lunged forward only to be blocked by the sudden appearance of Stephen Strange levitating into view at the tunnel's end, hands crackling with lightning.

Decelerating to a full stop again, Izuku hurriedly raised his own crackling hands against Strange...and hesitated. Strange frowned and unleashed his attack, coating Izuku's body with arcs of lightning. Though it lacked the searing intensity that managed to effortlessly pierce through Ikiji's defenses, it was still painful nonetheless.

Izuku yelled as his body fell into a painful fit of shudders and spasms, lightning coursing through his body as the tunnel finally closed, the end clamping down around his waist as he and the cloak futilely tried to squirm out to freedom. Strange sighed at the fruitlessness of his apprentice's actions.
"I guess this is as good a place to stop as any..." Strange muttered as he reversed the tile's grip on Izuku just enough to allow him to slip through. With a gasp, Izuku fell to the ground, obviously disoriented. Shaking his head, Strange opened a portal beneath Izuku, letting him fall through and back into the real world.

"Y-you really went all out that time..." Izuku groaned as he rubbed the soreness on his waist and shook the dizziness out of his head. Even though he was back in the real world, he wouldn't dare look over at the staircase. The transition out of the Mirror Dimension was always more unpleasant than the transition into it.

"Hey!" Izuku noticed that his green cloak was no longer connected to his shoulders. He whirled around and, seeing it floating passively some feet away, approached it irritably. "Why didn't you stop when I said to? We got stuck because of that!"

In response, the cloak flitted about angrily at the accusation, its bottom corners curling into what Izuku could only assume were fisticuffs as it squared off with the boy, aggressively weaving to and fro.

"Is that any way for a sorcerer to talk with his relic?" Strange jokingly asked as he descended from the portal. "That is most unbecoming of you, Izuku."

"I—! It—! This is all his fault!" Izuku flusteredly stammered, pointing an accusing finger at the cloak only to turn and see the cloak pointing right back at him. "Hey, don't point at me!"

"Any blame to be had for a mishap with a relic, sentient or not, rests entirely on the shoulders of the sorcerer using it," Strange said, chuckling at the sight of his student arguing with his cloak just as he had done with his own so many years ago. "In terms of magic and functionality your cloak is identical to my own, and in order to use the Cloak of Levitation effectively, one must—"

"One must be in sync with the cloak and have their intentions be felt clearly," Izuku finished Strange's explanation, one that he'd heard many times over the last several months. "But I really felt like I was in sync until—"

"Until you crashed," Strange interjected. "Or rather, until you suddenly found yourself in a disadvantageous position and failed to properly adapt in time."

"But can I really adapt to a situation like that on the fly and stay in-tune with my cloak all at once?" Izuku asked, his brow scrunching in frustration.

"Learning the proper ropes behind any given relic is no easy feat," Strange admitted. "And the difficulty is undoubtedly compounded when adding in the factor of your cloak's sentience. But you knew of the difficulties going into this specific training, and despite the...'setback' we had a few months ago, your skill with working alongside the cloak has improved remarkably compared to when you first began, Izuku."

"Setback" being Inko, Izuku's mother. True to his word, Strange remained open with Inko about what had transpired at Kamar-Taj while Izuku was there. He just wished his sensei wasn't so honest to the point that he had described what had occurred in...such vivid detail. Inko was horrified, but Izuku was more so when Strange told Inko how he would understand if she decided to end his training sessions right then and there.

Her consternation and indignation remained visible, but they had lessened just enough to allow for a compromise to be made: any training outside of their apartment was to be halted for the remainder of the summer as well as for the first four weeks of Izuku's final second term. Inko also requested to be
present for as many training sessions taking place within their apartment as possible, though Strange later confided with Izuku that it was more likely she was genuinely curious about the nature of his training rather than skeptical of Strange's teaching methods.

Six weeks had now passed since the end of his 'house arrest training' and Izuku honestly felt better for it. He certainly didn't begrudge his mother in any way; he had long since accepted her overbearing, worrying nature for the loving concern that it was. Besides, the short hiatus from a strict training schedule helped Izuku keep his mind focused when it came to schoolwork, which came all the more easier since Bakugo and the rest of his classmates had ceased their belittlement of him once and for all. It had lessened ever since media coverage of the sludge villain incident outed him for supposedly having a Quirk and by now it had faded entirely. He wasn't embraced by the rest of the class by any means, not after so many years of disparagement, but he would certainly take awkward indifference over outright hostility any day of the week. Speaking of class, Izuku recalled being chastised by his teacher for still not formally registering himself with the National Quirk Registry. Right...he would have to do that before the Entrance Exam rolled around.

"Setting your training with the cloak aside," Strange snapped Izuku out of his musings. "You still seem to be having trouble with the Bolts of Bedevilment. The rules of the Mirror Dimension training are not just to maintain levitation above ground and avoid capture, but to also counter my bolts with your own when given the opportunity. Yet this time, as with many times before, you...hesitated."

Izuku merely turned his gaze toward the ground. He felt especially ashamed since he was the one who'd pushed for this kind of training in the first place, and yet...

"This hesitation of yours, it is different than the self-doubt you had to overcome when you first began lessons with me," Strange noted. "There is a twinge of fear I sense within you, Izuku."

"It's just...I'm really eager to learn all that I can and so much more before the Entrance Exam in a couple months, but—!" Izuku bit his lip. "A part of me worries that the more I learn, the more likely I'll end up...corrupted like Ikiji."

Strange raised a brow but said nothing for a good minute. He finally relented with a sigh, sitting down on the steps of the staircase and motioning for Izuku to sit beside him.

"You must have felt it early on then," Strange surmised. "How the power behind ones Bolts of Bedevilment can be steered and fueled by one's emotions, namely: anger and, dare I say, hatred."

"It wasn't long after the first time I successfully did the spell," Izuku admitted. "I forced myself into a state of anger and the results were...more than I had imagined."

"The power you managed to wield frightened you?" Strange asked and a nod from Izuku was the reply. "That is not inherently a bad thing, Izuku. A healthy dose of fear can help a sorcerer better understand the scope of the power they possess as well as motivate them to train more vigorously."

"It's not just that, I understand that stuff!" Izuku shook his head. "I just keep thinking back to Kamar-Taj. When I fought Ikiji. Before you had arrived...he told me my mind was similar to his own, that I was a spitting image of him from just a few years back."

"And you believe that continuing on your current path will endanger you to corruption on a level comparable to Ikiji," Strange concluded.

Izuku shakily nodded his head. "The thought of giving myself over to such darkness...the mere idea of turning against you and the other sorcerers, it...it makes me sick just thinking about it!"
"It's true, there are parallels between you and Ikiji," Strange conceded. "Most plainly of them all is the aptitude for magic you both possess, despite your young ages and relatively early training regimens. Ikiji, like myself, likely noticed the potential for growth you carry and sought to cultivate it for his own agenda."

"So you understand my worries..." Izuku murmured.

"On the contrary, I think your fear is quite unfounded," Strange said with a chuckle.

"How can you be so sure?" Izuku asked incredulously.

"Because in spite of the parallels between Ikiji and yourself, you possess something that fundamentally sets you apart from him," Strange said, thumping a finger against the boy's chest when Izuku looked up at him in confusion. "Simply put, you have a hero's heart, Izuku. Ikiji sought knowledge and power in a vain attempt to alleviate himself of the pain within his heart, whereas you seek knowledge and power to alleviate the pain of those around you, as a true hero would."

"Ikiji led a pitiful life before being brought to Kamar-Taj," Strange continued. "He was not able to rise above his pain and it ultimately consumed him—nay, corrupted him."

"He was corrupted...by his pain?" Izuku asked.

"Power is not the only thing that corrupts, Izuku," Strange lectured. "Everyone, in some way, is defined by their pain. However, it is up to each individual to ensure that they are not dominated by their pain as well."

Izuku frowned and looked back down at his feet. The lessons of pain and the differences and similarities that both set him apart from Ikiji and connected them in some way, it was all a lot to ponder. He still felt so unsure...and it was clear Strange could see that as well.

Anymore ponderings on the matter were cut short when the sudden booming sound of rock-and-roll music unceremoniously thundered throughout the Sanctum, rattling the windows and sending vibrations up the very walls and across the floorboards.

"W-what's going on?" Izuku asked, leaping to his feet.

"Oh no," Strange groaned as he, too, got to his feet, approaching the nearest window to peek out alongside his apprentice. "Don't tell me it's that time of the year already?"

"What?" Izuku asked, his curiosity more than piqued by now. He could see throngs of people crowding the sidewalks outside, all heading past the Sanctum in a single, unified direction. "What's happening out there?"

Strange merely rolled his eyes and stepped away from the window. "This year's Stark Expo," He explained. "I swear, it's practically a holiday throughout all of Manhattan..."

Izuku let out a cross between a gasp and a squeal; Strange wasn't entirely sure. "THE Stark Expo!?" Izuku exclaimed. "The internationally acclaimed exposition helmed by the Number Two American Hero himself: Iron Man!?"

Strange seemed to have forgotten just how much of a superhero fanboy Izuku Midoriya could be.

"Are the rest of the Avengers going to be there?" Izuku asked excitedly. "Oh, I wonder what other heroes are going to be there, certainly there would be lots of recognizable ones given the sheer magnitude of the Stark Industries brand name, not to mention the media presence—"
"Izuku!" Strange yelled, snapping his student out of his mumbling. "You overestimate the hero presence found at a given Stark Expo. The Expo has always primarily been Support-focused. While heroes may appear here and there, expositions, presentations, and demonstrations of the latest technological Support-based wonders are held all over the city."

"Not to mention the countless vendors set up on every street and every park imaginable—" Strange said before suddenly coming to a halt as he began to turn away. He turned to face Izuku with a knowing look; perhaps he could use the boy's enthusiasm and the raucous Expo to his advantage. "Izuku, why don't you take the rest of the day off? Go out and explore what you can from the Expo's vendors."

"I—what?" Izuku blinked, as if he wasn't sure he'd heard his sensei correctly. "Explore the Expo?" Sensations of excitement began creeping up his backside. "You don't want to continue with today's training?"

"I think this would be more beneficial to you, Izuku," Strange said. "Given your state of distress moments ago, it would be unwise for me to force you back into a similarly stressful situation so quickly. Besides that, I think you've earned a day of fun, don't you agree? You don't want every day between now and the Entrance Exam to be a slew of just schoolwork and nonstop training, do you?"

"That sounds amazing!" Izuku exclaimed, pumped with excitement before visibly deflating. "But isn't it too late to get tickets? Aren't those needed to attend the expositions?"

"It may be too late to acquire tickets for the exposition itself, but there are no shortage of public vendors to partake in!" Strange replied. "I'm sure there's plenty to see just up the road from here in Washington Square Park alone."

"Thanks a bunch sensei!" Izuku bowed and prepared to depart right out the front door before pausing. "Don't you want to explore the Square Park, too?"

"No, no," Strange waved his hand dismissively. "Year after year I've put up with the noise of Stark's Expo, and I can hardly tolerate it as is from within my own Sanctum. But before you leave..."

Strange snapped his finger and Izuku's red tunic was instantly replaced by the casual blue pants and black shirt he was wearing before beginning his training for today. Also appearing in Izuku's hand from the snap was Strange's calling card, which was hurriedly slipped into Izuku's pocket. "Just in case," Strange said. "Now off with you!"

"Thanks again sensei!" Izuku said as he pushed open the front door, only to be met with the sharp November chill, causing him to shiver. "H-hey sensei! Mind if I take my cloak with me? I-it's pretty chilly out today!"

Strange paused as he considered his student's request. Izuku thought for a split second that he'd say no before Strange seemingly relented. "Very well," Strange said. "But no using it in public! Who knows what sort of trouble it might land you in!"

_Hopefully a day of levity will relieve some of your doubt and fear, Izuku, _Strange thought as the boy practically flew out of the Sanctum. _Who knows? Perhaps you'll run into one who will help assuage your worries in some way._

Marcus Daniels absolutely despised his life.

Every day that he could remember was a day filled with struggle, one that always ended with him clawing his way back from the brink of despair and into some semblance of sanity. All the memories
he had, even from his early childhood days, were ones of hardships and marginalization by his family and peers.

Perhaps he should just end it all, he thought. Of course! Why wouldn't he? Who would possibly miss a Quirkless nobody!? Certainly not the family that had long since abandoned him, and definitely not his peers that did everything in their power to keep him down.

And yet...he continued to struggle. Day after day. The hardships he had faced regularly throughout life—the isolation, the discrimination, the pity—were practically numb to him now. School passed by like a blur, he had scraped his way through college with little recollection of his time there, and even getting accepted into the prestigious research laboratories of Project Pegasus left him with little desire to celebrate his academic achievement and progress.

And while everything that had caused him pain throughout life eventually became numb, the hurt never truly lessened. That pain was seared into his brain, engraved on his very heart, and his resentment—his rage—against the Quirked and society steadily bubbled deep within him, gathering pressure, just waiting for the right moment to blow.

It was only a matter of time, he knew. No one else seemed to, though. Certainly not the bald, pompous Dr. Croit, who repeatedly belittled him in the labs at every given opportunity, much to the amusement of his other coworkers.

To study the different energies of the Universe itself, what a perfect career to have, Marcus thought at the time. Wouldn't becoming a pioneer in such a field inject the perfect semblance of power he needed to fill the void in his black, beating heart? Wouldn't the recognition he'd surely receive from the Stark Expo as a proud member of Project Pegasus dull the ceaseless pain of his measly existence?

"That pretentious Croit," Marcus bitterly seethed, running a hand through his brown, slicked back hair as he allowed a bit of his anger to seep through now that he was alone. Alone and left to finish preparations for Project Pegasus's exposition without any assistance from Croit or the other team members, who went out drinking and celebrating before their big presentation tonight. "He thinks he's such a bloody Godsend with that Atomic Vision Quirk of his, even though I've worked on this project thrice as hard as he has!"

"How much longer can I hold this in? Marcus thought dejectedly as he repressed the vehement urge to simply smash every last bit of Project Pegasus's data available and storm off into the night for a drink of his own. A Quirkless man needed every last drop in this world.

"How much longer can you hold it in?" A gravelly voice seemingly read his mind. Marcus spun around, facing a bizarrely robed man with jagged, white hair. The left side of his face was decorated with a scar that ran from eye to jawline. And his eyes—his eyes—were cracked and oddly appeared purple.

"To hold back your anger and hatred is to hold back your honesty," The strange young man said as his hands conjured a bizarre, spinning crimson sigil in the middle of the lab. "I can grant what you desire most...but only if you remain sincere, kind sir."

The sight before him was positively absurd, Marcus's logical mind implored. He should be yelling for security, or phoning police, or simply running, but Marcus didn't budge, entranced by the spinning sigil. And although his lips never moved, his heart and mind seemed to speak as one: *Give me the power I've never known. Relieve me of the pain I've always held!*

The robed man grinned; it seemed such thoughts were all that were required. The sigil suddenly sped forth and collided with Marcus, who accepted it with wide open arms as his body was immediately
set upon and consumed by an unfathomable darkness.
Excelsior!

Chapter Summary

After receiving some much needed advice from a certain retired Pro Hero, Izuku finally makes his way to Washington Square Park, meeting (seemingly) old and new faces alike. Not far away, however, the newly corrupted Marcus Daniels exacts his revenge against his Quirked boss, and begins his rampage across Manhattan.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

These streets are so narrow...! Izuku thought as he attempted to take in as much of Greenwich Village as the crowd would allow. He wasn't tightly packed in the crowd like a can of sardines, but there was no fighting against this current. The throngs of excitedly chattering people all seemed to have a single destination in mind: Washington Square Park. Wide open, and extremely popular to boot, Izuku should have figured most of the people would flock to where the nearest cluster of vendors were likely located.

Still, Izuku couldn't deny the charm of this neighborhood as the crowd moved him right on by. The bricked mid-rise apartments, the numerous row houses that seemed remarkably maintained given the sheer age and history of the Village, and the walk-ups that dotted the vista all coalesced into a warm yet sturdy portrait of a community that defied the odds and stood the test of time, refusing to fall.

The growth of Bohemia, anti-war movements, the Stonewall Riots, the Dark Ages of Quirks—the Village has seen it all. Izuku couldn't blame an insider's perspective that the world seemingly revolved around Greenwich, given all the historical events that have taken place here across the centuries. Small wonder that Doctor Strange's own Sanctum Sanctorum would be located in such a neighborhood.

Geez, Izuku thought, trembling slightly in spite of his cloak's otherworldly warmth. The more I think about this place, the more I feel as if I almost don't belong.

Izuku Midoriya was a worrywart. It was a weakness he could admit to himself, that his overly analytical nature over things such as Quirks and Pro Heroes inadvertently transferred over into other areas of his life, such as his worries and fears. It was almost paralyzing, how easily he could get lost in the sea of thoughts and possibilities from time to time.

You have a hero's heart, Izuku, Strange's words echoed in his head. He gazed downward and slid his palm against his chest. Both Strange and All Might seemed convinced of his potential and had an unshakeable faith in the brightness of his future as both sorcerer and hero, but would the heart of a hero suffice? Would it be enough to quell the doubt Ikiji had inflicted on him? Or was his path set in stone, his parallels with the rogue sorcerer dooming him to a descent into zealotry?

He hated the thought of being corrupted down a villainous path and standing with Ikiji against Strange, Wong, and the other sorcerers. It evoked images of his face twisted into a sneer, eyes cracked and forehead defiled by the crimson symbol of Dormammu. But most of all, he hated how often he would get stuck on these thoughts in the first place...!
"Oof! My back...!"

Izuku, lost in a labyrinth of dispiriting thoughts, unwittingly walked right into an elderly passerby, knocking them onto the ground.

"Oh my gosh!" Izuku snapped out of his thoughts in a panic, rushing to help the elderly turtle necked man up off his hindquarters lest he find himself victim to a ceaseless crowd of jubilant civilians. "I'm so sorry sir! Here, let me help—"

Izuku froze as he brought the aged gentleman to his feet. The perpetual stream of people practically melted away as Izuku focused on the man's wrinkly face and grayed, combed back hair and shades. One by one, every detail clicked into place and the hand Izuku had used to help the man to his feet began shaking.

"You-you-you—!" Izuku stammered with barely restrained excitement. "You're the legendary retired Pro Hero Generalissimo! The Comic Hero: Stan Lee!"

Stan Lee had one hand gripping Izuku's as he was helped up, his other hand rubbing the soreness on his lower back where he had landed. He stopped rubbing and gave Izuku a surprised stare for a few moments, both wholeheartedly ignorant of the swarm of people pushing around them.

"Gee, I'm surprised you recognized me! Stan Lee finally said, sporting that trademark grin of his that you just couldn't hate no matter how hard you tried. "I'm even wearing my shades!"

"How could I NOT recognize someone hailed as a Grandfather of all modern day Pro Heroes!?!" Izuku exclaimed, although the pitch in his voice seemed barely audible in the middle of the ever-moving crowd.

"What's that?" Stan asked, putting his hand to his ear. "I can hardly hear you, True Believer! Let's move out of these peoples' way!"

Squirming through the sea of bodies and faces, Izuku and the retired Pro made their way to the nearest set of concrete steps where they weren't in any danger of being swept away or being obstructive to the people current.

"I would've thought that whippersnappers your age would be more into heroes like All Might!" Stan said as he gingerly took a seat on the steps. "It just goes to show that someone my age should never underestimate the up and coming generation!"

"I'm a huge fan!" Izuku suddenly blurted out before offering a sheepish, embarrassed smile.

"I can tell!" Stan chuckled. "It warms my heart to see that at least one from your generation hasn't entirely forgotten mine." He ended with a sigh.

"I am so sorry for not paying attention earlier and knocking you down!" Izuku bowed his head venerably for forgiveness.

"Oh, don't beat yourself up too hard for a simple mishap, young man," Stan said encouragingly. "A few moments of rest will pep me back into shape! Though while we're sitting here, perhaps I can help you in turn?"

"H-huh?" Izuku blinked.

"I got a good look at your face before you bumped into me," Stan said with a perceptive look in his eye. "You, young man, had the face of someone deeply troubled by something. Anything I can do to
"O-oh, you don't have to worry about that Generalissimo—" Izuku said, visibly deflated as his concerns rushed back to the forefront of his mind.

"Retired or not, a true Hero never hesitates to meddle wherever and whenever they can!" Stan beamed proudly.

Izuku sat beside Stan and lowered his head in thought. The retired Pro Hero Generalissimo himself was offering to help in any way he could. He certainly couldn't deny the advice of a venerated veteran, could he? Although, he also couldn't spill the beans on his repertoire of magical skills, per Strange's instructions. But maybe...maybe the man could still offer some insight, if Izuku stayed ambiguous enough.

"Well...I've been training for U.A's Hero Course for the better part of a year now," Izuku began. "And I've been having trouble lately in the sessions I've been having with my teacher. Rather, I've been having troubling thoughts. I met someone not too long ago, someone with power similar to but far greater than my own and he was...well, evil. Twisted. Corrupted."

"Ever since I met him, I've had a harder time focusing and truly giving it my all in training," Izuku continued. "I've hesitated—held back—because I began to fear that I'd end up like him if I continued growing at the pace I was at before. My sensei told me that I had nothing to fear because I had 'a hero's heart' but...I've been worried if that's truly enough. Can I remain a hero if I continue like this? Or will the chance of me succumbing only increase as my strength does?"

A restive silence fell between Izuku and Stan as the boy left his question hanging in the air. Stan was giving the youth a focused stare, likely processing and compiling his answer before going forward with this conversation. Finally, after what felt like several minutes, he spoke.

"You know," Stan began with a sigh. "There was a time in my life where I was...less than thrilled with my Quirk. In fact, I was outright embarrassed by it in my youth."

That certainly caught Izuku off guard. He snapped his head towards Stan, shocked by the admission. Generalissimo? Ashamed of his own Quirk?!

"Embarrassed?" Izuku exclaimed. "B-but your Quirk is—!"

Stan had already slipped a piece of scrap paper out his pocket and a pen from the other. On the torn piece he wrote out the word 'light' and snapped his fingers. Izuku watched in awe as he saw something he had previously only seen in old videos of the man: the word literally peeled off the page and began shining radiantly before seemingly snuffing itself out moments later, the letters fading along with the light it emitted.

"My Quirk: Written Reality," Stan said with a soft smile. "The power to transform written words into the actual object or thing."

Izuku frowned in confusion, furrowing his brows. "But you have such a unique Quirk! Why would you feel ashamed to use it?"

"I used to be embarrassed because all I had was a writing Quirk and a writing gig when I wasn't working as a Pro," Stan explained. "Some of my other peers had flashy, muscular Quirks and others were innovating medicine or other fields of science with their own powers. I felt lacking by comparison. But then I began to realize: entertainment is one of the most important things in peoples' lives. People might go off the deep end without it! And so I decided that even if I didn't have the
"I think there is an innate desire for superpowers in all of us," Stan continued. "Or rather, a desire to do more than we can already do, for better or worse. I think it's almost fitting that Quirks have become so prevalent: they allow people to rise up and achieve these dreams. But not everyone gets what they perceive to be a useful power. Some...don't receive any powers at all."

Izuku was instantly reminded of Kacchan, how he'd received a perfect blend between his parents' Quirks, resulting in a terrifyingly strong power well suited for Heroics while he himself was deemed Quirkless, his dream of being a hero seen as an outright fantasy.

"But despite that, there's no such thing as a truly powerless person," Stan quickly added, surprising Izuku. "Because flash or no flash, strength or no strength, Quirk or no Quirk, one person can always make a difference."

There will always be something one such as you can do to be a hero, All Might's words of advice flashed through Izuku's head.

"And people—heroes, civilians, and even villains—press onward, not because they have no fear or doubt, but rather they strive to stay ahead of it, to not be dominated by it."

Izuku recalled the lesson Strange had given not even an hour beforehand on pain, how it defines everyone and the importance of not allowing it to dominate oneself. Izuku realized then that his hesitation—his reluctance to grow in fear of ending up like Ikiji—was his pain stunting his growth and was slowly beginning to dominate him rather than simply define him. There was a wicked irony in the realization: Izuku's festering pessimism posed a far greater threat than any magical growth ever did. Generalissimo was right! He can't hesitate because of doubt alone! Rather, let it propel him forward, onward and onward, until he was finally ready to take on the Entrance Exam and earn his way into U.A!

"Now that," Stan said, admiring the sheer determination that sprouted on Izuku's face. "Is a look that screams Excelsior!"

"I—thank you, Generalissimo!" Izuku exclaimed as he sprang to his feet, feeling pumped and energetic from the retired Pro's pep talk. "I feel like I know what to do now!"

"Then before you head off," Stan said, quickly whipping out a small piece of paper and thrusting it toward Izuku. "Let me give you this!"

"O-oh no, I couldn't—!" Izuku resisted, trying to stay humble, but Stan was persistent, pushing it into the boy's hand.

"Trust me, that coupon better suits you than me, especially given my age," Stan said. "Just take it with the promise you'll not let this evening go to waste! Now face front, True Believer! And if you ever feel bogged by doubt or hesitation ever again, it always helps to keep your spirits up with a motto! Like 'Excelsior'!"

"Excelsior? That's—" Izuku began.

"'Excelsior' is an old motto of mine," Stan elaborated. "It's an old word—old even by my standards—that means 'upward and onward to greater glory,' to keep moving forward even in the face of the fact that nothing lasts forever."

Izuku smiled earnestly, brimming with resoluteness. "I have a motto to keep me going, too."
"Then let me hear it," Stan said with an equally bright grin. "Let me hear your 'Excelsior'!"

Izuku raised his left arm high in the sky, mimicking the man he'd admired since childhood before dashing back into the sea of people steadily marching towards Washington Square Park.

"Plus Ultra!"

"Now now, Marcus," A portly and baldheaded Dr. Croit uttered fearfully as he beheld the state of his fellow scientist, one that he had belittled ever since he joined Project Pegasus. Where once he looked down upon the pitiful, Quirkless Marcus Daniels with little more than disdain and contempt, he now gazed upon a crepuscular nightmare with trepidation and fright.

Croit stood in the laboratory doorway, bathed in the light of the hallway as he peered at the carnage within the room. All of their computers and equipment had been ripped asunder. Electrical components, some still sparking with electricity, were strewn about the floor like confetti or worse, embedded into the walls and ceiling from an unfathomable force. Some of the windows were cracked, others completely shattered, and others still remained untouched and undamaged for reasons Croit couldn't comprehend. Much of what remained of Project Pegasus's lab was cloaked in shadow, as many of the lights had been utterly obliterated by the same entity that had laid waste to the computers. Said entity—the new Marcus Daniels—stood contemplatively in the center of the lab.

Marcus huffed raggedly as he observed the new power emanating from his body. He let loose in a fit of excitement the moment the sigil made contact with his body, and when his senses returned to him moments later the robed man had vanished and...well, the results of his carnage was crystal clear. No one would be able to deny the primal strength his new body possessed! No more Quirked individuals would be allowed to look down on him anymore! No more would they keep him under the heel of their boots!

"More..." Marcus muttered to himself as he admired the waves of tangible darkness undulating off his body. "I have become so much more...!

Much more than a mere human, Marcus decided!

A glint of scattered lights on the floor caught his attention. It was a shattered window pane and Marcus was able to see his splintered visage on the various shards on the ground before him. The tiredness in his grey eyes had dissipated. He gingerly touched his cheeks, noting a slightly darker skin tone that wasn't present before. But most obvious of all was the shimmering crimson sigil adorned in the center of his forehead—the same sigil that he embraced just moments ago. Marcus grinned malevolently; the stranger truly had granted him his deepest desire. This was a symbol that denoted true, undeniable power!

Marcus raised his arms, watching studiously as the darkness his body now freely conjured seemed to ooze from his limbs before dropping to the floor, producing sizzling wisps of stygian smoke as they impacted. The darkness came and went all over his being, robbing himself of any bodily sensation wherever it emerged, though it returned whenever the black substance faded or moved on. Stumbling forward, Marcus looked down and saw that his very footprints left oozing puddles of the dark force in his wake, which soon evaporated moments later.

"Darkforce..." Marcus croaked as he clenched and unclenched his hands, solidifying and liquefying the shadows repeatedly. "Yes...has a nice ring to it."
Marcus gritted his teeth and slammed his hands into the floor, spreading his bodily shadows all around him. The swirling dark pit encompassed what remained of the laboratory’s demolished hardware, pulling the fragmented bits of metal, glass, and wiring into its unknown depths, leaving absolutely no trace of their existence.

Croit jumped in surprise, shaking at the terrible display of never-before-seen might by the once unimpressive, meek Marcus.

Marcus turned his head to his former coworker, shooting him a murderous grin. The status quo was defiled. The oppressed, now the oppressor. Marcus Daniels now had power...and what better way to use it than to impose it on those who'd dared step on him before?

"Anything to say, Croit?" Marcus asked, his voice laced with venom as he flexed his hands, readying himself for the beginning of his vengeance.

"N-now Marcus," Croit stammered, raising his hands defensively. "L-let's not do anything hasty, alright? You've obviously...unlocked your Quirk! That's it! And so late in life, but better late than never, ah! That is to say! There's nothing wrong with never having a Quirk! Aha..."

"That's one foot you've put in your fat mouth, you pompous oaf," Marcus snarled. "Got enough room for the other?"

"Please don't...!" Croit whimpered pathetically. "There's still time to fix this! We can get you a suit to contain your powers, and—!"

"Fix? Fix!? There's nothing here that needs fixing!" Marcus roared, raising a wall of shadow in the lab's doorway before Croit could scamper out the room and the down the hall to safety. "And contain my powers!? My powers cannot be contained!"

Baring his teeth in a deranged snarl, Marcus flexed his hand, the sinister wall of shadow latching out and seizing Croit's arm, pulling him slowly into its dark depths. Croit dropped all pretense and screamed bloody murder, desperately trying to yank his arm free, but his efforts were fruitless. His screams only intensified as Marcus violently clenched his hand, crushing the squealing man's arm as it sprayed blood and viscera that was also absorbed into the dark mass.

"Marcus!" Croit howled as the shadows pulled his stubby legs in next, crushing them with a bloodcurdling 'squish'. "Forgive me! Forgive me!"

"NEVER AGAIN WILL MARCUS DANIELS BE SHACKLED BY THE QUIRKED!" Marcus bellowed as he summarily finished his bloody, vengeful deed, ending Croit's horrid misery with one final, sickening squelch.

However, Marcus applied far too much pressure into the black vortex than he realized he could handle. He unclenched his hands all at once and the conjured Darkforce burst outward, spraying him in a geyser of blood as the force of the blast sent him careening through an undamaged window pane. The lab was located fairly high off the ground, ten floors up to be precise, sending him plummeting to the quickly approaching ground in a shower of blood, glass, and whirling shadow.

Damn it...! Marcus cursed his seemingly doomed fate. I'd only just begun! No! No...! I won't accept this! I WON'T!

Marcus shut his eyes and stretched his hands outward, nearly hurling as his accelerated descent came to a halt. Shakily taking a peek, Marcus saw that the Darkforce his body produced seemingly acted on its own, conjuring an inky black platform that slowed and then stopped his fall. He felt tingly all
over, unable to feel any sensations throughout his body for a moment.

Marcus stayed silent aside from his rough panting before exploding into a giggling fit as the feeling in his body slowly returned and the platform gently lowered him to the plaza ground below—he was about twenty feet from a bloody impact before his Darkforce had caught him.

"Unstoppable..." Marcus muttered to himself, shivering with glee. "I am truly unstoppable..."

"Halt!" A shaky voice yelled out as Marcus's feet reached the ground. Before he'd even realized it, he was surrounded by a dozen armed guards, separating him from the rest of the brightly lit plaza. The plaza itself was filled to the brim with vendors, advertisements, and hundreds of now fearful spectators. All movement had ceased, all music subsided, all eyes were on Marcus...who shivered uneasily.

What was this? Why was he shivering all of a sudden? Why was his body tingling all over again, tingling so bad it felt like prickly needles stabbing every fiber of muscle and blood vessel beneath his skin?

...Is it them? Marcus dementedly wondered as he stared out across all the wide-eyed passerby. Are they, the damned Quirked, causing this feeling...?

"Don't move!" One guard ordered as he pulled a radio to his lips. "Requesting backup at Madison Square—!

"Stop staring at me...!" Marcus growled as he took a sudden step forward, prompting the jittery officers to open fire on him. Marcus was immediately shielded beneath a shadowy dome, effortlessly deflecting all projectiles sent his way.

"What the hell!?" Another officer yelled out. "Contact Mr. Stark immediately—!

"I said..." Marcus rumbled from beneath his dome, flexing and clenching his hands crazily. His shadows seemed to pulse with life anew and every light in and around the plaza was suddenly sucked into the dark mass, rendering the entire area dimmed, illuminated only by what light remained in the evening sky. The dome suddenly burst, knocking every armed officer away from him with the same unfathomable force that rent the laboratory to pieces. "STOP STARING AT ME!"

The plaza erupted into screams of terror and a mass of fleeing bodies as Marcus Daniels commenced his rampage, barreling straight through the plaza and due south—right in the direction of Washington Square Park.

"Wow..." Izuku whispered with wonderment in his voice as he walked beneath the Washington Square Park Archway, admiring the architecture and the fact that it has remained standing since the twentieth century, before even the dawn of Quirks.

He could definitely see the appeal this park possessed: wide open spaces, lovely fountains, plenty of foliage and greenery, and an abundance of benches and other seating places for resting and people-watching. Throw in ostentatiously decorated Stark Expo vendors and hundreds of spending onlookers flocking to and fro like hapless pigeons, and it all added up to an environment that practically spelled excitement.

"Now then," Izuku spoke to himself as he pulled out the coupon Generalissimo had gifted to him. "Where can I find this vendor...?"

Izuku could hardly believe his eyes when he first read the coupon. "E-eh? A coupon for pork-stuffed
pretzel rolls!? Why are Americans so weird with their food!?” Although, he began to wonder how it would compare to his mother's beloved katsudon...

Hmm, Izuku thought as he looked the coupon over. There aren't any specific directions besides saying it's located somewhere at this park.

It was decided: it'd be better to ask at the nearest vendor instead of wandering aimlessly around such a heavily crowded park he'd never been to before.

Unfortunately, the nearest vendor was an unusually elongated truck parked off the pathway with many stools lined up before the counter. A...bar truck? Izuku paled as the scent of ales and booze reached his nose. I've heard of food trucks, but bar trucks? America sure is bizarre...

"Hey!" The gruff bartender barked at Izuku as the boy approached apprehensively. "No minors allowed at this truck!"

"I-I'm not here for a drink, I swear!" Izuku stammered as he waved his hands. "I was actually wondering if you could—oh, you're ignoring me..."

True enough, the bartender was already focused on the crowd of patrons seated before his odd truck. He wasn't even sparing Izuku a second glance: out of sight, out of mind. If the bartender wouldn't help, then the next best bet would be to hope a local was here that could point him in the right direction. Couldn't hurt, right?

"Excuse me," Izuku approached the nearest seated man at the truck's counter. "I was wondering if you could—"

"Buzz off," The jacketed man grunted none too kindly, promptly downing the bottle he had in a single go before tapping it on the counter, signaling the bartender to bring another.

"I-I'm sorry for bothering you, sir," Izuku tried again. "I was wondering if you could help me find—"

"I said buzz off!" The man growled as he whirled toward Izuku before suddenly halting, allowing Izuku to get a good look at the man's face (after he jumped from fright, of course). The man at the counter was downright buff and grizzly, the hair on his head buzzed and nearly as thin and white as the hair on his cheeks, chin, and jawline. His jacket was brown and grungy, his pants only slightly more presentable. The man narrowed his eyes as he looked over Izuku's nervously trembling form. "What are you doing here?"

Izuku thought for a second that the man was speaking to him in a personal manner, before ultimately chalking it up to him simply being a minor.

"I'm not here to try and sneak a drink from the bar, I promise!" Izuku pleaded. "I'm just a little lost and was wondering if you could help me find a certain vendor."

"That's not what I meant—" The man groaned and turned his back to Izuku, guzzling down his alcoholic beverage in a single go yet again, tapping the counter for another drink. How many had he downed by this point?

"I see," The wild-looking man muttered, seemingly more to himself than to Izuku. "This must be you from before that time..."

Before that time? What was this man talking about? Sighing in defeat and deeming his time here wasted, Izuku turned to move on to the nearest vendor.
"Hold up kid," The man stopped Izuku before he could leave, his tone remarkably softer than moments prior. "Where you trying to get to?"

"Oh! Uh, here," Izuku handed him the wrinkled coupon and the man studied it for barely a moment before pointing off into the crowd.

"Other side of the fountains," The man said. "Next to the where the dog park is located."

"Thank you very much!" Izuku said with a complimentary bow of courtesy as he took back the coupon. "Sorry again for bothering you sir!"

And with that, Izuku bounded back off into the crowd, narrowing in on his pork-pretzel destination as the man watched him disappear into the horde of passerby.

_Pork-stuffed pretzels, huh_? Izuku wondered to himself as he walked absentmindedly toward the desired booth. _I like my katsudon with a bit of salt, but I hope these aren't too salty. Plus, I wonder what kind of sauce is put in it? Knowing American sensibilities, probably barbecue sauce, but I also wonder if I could get—_

"Watch out!" A voice called out to Izuku, cutting off his inner ramblings of pork and pretzels but not in time to stop himself from being knocked into by another figure.

"Whoa!" Izuku yelped as he suddenly felt himself falling backwards toward the ground...only to have his fall stopped short by his trusty Cloak of Levitation, keeping him parallel to the ground for only a moment before reverting him into an upright position.

"D-did I walk into someone again?" Izuku shakily asked as the adrenaline continued to pump through his chest. "I've been rather clumsy today, I apologize if—"

"That's an interesting baby you've got there!" The voice sounded again, only _much_ closer this time.

Izuku squealed as his vision was suddenly filled with cross-haired pupils and pink tube-like hair. _S-she's way too close to me...!_

"I'm Mei Hatsume!" The girl assertively introduced herself to a paralyzed Midoriya, encroaching on the poor boy's personal space. "Mind telling me how you made that baby of yours on your back?"

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Chapter End Notes

This chapter was originally posted onto FF shortly after Stan Lee passed away.
Chapter Summary

While getting horribly lost in the crowd at Washington Square Park, Izuku runs into the eccentric Mei Hatsume, who mistakenly refers to him as an avid inventor. Hijinks ensue, but a creeping feeling of darkness overwhelms Izuku, causing him to run off to alert Doctor Strange. The Sorcerer Supreme heads out to investigate, unaware that said darkness is steadily approaching Izuku's position, ready to instigate a terrible confrontation...

Why is she so close!? Izuku mentally screamed as the pink-haired girl kept leaning in close to him with that excited grin plastered all over her face. Being stuck in the middle of a bustling crowd was one thing, but this girl's shameless assertiveness on top of that cranked the level of discomfort practically to a ten or even higher!

She isn't bothered by the chill in the slightest!? Izuku gaped at how little clothing she wore on her upper body.

"Hey, hey!" The girl beamed directly and enthusiastically in Izuku's face before placing her hands onto his shoulders, causing the boy to tense up considerably at the sudden touch. "Let me have a good look at your baby!"

A girl is touching me! Izuku twitched as Mei kneaded her fingers into his shoulders before sliding them across his chest where his cloak was clasped together above his sternum. And why does she keep using the word 'baby'!?

"How interesting!" Mei exclaimed, blinking rapidly as her eyes seemed to study every fiber woven into Izuku's cloak. "The way your baby propelled you back up without any visible propulsion, it's almost like it emitted gravitons! Yet I can't find any noticeable electronic components in your baby whatsoever!"

"U-uh, that's actually because—" Izuku stammered, trying to offer an answer that would satisfy this shameless busybody while simultaneously preserving his secret, but his voice once again lodged in his throat as Mei circled behind him, rubbing her palms against his backside as she felt up his cloak to study it further.

"This baby is exemplary!" Mei remarked. "I can definitely see why you'd want to show it off at one of the expositions being held around the city!"

"Actually, I'm not really—"
"Well then!" Mei interrupted Izuku, actually taking a step back for once. "Since I took a peek at yours...how about you take a peek at mine?"

Izuku's face became visibly flushed as the poor boy did his best to resist falling over right where he stood. He didn't think even his cloak could keep him on his feet this time!

W-what is this girl talking about!? She couldn't possibly mean...!?

"Ta-da!" Mei twirled around, giving Izuku a good glimpse at the mechanical contraption strapped to her backside while also pulling out a smaller, multi-pronged object from one of her many pockets. "Featuring two of the newest babies constructed by yours truly, Mei Hatsume! All for the viewing pleasure of my superior!"

Izuku practically sweatdropped; had Mei mistaken him as some avid inventor and was now trying to show off her own inventions to court some kind of favor with him?

"The first baby I have: my proto jet pack!" Mei said, pointing to the cylindrical booster strapped to her back. "A single turbine thruster allowing for a quick getaway, and halving the power output grants the user limited sustained hovering capabilities!"

"Is that based off the Pro Hero Air Jet's debut design!?" Izuku clamored excitedly. He was pretty familiar with the Buster Hero, even over other Pros, since the hero's office was located in his old neighborhood. "It looks really impressive!"

"But of course!" Mei said with a grin, flipping several pink locks over her shoulder. "And then there's my other baby: the ionic torch!" Mei wielded the diminutive item proudly in her grasp. "With this torch, one will never find themselves stuck in total darkness ever again! With the flip of a switch, the ionic torch electrically charges the air around it and draws in ions to sustain a neverending source of light! At least, that's what it was supposed to do..."

She angled the device slightly, showing Izuku a series of charred electrical bits on the top half of the device, right above where the activation switch was located.

"Seems I hadn't calibrated it properly, so continued use or turning it to max power right from the start will cause it to overcharge!" Mei explained, her smile faltering for a fraction of a second. "A shame, I really wanted to show off my absolute best with my absolute best babies here at the Stark Expo of all places..."

"You seem rather...disappointed, Mei," Izuku said, picking up on the traces of despondency leaking through Mei's otherwise exuberant face.

"Yeah, I suppose I am," Mei admitted while she looked over her malfunctioned torch. "My proto jet pack won first place at my junior high's tech fair, which earned me an invitation to this year's Stark Expo. I wanted to really pull out all the stops and create something ingenious yet practical for a hero to use, yet...I really botched it up in front of all the judges at the Junior's Exposition. I really wanted to show off an invention of mine to my idol, Mr. Stark, too..."

Izuku felt a twang of empathy in his chest; Mei looked up to Iron Man in much the same way he had looked up to All Might when he was a child. And Tony Stark was as much an inventor as he was a Pro Hero, meaning his appeal stretched widely between Pro Hero fans and Support Tech fans alike.

"But all is not lost this day!" Mei dramatically exclaimed, catching Izuku off guard as she pointed a finger squarely at him. "My trip here has led me to discover one with a superior baby-making mind! You will make for a suitable inventing rival!"
"W-wait! Hold up!" Izuku waved his arms defensively when he saw Mei sport a devilish grin as she pointed at him. "You've got it all wrong! I'm not actually an inventor!"

"Oh?" Mei asked, blinking in surprise.

"I'm actually training to become a hero at U.A!" Izuku explained. "What you saw my cloak do is really the result of—"

Izuku paused. Crap. He couldn't tell her what his Cloak of Levitation really was, and if he told her that it was a support item for his future hero costume (technically the truth) then she'd just hound him to know who really invented it, which would just lead him to feed her an actual lie. So he decided to take the path of least resistance.

"What you saw my cloak do is just a result of...my Quirk!" Izuku gave the best excuse that came to mind, laughing sheepishly all the while. "Yeah! My Quirk!"

Mei gave Izuku a silent, pensive stare for several silent moments, drawing the tension out so thin it could've snapped at any given second. As if trying to help corroborate its master's story, Izuku's cloak unclasped itself from his shoulders and levitated to Mei's backside, equipping itself onto her instead.

"Yeah! My Quirk is, uh, Sentient Fabric!" Izuku said with the straightest face he could possibly muster. "I can give sentience to any article of clothing I desire!"

"Well, that's a relief!" Mei seemed to visibly relax when the cloak attached itself to her; seems it wasn't just Izuku that could be gifted its ethereal warmth. "That means less competition for me! Not that I wouldn't have welcomed it otherwise."

"Yeah, sorry for confusing you earlier!" Izuku nervously chuckled and rubbed the back of his head.

"Ooh, it's so warm..." Mei snuggled into the cloak before suddenly popping out of her trance and rushing into Midoriya's personal space again. "I know! I got an idea!" She reached into another one of her pockets and retrieved a small card to present to Izuku. "Take this!"

Izuku accepted the card and looked it over once he managed to put some space between himself and Mei. The card was decorated simply, with a posing Mei on the front with her name adorned on a symbol of a wrench of some sort. The card was emblazoned by the words "Hatsume Industries" followed by a variety of contact information.

"Uh, thanks?" Izuku paled at the prospect of a girl giving him their number.

"Don't mention it," Mei said with that mischievous grin of hers. "Never let it be said that Mei Hatsume doesn't keep a look out for prospective clients. I'm aiming for U.A as well, the Support Course to be specific. You just keep that card on you and put a good word in for me to the rest of your classmates, okay? I'll ultimately be the sole provider for all your heroic needs!"

Ah...she's only doing this for her own benefit, huh? Izuku bemoaned to himself.

Izuku was about to open his mouth to reassure Mei when a sudden chill rocketed up his spine. He immediately snapped to attention, looking all around him with a jittery expression, trying to ascertain its approaching source. That was no wind chill, it was...something with a tinge of darkness to it. Something foul. Something malignant.

Something familiar.
No, Izuku thought in a panic. It can't be...

The last time he'd sensed something akin to this contaminated presence, he'd stood face-to-face against the zealot, Ikiji, at Kamar-Taj. And now here he was today, feeling a faint yet rapidly growing malignance that pulsed with nearly the same level of ill will.

Izuku instinctively slipped a hand into his back pocket, shakily pulling out Doctor Strange's calling card as he suddenly sprinted off through the crowd, leaving a bewildered Mei behind.

"Hey, where you running off to?!" She called out to him.

"I'm sorry...!" Izuku retorted, not sparing her a glance back whatsoever. "I have something important to do really quickly!"

And with that, Izuku had vanished into the crowd. Mei stood still, staring out in the direction of where he'd run off to before turning her attention entirely toward the cloak Izuku had unceremoniously left with her.

"Oh well!" Mei said resignedly. "Guess that just means I have your warmth all to myself for now, little guy!"

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_Sensei has to know!_ Izuku internally panicked as he dashed through throngs of people, pushing through more than a few ill-tempered individuals who didn't appreciate his shoving and darting. _Ikiji might be here!_

Pushing through the outer shell of the crowd with a stressed grunt, Izuku finally found himself free of the claustrophobic nightmare and on the boundaries of some of the more secluded greenery of the park.

_Perfect!_ Izuku thought as he dashed forward, putting himself far from the prying eyes of any curious passerby. _Now I can summon sensei!_

Izuku wasted no time in thumbing the symbol on the card; hardly a minute had passed before a brightly sizzling portal appeared before Izuku's very eyes. Meticulous timing on Strange's part, as usual.

"Izuku?" Strange asked warily as he stepped into the secluded garden where his apprentice had called him to. "What seems to be the—"

Strange immediately bristled, his posture becoming defensive as his eyes darted all around himself suspiciously.

"You sense it as well, right?" Izuku asked fearfully. "This sensation...this aura...it's a lot like Ikiji's back from when he attacked Kamar-Taj!"

"Correct Izuku, and yet..." Strange became eerily quiet as he shut his eyes, trying to focus on the dark presence that was steadily growing, indicating either a continuous surge in strength or a nearing to their location—or, more terrifyingly, both. However, try as he might, Strange was unable to properly tune in on the growing dark presence's precise location, although he could pinpoint smaller, fading vectors of the dark energy dotted around the city to the north of Washington Square Park.

_This is a dark magic, indeed, Strange bemoaned. For it to be obstructing my efforts to locate it so readily._
"Izuku," Strange spoke without turning toward his student. "I want you to get yourself to safety immediately. If this is Ikiji, then it would be best if you were nowhere near this location. You are not yet ready to confront him again. Either return to the Sanctum or return home posthaste."

"That is an order, Izuku," Strange sternly added when he sensed that the boy was about to object in some way. Strange briskly opened another portal and promptly entered through, closing it behind him and leaving a fearful yet equally determined Izuku in his wake.

"But...!" Izuku piped up, though a bit too late as Strange's portal had already closed. "I can help..."

_I may not have been a match against Ikiji on my own, but together we would definitely be able to beat him!_ Izuku pondered to himself. _Why won't you let me help?_

Izuku shivered and rubbed his arms as another chill—a definitively windy chill this time—swept through the area. Izuku suddenly ceased his rubbing as a realization sprang to life in his brain.

In his panic, he had ran off without his trusted relic. Mei still had his Cloak of Levitation.

Marcus soared through the air, landing on the side of a nearby skyscraper as he headed steadily southbound. His lab coat fluttered in the breeze, tainted in horrific red and black hues from a constant use of his newfound powers and also the blood of that wretched Croit whom he dispatched moments ago.

His arms had morphed into dark, amorphous blade-like appendages, digging into the side of the building he had latched onto, keeping him propped up as he surveyed his surroundings.

_Light_, He grumbled to himself irritably. _Far too much light...

New York wasn't called The City That Never Sleeps for nothing, after all. Even as the last vestiges of the sun were dipping beneath the already obstructed horizon and night began its routine domination of the sky, brightness still permeated the Burroughs of New York like a virulent plague.

Luckily, he possessed the cure for this bothersome contagion.

Marcus inhaled a deep breath, tightening his focus on the swelling Darkforce that was now pulsing through every vein and capillary within his body. He hissed as it erupted from his backside, a throbbing mass of shadows that hungered perpetually.

Reaching out almost reflexively, Marcus suddenly and violently yanked his hand back, pulling nearly every bit of light around him into the writhing dark mass that he now wielded. He wasn't stingy, either: every skyscraper and mid-rise building in sight went dark in an instant, as if they were merely flipped off by a simple switch, and the streets below were plunged into sudden darkness as the bulbs of the street lights exploded in a shower of rapidly fading sparks and car and traffic lights alike inexplicably lost all luminosity. That panic down below set in immediately as people stumbled fearfully through the untimely darkness, their screams compounded by the crashing of vehicles and the grinding of steel against steel.

Marcus tuned out the chaotic clamoring that echoed all around him, focusing entirely on the darkness that consumed any and all light insatiably, rumbling for more even after this generous feeding. He allowed the Darkforce free reign all across his mortal body, relishing in the numbness that ceaselessly followed every rapid rush of darkness that washed over his limbs and torso, seemingly drowning his flesh in the bottomless pools that radiated out of him.

That sensation of drowning—the numbness—was practically blissful for Marcus. Numbness meant
he couldn't feel anything anymore, especially not the pain he was so accustomed to in life. It was also more than his body that he couldn't feel anymore; his heart, too, had succumbed to the numbness and he was more than happy for it. His newfound powers made every noticeable pulse seem cold. Lifeless. Painless.

He wouldn't ever go back—to his former pitiable self, capable of little more than simply existing day by day, slowly rotting from the pain inflicted by all those around him. No, he had to stay numb, he had to stay cold and unfeeling, and he could only do that by constantly using his powers, forcing it to perpetually encompass as much of his body as possible.

Every few minutes or so, that dreadful tingling would reemerge somewhere on his body and Marcus would grit his teeth and bury whatever inch of warm, exposed skin and flesh dared to feel again beneath a deluge of darkness, each one deeper and colder than the one before.

The sound of police sirens caused his ears to perk. Marcus casually cast a glance back in the direction he'd came from. None of those pesky officers had been able to keep track of his movements and keep tabs on his location once he'd submerged that plaza into blackness and knocked them all back and sprang away. No, they were of no consequence. No one was of any consequence to Marcus now, Quirked or otherwise.

And yet... Marcus grumbled to himself. Those 'Lights'. The further south he rampaged, absorbing any and all light from his surroundings as he went, he could faintly detect two particularly strong 'Lights' way in the distance, getting closer and closer the more he went. He could feel these Lights, just a little. There was a warmth to them he couldn't even begin to describe. It was almost as if they were alive. Of course, that just made him want to extinguish these 'Lights' as quickly as possible. How dare they penetrate through the coldness of his new being and make him feel!?

Marcus was about to launch himself from the building and continue his way southward, but he paused; two more Lights suddenly manifested in the direction he was heading, and barely a minute or two had passed before they suddenly disappeared...and then reappeared behind him, in the direction of the Project Pegasus Labs that he had decimated minutes ago.

"What the hell is going on?" Marcus growled aloud. He now had two options: continue southward and extinguish the Lights he had initially sensed or swing back toward his old laboratory and try to snuff out the Lights that manifested over there.

After a moment of internal debate, Marcus kicked off the skyscraper and landed on a platform of shadow that materialized out of his body. He zoomed southward without hesitation, with Marcus deciding to stick with the Lights he'd detected first. He would deal with the other two later; security and police had already gathered in that direction anyhow and he wanted to avoid those annoyances for as long as possible.

Marcus leaned forward as his levitating platform zoomed onward, urging it to go faster and faster still as the Washington Square Park Archway soon came into view. With a malevolent grin, Marcus sped right towards it, sending a cloud of dust and rubble into the evening sky as he crashed atop the ancient arch, looking out across the stunned sea of people before him.

All eyes were on him once again as he narrowed his search for the nearest Light that caused his new body to quiver so irritably. There were a few shouts of surprise as he landed with a crash, but the crowd didn't descend into mayhem until he leaped off the arch, over the fountain, and onto the ground below.

As before, the screams and thunderous stampeding of frightened bodies became little more than white noise in Marcus's ears as he finally managed to corner his target: a pink-haired girl wrapped in
a dark green fabric.

The girl was shuddering, her wide-eyed face full of fear as she collapsed to the ground and scooted backwards until she was pressed against the fountain wall, with nowhere else to go.

_No, it's not the girl_, Marcus suddenly came to realize. The Light vexing him so thoroughly was not the girl...but the cloak she was wearing? Marcus could hardly begin to comprehend how the garb was part of the source of his aggravation, but that wasn't going to stop him from ripping it to shreds and extinguishing its Light!

"Girl," Marcus rasped venomously. "Hand over that cloak you have there."

"The cloak...?" The crosshaired-eyed girl asked. The cloak seemed to shudder and the girl hugged it closer to her body. "I-it's not yours!"

"Give me the cloak, girl, and no harm will come to you!" Marcus growled, his patience dwindling to zero.

"I'm holding onto this for someone else!" The girl said defiantly as the cloak seemingly attached itself to her backside without any movement from the girl. Marcus nearly recoiled from a surge in Light emanating from the fabric, which flowed freely into the girl's body and kept her resolve and defiance steeled.

"Then I will extinguish you along with that wretched Light you wield!" Marcus roared, his arms bursting into amorphous bludgeons that he raised above the girl's head, making her flinch in terror.

"Get away from her!" A voice exclaimed from behind him. Before Marcus could even turn to face this newest annoyance and obstacle, a lash of blazing fire soared through the air and ensnared his arms. Marcus found himself being pulled back and yanked to the ground from a forceful tug. "Hatsume! Run!" The pink-haired girl wasted no time and sprinted out of view.

With a pained hiss, Marcus worked fervently to rid his arms of the lashes that constricted him. It was painstaking agony, but he managed to overwhelm the restrictive fire by drowning it in a torrent of renewed shadows. It hurt, it hurt, _it hurt!_ Marcus turned around quickly, seething to himself how this Light was now inflicting pain on him rather than simply being an irritant.

Marcus nearly took a step back in fear when he saw the one who'd gotten in his way. It was a messy green-haired boy, whose eyes were placed squarely on his own. His gaze was filled with equal parts fear and determination and the boy had taken a fighting stance, despite the obvious dread he was showing.

But there was an even more obvious fact about this enigmatic boy, one that was only amplified when the green cloak flew to his backside, attaching itself to him and amplifying the Light twofold.

"Boy..." Marcus rumbled, narrowing his eyes. "You and the cloak are the two Lights I first sensed."

"And you must be the dark presence _I_ sensed!" The boy retorted, trembling where he stood.

Marcus _did_ take a step back this time. He sensed the boy's presence, and he was sensed in turn!? Not only that, but the boy's Quirk, whatever it was, seemed to counter his power perfectly, his Light being somehow able to pierce straight through the comforting cocoon of his newfound darkness and actually cause him pain where people with guns could not.

Quivering with rage, Marcus bared his teeth as the pressure within his form skyrocketed, the shadows within swirling tempestuously. This boy's very existence...was a blight against his own!
swore back in the lab that no one would ever stomp Quirkless Marcus beneath their heels ever again! He would make every Quirked individual that dared to get in his way suffer his wrath! He'll start with this boy before him—his slaughtered corpse will suffice as a warning against all Quirked!

Letting loose a fierce, bestial yell, Marcus's body began drawing in all light from Washington Square Park and the surrounding buildings: street lights, neon vendor signs, decorative bulbs, etc. All luminescence was dragged into his bodily abyss, gobbled up by the dark, incessant hunger lurking within him. Soon, the entire park was shrouded in a nearly impenetrable darkness. The boy's cloak seemed to wrap around his body, preemptively shielding him from what came next.

The pressure reached its limit and Marcus unleashed it all at once in the form of a mighty shockwave, blasting it outward in all directions around him. The boy was seemingly hit pointblank and sent flying. The dark tremor absolutely laid waste to the park, busting through the fountain walls and forcing the water to erupt high into the sky. Street lamps and telephone poles were snapped and bent like toothpicks, dangling precariously above the ground. The greenery was rent asunder, roots and chunks of wood sent careening into the crowded vendors, most of which were blasted onto their sides or collapsed where they stood; some even burst into flames.

Marcus panted heavily as he surveyed his latest carnage. The mostly evacuated park was thoroughly destroyed and laid to waste...but he hadn't accomplished his goal. A brilliantly bothersome incandescence shone through the cloud of dust, causing Marcus to shield his eyes momentarily. Much to his dismay, he saw that the boy and his cloak remained relatively unharmed...and they were levitating. The cloak was fluttering outward, seemingly stopping the boy from flying too far back while the impact of the attack appeared to be mostly absorbed by a shimmering shield of some sort conjured by his very hands.

Before Marcus could muster even a snarl, the sound of scraping metal and other debris filled both of their ears. Both Marcus and the boy looked over at the source of the noise, watching as a grizzly old man calmly pushed his way out of the flaming wreckage of one of the vendors. His jacket and pants were scorched in various areas. In one hand he held the body of another person, and in the other, he held the remains of a shattered beer bottle.

He gently settled the body he had pulled from the wreckage off to the side before leveling a murderous glare directly at Marcus.

"Hey, asshole," The man spoke directly to Marcus as he raised the shattered top half of his beer bottle before abruptly dropping it, letting it shatter completely upon impact. Three metallic, elongated claws slowly emerged from between the man's knuckles on both his hands with a soft *snikt*, as if they were unsheathed swords. "I was drinking that."
From Izuku to Marcus

Chapter Summary

Izuku does battle against the corrupted Marcus Daniels with a couple new (or old?) faces, testing his newfound magical skills against this new, dark foe. In the aftermath, Izuku and Mei are set upon by two iconic New York Pro Heroes.

"Izuku," Strange spoke without turning toward his student. "I want you to get yourself to safety immediately. If this is Ikiji then it would be best if you were nowhere near this location. You are not ready to confront him again. Either return to the Sanctum or return home posthaste."

"That is an order, Izuku," Strange sternly added when he sensed that the boy was about to object in some way. Strange briskly opened another portal and promptly entered through, closing it behind him.

_Forgive me, my student_, Strange thought as the fizzling of his closing portal left him enclosed in a dimly lit wreckage._Your safety is absolutely paramount to me._

When Strange strode into the remains of Project Pegasus's laboratories he bristled with caution, unsure of what to expect. The destruction wrought upon the room was not surprising to him in the least, with glass panels and flickering lights hanging from the ceiling and ominous claw marks etched on the walls. A pungent odor of blood also hung in the still air, and Strange quickly found the corresponding bloodied stains on the wall and floor that birthed the foul smell. He very well might have gagged if his years of experience as a surgeon were not so thoroughly ingrained in his brain.

What was surprising, however, was the complete lack of debris to be found. The floor was completely clear of any rent pieces of metal from the torn walls and ceilings. There were no shards of glass on the floor despite the obvious fact that all of the lab's windows had been blown out from a terrible force. The room seemed stripped of any electronic components or equipment, though Strange could see indentations on the floor that indicated they were present before. And to top it all off, there wasn't a speck of dust to be found. Aside from the remnants of damage and blood, it was as if the entire room had undergone a deep cleaning of sorts. Thoroughly perplexing.

But aside from the blood, there was another foulness lingering on the floor and in the air of the room. It was something Strange recognized almost instantly. This lingering malignance carried a familiarity with it that Strange did not savor in the slightest. It was imprinted all over the room, and Strange followed a particularly thick trail until he came across the first oozing puddle of shadows hidden away in a darkened corner.

_Energy from the Dark Dimension_, Strange thought worriedly as he gazed down at the slowly shrinking pool. _Ikiji...what have you done?_

This was clearly a premeditated strike, Strange could see as much. The attack on Kamar-Taj was proof enough that Ikiji operated on planning rather than impulse. But what was Ikiji attempting to accomplish by unleashing Dormammu's ritual upon a laboratory owned by Project Pegasus? The group was renowned for experimenting on and researching with theoretical energies. Their mission statement, as far as Strange could remember, was to discover increasingly renewable sources of power with different kinds of energy. Was this an ideological attack by Ikiji then? Had he assaulted
the labs to make some kind of statement?

No, I'm definitely missing something here, Strange thought as he summarily zapped the shrinking dark puddle with a few weak bolts, watching with disdain as it evaporated into a sickly miasma. There was a deeper purpose to this attack, no doubt about it.

Strange glanced over as another fledgling pool crawled out of another corner of the room. It slithered silently across the bloodstained wall toward the ground, leaving a perfectly spotless trail in its wake.

"I see!" Strange said aloud. "These pools are not just remnants of energy from the Dark Dimension, they are literal conduits, temporary and diminutive passageways from our dimension to his..."

Not wide enough for Dormammu or any creation of his to forcefully enter through, but more than enough for his corruptive influence to seep in. That also explained why they were shrinking on their own and why his bolts obliterated one in an instant—the White Magic that formed the base of his powers and the Seal of the Vishanti that protected the planet were a direct counter to Dormammu's dark magic. The sheer amount of White Magic on this planet and at his disposal was more than enough to passively eat away at the shriveling apertures until they were no more.

But conduits of this energy could not be simply conjured by the stolen ritual. A medium—usually a host body—must exist in order for the darkness to materialize.

Strange froze where he stood; this wasn't merely an ideological attack by Ikiji at all.

He used the ritual on another! Strange thought in horror at the prospect of a rebirth of the zealots. He infected someone from Project Pegasus and set them loose on the Expo!

Strange rushed to a shattered window pane and looked out across the city blocks, darkened entirely except for the shimmering of police cruisers down below. The trail was faint, but it definitely originated here. Following the trail from here gave Strange a clear vantage point he lacked at the park. Whoever Ikiji had corrupted was heading due south, toward where he initially was. But if not towards him, then they were most certainly headed towards—

"Izuku!" Strange muttered in fright as he hastily erected a portal straight back to Washington Square Park. Dashing through, Strange halted as he was met with the smell of smoke and blood, a previously packed park now devoid of light aside from a few flickering flames and people aside from three.

Strange locked eyes with a listless Izuku and ashamedly resigned himself to the fact that the battle was already over.

T-that's the old man from the bar that I encountered earlier! Izuku thought as he watched the grizzly old man shrug his scorched jacket off to the ground in a smoldering heap. I'm glad he's okay!

The man's physique was certainly impressive for his seemingly advanced age, and his jacket seemed to hide the bulk of it. He rolled his head from side to side, cracking his neck loudly as he brandished those huge, menacing claws directly toward the villain before them.

With a beastly snarl, the man surprised both Izuku and Marcus by suddenly leaping forward, swinging those fearsome claws of his in an animalistic frenzy.

Is he planning on fighting!? Izuku thought as he stood his ground, fighting off the instinct to step away from the tumult. The man carried a bloodlust within him that reminded him a lot of Kacchan. I guess this old man must be a Pro! I don't recognize him, though...
The sudden rush into battle caught Marcus off guard, and he quickly leaped back to keep some
distance between him and the clawed man. The aura he was giving off as he swung his claws with
reckless abandon was incredibly intimidating, and Marcus felt endangered without even knowing the
full capabilities of this new foe.

Marcus was put squarely on the defense as he continually jumped back to avoid the savage man's
brutal slicing swings, his Darkforce erupting forth and covering his torso and arms to mount a
defense for its host. Unfortunately, the grizzly man proved to be the quicker of the two of them as he
suddenly closed the gap with a sudden burst of speed and sank his mighty claws into Marcus's chest
with a loud roar.

Marcus gasped, flinching out of instinct as the man buried his claws deep into the swirling shadows
of his body, pushing them down until his bare knuckles were pressed against his pectoral muscles.
The man had ran the entire lengths of his claws into the dark depths. Izuku looked on in amazement
at how quickly the man had landed such a devastating attack.

The three were silent for but a moment before the old man frowned and cursed under his breath,
followed by Marcus laughing uncontrollably.

"What a frightening oldster you are!" Marcus laughed derisively as the older man struggled to pull
his claws out of the shadowy depths of Marcus's chest, growling and swearing all the while. "You've
got an intimidating bark, but your bite leaves much to be desired!"

"Such a shame..." Marcus sneered as his Darkforce pulsed and began pulling the older man into its
depths, arms first. The man's thrashing and snarling only intensified as his hands soon disappeared
into the shadowy vastness, followed by his forearms, and then his elbows. "Perish along with your
wretched Quirk!"

A sickening squelch resounded throughout the park and the old man roared in agony, blood spilling
out and staining his shirt and dribbling out only to be reabsorbed back into the darkness. It had been
quite a long while since he'd experienced pain of this sort, but the man could feel the adamantium in
his arms holding up just fine, despite his skin and flesh going through a metaphorical meat presser.

Although I'll really be in trouble if my entire body gets sucked in there...!

The grizzly man's worries were soon assuaged as two fiery lashes were suddenly wrapped around
his bulgy biceps. Glancing back, the man saw Izuku pulling back as hard as he could to free him
from the absorptive shadows.

Marcus's cocky laughs soon gave way to a cacophony of pained screeching, the close proximity of
Izuku's magic whips piercing through the Darkness and causing his body actual pain again. He
stopped drawing the older man in and swiftly repelled him with as much force as he could
immediately muster before his Darkforce faded entirely, sending him and the boy flying back while
he put some distance between them to recuperate.

"M-mister, are you okay—!?” Izuku came to the man's aid, only to recoil in revulsion as he saw the
state of his arms. While his claws were perfectly intact, the skin and sinewy muscles of his arms
seemed bloody and smushed beyond recognition. "Oh my God, your arms...!"

"Ngh, don't worry about that..." The man groaned as Izuku helped him sit right back up. He grit his
teeth and grunted, forcing himself through the pain as his second power began to work its magic.

His arms are regenerating!? Izuku thought in bewilderment as he watched the man's mutilated arms
repair themselves back into seemingly perfect condition. Not a drop of blood could be seen on his
His regeneration capabilities are impressive! Izuku gawked over the man’s powers. But I thought those metal claws of his was his Quirk? What correlation could there be between metal claws and enhanced healing...?

Meanwhile, Marcus was panting as he pressed his own hands against his chest, inspecting what damage there was. That green-haired brat—that damned Light—used his Quirk to harm him again! He glared daggers at the boy as his exposed chest was eventually submerged once more beneath his splendid Darkforce. He wouldn’t settle until that boy was dead by his hands; what a blight he and his Quirk were, to counter his newfound powers so easily!

"Uh, sir?" Izuku asked anxiously as the older man got back up on his feet. "A-are you sure you’re ready to—"

"I'm fine, kid," The man grunted. "I know what my limits are. But maybe you can catch me up to speed on yours: just how much magic training you got under your belt right now?"

Izuku was about to respond until the man’s words registered completely. He turned and stared up at him, dumbfounded that the man knew his secret.

"...You know about magic?" Izuku asked, feeling just a tad bit defensive and suspicious.

"Don't get skeptical with me, kid," The man said. "Just tell me how long you've been training with Strange already."

Strange? This man knows of sensei, too? I guess he must be one of the few Pros that All Might said sensei had dealings with in the past, Izuku thought as he decided this man was worth trusting, given the situation.

"...A little less than a year and a half," Izuku answered honestly but vaguely.

"Tch," Izuku heard the man click his tongue. "Well, any bright ideas for this guy? I skewered that chump in one fell swoop but it had no effect. And I don't feel like having my limbs crushed to bits again."

Bright ideas, huh? Izuku asked himself as he turned his attention to their enemy, darkness pouring from his torso and covering nearly the entirety of his body in a blackness that stood out even amongst the dimness of the evening’s fading light. Only the man’s head and hands were visible amongst the pulsing dark energy.

Given what I’m looking at right now, the energy his body is giving off seems incredibly fluid, Izuku analyzed. But he can also harden it, as when he trapped this old guy's claws and arms in his chest. So this darkness of his can have both fluid and solid-like properties, and when covering his body, it renders him nearly invulnerable to most conventional forms of harm. And his shadows seem to have some unknown depth to them, as he tried absorbing that man with little effort!

But... Izuku clenched his hands. His physical body still has to be under there somewhere, right? My magic is somehow extremely effective and cuts through his defenses with ease. In that case...!

Izuku crouched and used his Cloak of Levitation to soar straight up into the air. "My power works against him for some reason, so you stay down here and wait for me to find an opening!" Izuku exclaimed.

"Damn it, kid, wait—!" The man tried to protest.
"As if I'd give you an opportunity!" Marcus screeched and took to the air after Izuku, his malleable shadows forming a platform that carried him into the air and after his prey.

So he uses his shadows to levitate himself through the air much like how I use my cloak to do the same, huh? Izuku thought as he soared around the plaza, keeping his distance as he observed his foe's tactics.

"I won't let you escape from me!" Marcus snarled and outstretched his hands. "I'll drown you in a sea of suffocating shadows you damned Quirked!"

His body abruptly exploded upward as a pulsating, umbratic geyser that towered high into the sky, far above Izuku's head and taller than any of the surrounding buildings. The geyser seemed to slow its ascent before it toppled over and raced back toward the ground, bearing down on Izuku as a caliginous tidal wave.

This is familiar... Izuku was reminded of the eerily similar attack he'd attempted to dodge back in the Mirror Dimension with Master Strange.

"Are you ready?" Izuku yelled at his cloak, which seemed to flutter in confirmation. "Then let's try this for real this time!"

Izuku and his cloak soared parallel to the dark wave as it twisted and crashed over them, forming an ominous tunnel with the end barely in sight from how obscured it was. Izuku kept his flying as straight as he possibly could before a glancing blow from the side of the tunnel sent him spinning wildly.

"T-take over!" Izuku groaned, letting his cloak control their flight as he shrugged off the stunning blow.

Don't fight for control, Izuku reminded himself of the lesson Strange had taught him earlier. Be in sync with the cloak! Let my intentions be felt clearly!

Izuku eased back into control of their combined flight as they soared through the end of the tunnel, emerging nearly unscathed as the shadowy mass crashed, twisted, and shrank back into a somewhat humanoid shape, the man's face budding out of the writhing mass. Izuku beamed triumphantly as he finally synced with his Cloak of Levitation to successfully avoid an attack of that stature.

"We did it!" Izuku laughed as he circled his enemy at a reasonable distance. "I can't believe we pulled that off—!" Izuku's mind hardly had enough time to register a sense of sudden, impending danger before his body suddenly seized up in midair, a tight constriction slithering around his torso and limbs. "Damn it...!"

"Got you," Marcus sneered as the dark tendril he'd detached from his body before morphing into a giant wave got the drop on the unsuspecting boy.

He can separate this dark energy from his physical body and control it remotely as well!? Izuku thought, appalled by the terrifying level of versatility this enemy was showing with his powers. Izuku felt his head yank backward as the blackened stranglehold that kept his body prisoner suddenly zoomed back toward its master, reconnecting to his body where his arm used to be. He disconnected his entire arm and used it to trap me!

"Just as you were analyzing me, I was observing you all the same, boy," Marcus sneered. "Oh, and why wouldn't I? Your damn Quirk can do the one thing that all others, even that brutish ally of yours, cannot: you can hurt me."
So he can't tell that I'm actually using magic! Izuku thought as he struggled in vain against his bonds, which only caused his opponent to tighten his grip, causing Izuku to yell in pain.

"Yes..." Marcus grinned maliciously as he gave Izuku multiple squeezes, watching him with delirious eyes as the boy screamed in pain with each clench of his fist. "Feels painful, doesn't it? Perhaps now you can understand an iota of the pain I've had to endure my entire life: the pain that comes with being a Quirkless nobody in this world."

Izuku stopped his pained wriggling and merely gaped at his attacker with wide eyes and open mouth. H-he's...Quirkless?

"Maybe you don't believe me..." Marcus whispered, his mad grin faltering, crumbling away into a more grim expression. "I can hardly believe it myself. I've lived my entire life wondering what it would be like to have a bit of power for myself—power over others—for once, just like how all you rotten Quirked have had power over me."

Izuku felt pangs of remorse and empathy for the man. Ikiji...you used the forbidden ritual on a Quirkless person? Izuku wished he could tell the man that he really did understand that pain, since he was technically still Quirkless just like him. But he couldn't. This man thought Izuku was using a Quirk this whole time. He didn't recognize it as magic. Did he even know what power he was using? Or did he just find himself swept up in the chaos he'd caused and decided not to question it? Either way, if Izuku told the man he understood...his anger would most assuredly escalate.

"But with this," Marcus gestured at the symbol of Dormammu emblazoned on his forehead, practically identical to Ikiji, "I'm going to show all you detestable Quirked—nay, the world—that just because one is Quirkless...doesn't mean they're powerless!"

Marcus leaned his head back and let loose another raucous round of deranged laughter as he squeezed Izuku's body again. However, upon looking back at his captive, he nearly dropped him out of surprise: the boy had his eyes shut tight with a few tears leaking through.

"You're...crying...?" Marcus asked dumbfounded. "Are you crying because you don't want to die? Or because you pity poor, pitiful, Quirkless Marcus Daniels that damn much?"

"You wouldn't believe me if I told you the truth," Izuku croaked, barely restraining his sadness after hearing the very words he'd told All Might all those months ago repeated by a villain of all people. It disheartened him terribly how much in common he and this man had, yet he wouldn't be able to tell him lest his rage be stoked further. No, he'd have to power through this. He had to stop this man no matter what. He couldn't let him use his new power to fuel his vengeance against people with Quirks!

Marcus, stunned from Izuku's abrupt deluge of tears and studying him too closely, failed to notice a burly form barreling down on him until it was too late. The grizzly man had leaped up from a pile of debris towards them and slashed Marcus across his cheek, slicing his flesh open and drawing plenty of blood. Marcus squealed in horror and loosened his hold on Izuku just enough for the boy's cloak to wriggle them to freedom. The old man landed squarely on his boots as Izuku's cloak whisked him to safety, leaving Marcus to writhe in pain.

"He cut me! He cut me!" Marcus howled as the shadows wrapped around him defensively, absorbing the blood pouring down his split cheek.

"Saved you right in the nick of—kid, are you crying?" The old man shook some blood off his claws and blinked at Izuku.
"No!" Izuku quickly responded, wiping his tears away and forcing his mind into overdrive to find a way to beat this opponent as fast as possible. The time for tears was over. "But I think you gave me a vital clue to defeating him, Mister—"

"Logan," The man responded brusquely. "Just Logan, kid."

"Well, uh, Logan," Izuku spoke sheepishly, feeling a tad awkward at referring to the man by name alone without any honorific. "I think I figured out the crux of his powers!"

"Let's hear it then, kid," Logan grunted.

"I don't think that dark energy of his is simply covering his body," Izuku explained. "I think it's actually *replacing* it instead."

"Replacing it?" Logan scrunched his brow in confusion. "What do you mean?"

"Those shadows of his, I'm pretty sure it's not something his body is actually producing," Izuku continued. "Rather, I think his body is just a medium between this realm and the realm that the shadows come from!"

"So more magic mumbo jumbo then," Logan grumbled, brandishing his claws again. "Always something with you sorcerers, huh? So the gist of it is that every part of his body not visible is actually in that other dimension, correct?"

"And that's why you couldn't hurt him with your claws earlier," Izuku confirmed. "Your attack struck pure energy and not his body!"

"But your attacks can pierce straight through and harm his body," Logan said with an adamant grin. "Yeah, I understand now."

"His head is a weak point," Izuku added. "He won't cover his face or head in his darkness or else he wouldn't be able to see or coordinate with the rest of his body in this dimension."

"A head shot, huh?" Logan crouched, preparing for the next attack. "I think I can do that, kid."

"You...bastard!" Marcus roared as his rage finally overcame his pain. He rocketed straight towards Logan, whipping many sharp, pointed dark tendrils in his direction. Logan jumped back as Izuku's hands blazed with magic, constructing fiery whips in both hands to lash right back at Marcus. In spite of his rage, Marcus still recognized the danger Izuku's power posed, causing him to skid to a halt and leap back of the whips' range. Izuku pressed on with his attack, jumping toward Marcus and lashing his whips at him at every opportunity, but Marcus managed to dodge every assault.

_Tch, Izuku ruminated. If he stays out of range from my whips, then I won't be able to create any sort of opening with my magic! I only have one choice then...!_

Izuku would have to swallow his fears like he did his tears just a moment ago and use the Bolts of Bedevilment.

"I'll crush you both!" Marcus roared as his body began swelling and bulging outward as if it were about to pop. "Grind you into nothingness!"

Marcus's body burst into many dark globules that splattered all across the plaza. Several smacked directly into Izuku and Logan; Izuku tried to deflect them away with his whips but they proved too numerous, and the globs couldn't be skewered by Logan's claws. Both Izuku and Logan were soon immobilized by Marcus's attack and were completely ensnared by the absorptive force of the
shadows. Not even Izuku's cloak could wriggle itself to safety.

"My patience has been thoroughly squandered!" Marcus shouted as the remaining globules assimilated back together, reforming Marcus's humanoid shape as his leering head peeked out from beneath its defenses. "I'll squeeze you both to death! But this time I'll keep my distance, just in case..."

Marcus mercilessly clenched his hands shut, slowly constricting both Izuku and Logan in an iron vice. Marcus's cruel laughter mixed with Logan's pained grunts and Izuku's cries of agony, combining into a cacophonic racket that echoed into the desolate night. Logan tried slashing his way out to no avail, while Izuku was left unable to conjure any magic with his hands bound so tightly.

I-I can't...breathe...! Izuku gasped for breath when he suddenly saw a familiar figure zooming through the air toward Marcus. Is that—!?

"Hey, you creep!" Mei shouted at Marcus as she barreled towards him with her cylindrical jet pack, thick plumes of vapor trailing behind her as she flew. "Release them or suffer the wrath of my baby!"

Mei brandished a baton-like object in her hands and took aim with her Quirk, the crosshairs in her eyes narrowing and focusing directly on Marcus's face. She flipped a switch on the object she carried and deftly chucked it straight at Marcus, who summarily snatched it in midair and brought it close up to study it. The item Mei had thrown whirred to life as its components moved around, a bright sizzling light blazing out between the prongs on the end, causing Marcus to recoil slightly.

Is that...her ionic torch? Izuku wondered as he helplessly watched the scene unfold through squinted eyes.

Marcus inspected the seemingly innocuous torch for several moments before laughing condescendingly. The bright light was little more than a mild irritant compared to Izuku's magic. "You thought a fancy flashlight would do anything to me, girl!?!" He laughed derisively.

"It's not a flashlight, it's an ionic torch!" Mei retorted as she abruptly turned tail and began flying away. "One that tends to blow up when you turn it all the way to max power right away!"

Marcus didn't even have enough time to properly register Mei's words before the torch he held to his face abruptly exploded, scorching his exposed head in a rush of incendiary heat and flame. He jerked about wildly, screaming from the intense pain that blindsided him. Marcus's frenzied movements gave Izuku and Logan the opportunity they needs to jostle themselves loose of his tight bonds.

"Alright, just what we needed!" Izuku yelled as he flexed his hands, preparing to weave his next spell. "I'll get you another opening—!"

"No!" Logan growled, dashing forward with his eyes dead set on Marcus's writhing body. "I'll get you your opening! You just prepare to finish it!"

Izuku opened his mouth to protest, but any words would've been drowned out by the ferocious roar Logan let loose when he launched himself at Marcus, claws poised perfectly to strike. Marcus locked eyes with his assailant right as Logan swung his left arm, driving his claws through Marcus's cheeks, skewering his mouth and slamming him down on the ground. Marcus's cries of agony and thrashing only escalated as Logan kept him pinned.

"Now, kid!" Logan roared as he twisted the claws harpooned in Marcus's mouth, digging them into the ground beneath them.

Izuku flew up above them both, cloak billowing majestically behind him as his fingers cackled with
resplendent electricity. He looked down and saw Logan refusing to budge from his spot.

"I need you to get out of the way!" Izuku cried out.

"It's fine, kid!" Logan yelled back. "I can handle any spell you throw at me—gak!" Logan bit his cheeks to suppress the surging pain he was assailed with. He glanced down and saw that Marcus had impaled his abdomen with several wickedly sharp dark spikes, the bloodied appendages flailing madly as they tried to pry Logan off their conjurer.

"Logan...!" Izuku gasped fearfully as he watched the spikes run his ally through.

"END IT!" Logan roared as he coughed up a significant amount of blood.

"NO!" Marcus roared right back, his flails becoming more and more desperate as he saw past Logan and saw the lightning building in Izuku's hands. "I won't let it end here...! I won't allow myself to fall to your damned Quirks...!"

Izuku slowly inhaled as he locked eyes with Marcus, swallowing whatever regret and remorse remained and allowing his resolve to fully blossom along with his lightning.

"I'm not using a Quirk," Izuku said softly before unleashing the full torrent of his spell directly upon Logan and Marcus's bodies. "BOLTS OF BEDEVILMENT!"

The crackling of lightning and the dying screams of Marcus dominated the night air. The park and the surrounding blocks were briefly illuminated white and yellow before the light inevitably faded along with Izuku's spell, leaving two sizzling bodies in its wake.

Only one of the bodies got back up to his feet. Logan stumbled back over to Izuku's side as his wounds slowly but surely dissipated, his impaled abdomen closing shut and the burns all over his arms and backside from the bolts fading out of existence. Both Izuku and Logan observed Marcus lying squarely on his back, breathing raggedly as his once shadowy body seemed to flake and crumble away into numerous sizzling embers.

"What do you know..." Marcus rasped, chuckling lightly as he kept his grey eyes locked on the sky above him. "I can't...feel anything anymore..."

Izuku winced as his pity and remorse reemerged.

"Ah..." Marcus sighed as his torso and legs fully crumbled away, his ashy remains carried away into the Manhattan sky by the November breeze. "Painless...exactly what I wanted..."

"Marcus," Izuku spoke as he cautiously stepped toward the fading man. "I know you'll never believe me, but...I really do understand your pain. The injustice of having people with Quirks trying to keep you down at seemingly every opportunity...so much of what you've had to endure was undeserved, I know. But the pain we live with and carry in our hearts—even if its pain we'd rather live without—we should always allow it to help define us, instead of letting it dominate and corrupt us. People are more than their pain...don't you remember?"

Marcus tilted his head up just enough to look at Izuku, the rage in his eyes having melted away into a look of serenity and calm...and the symbol of Dormammu on his forehead had burned away as well.

"Unfortunately," Marcus murmured with one final, weak smile. "I don't...

Marcus's head collapsed into a sooty pile along with the rest of his body, the wind collecting and scattering what was left of his ashen remains across the park.
Izuku fell to his knees, choking back a sob just as a portal opened up across the park, a pale Doctor Strange rushing through, swiveling his head until he caught sight of his student. Panicked eyes met listless ones and Strange seemed to understand the situation immediately.

"Strange," Logan grunted as he walked forward, giving Izuku a consolatory pat on the shoulder as he passed by. "Nice of you to join us, Houdini."

"Logan," Strange spoke softly, a hint of surprise evident in his voice. "You...helped my student?"

"You got a problem with that, bub?" Logan glowered as he strode past Strange.

"No," Strange replied, turning to watch the man retrieve his scorched jacket from where he'd left it. "It's just a bit surprising since, like me, you aren't a legal Pro Hero."

That certainly caused Izuku's ears to perk. The boy raised his head and stared at the man's retreating backside with confusion etched on his face.

"Wait!" Izuku called out. Logan stopped in his tracks. "If you aren't a Pro Hero, then...why?"

Logan was silent for a few moments before he reached into one of the pockets of his ruined jacket. He pulled out an obnoxiously large Cuban cigar and approached the still flaming wreckage of one of the destroyed vendors. He brushed the tip of the cigar against the flaming metal and promptly stuck it in his mouth, puffing out smoke.

"Well, kid," Logan said with a barely visible grin. "Just consider it payment for a few things you did...or rather, for a few things you've yet to do."

Both Strange and Izuku gave Logan curious stares as he stalked off into the night.

"My name's Izuku Midoriya!" Izuku called out to Logan before he fully disappeared from view. "Not just 'kid'!"

"Yeah, I know!" Logan barked back before the darkness of the night removed him from view entirely.

You are quite an anomaly, Logan, Strange furrowed his brow and pondered as he stared off toward where that man just was. The first widely reported Quirk in the world was from the city of Qingqing, China, and yet...you were born way before that incident, weren't you?

"Back to the drawing board for you, huh...?" Izuku heard Mei's lamentable voice. He turned his head and saw that she had landed a fair distance away and was cradling several broken components in her hands—her ionic torch.

"Sentient Fabric", huh?" Mei glanced at Izuku with narrowed, teasing eyes. "I didn't know that animating clothes involved flaming whips or bolts of lightning."

"Eh?" Izuku blinked before laughing apologetically. "G-guess I should at least be honest with how that was a complete lie, huh? Still...thank you. You really saved me back there."

"You're welcome!" Mei beamed and punched Izuku in the arm. "Although you definitely owe me now! I expect you to come to me and only me for your Support tech for at least the entirety of your first year at U.A!"
"Yeah, I will, promise!" Izuku said embarrassedly.

"One thing I don't understand, though," Mei said, casting a curious glance at Izuku. "Why did you lie about your Quirk?"

Oh crap. "Well, you see—" Izuku began, carefully considering how to best explain his lie with his teacher present in the plaza, before he found his backside and cloak suddenly embroiled in a sticky substance of some kind. Mei let out a startled yell as she was likewise tangled in the sticky webbing.

Wait, Izuku realized. Webbing...?

"I got two of them, Mr. Stark!" An excited voice rang out across the night sky as a figure landed silently before them.

"You really shouldn't call me by my real name when we're on duty, kid," Another voice, more casual this time, rang out. "It's not professional!"

Izuku and Mei turned their heads as a metallic, armored man landed flew toward them, his repulsors slowing him to a halt as he landed with a 'clunk'.

"Oh my God..." Izuku gawked at the red-and-blue spider costume that emerged into view.

"I can't believe it..." Mei stared dumbstruck at the gold-and-red armored suit striding towards them.

"It's Spider-Man!"

"It's Iron Man!"
From Peter to Izuku

Chapter Summary

Izuku and Mei both receive some helpful advice after their run-in with Spider-Man and Iron Man. Meanwhile, the League of Villains contemplate the results of their experiment on the poor, deceased Marcus while formulating their next plan of action.

First the exposition, then Project Pegasus's labs, and now this, Stark thought grimly as he scanned what remained of Washington Square Park. What was visible was illuminated by flickering, fading flames. What wasn't was obscured by the darkness of encroaching night and plumes of smoke. Not even the twinkling of stars could be seen through the haze; not that Manhattan was a great place for stargazing, anyway. This evening has been one giant clusterfuck from start to finish.

And then there's these two, Stark's visor settled on the boy and girl he'd given Peter the a-okay to restrain. Being that they were the only ones visible in the park, it was safe to at least consider the possibility they were involved in this attack somehow, although now...looking between the girl's dumbstruck face and the boy's awestruck face, he was beginning to think he'd made his judgment a bit prematurely.

"O-oh my gosh!" Izuku said, positively star-struck. "It's the United States' Number Two Pro Hero Iron Man! And his protégé, the Number Ten Pro Hero Spider-Man! I can't believe I'm actually meeting them face-to-face!"

"This isn't how I wanted to meet Mr. Stark, though..." Mei quietly muttered, weakly tugging at the webbing adhering to her backside and jet pack.

Great, Stark mentally sighed. *I asked for a perp and fate throws me a fanboy...*

"Spider-Man used his own special webbing on me!" Izuku muttered ecstatically. "A shear-thinning long-chain polymer formula with a consistency far tougher than that of nylon!"

*Yep. Fanboy.*

"I hope I never have to wash the back of this cloak ever again!" Izuku whispered as he glanced over his webbed cloak in adoration. The bottom tips of the cloak bunched up into fibrous fists and gave the boy a quick thump over the head. "Hey!"

"Alright, time to get to the bottom of this," Stark sighed. He glanced over at Peter, who seemed just as confused as he was. "Alright kid, get them to their feet so we can ask some questions before the authorities arrive."

"Right away Mr. Stark—uh, Iron Man!" Peter corrected himself. It was difficult sticking with hero aliases when you knew so many heroes on a first-name basis. He approached Izuku first to bring the boy to his feet—

"Cease and desist, gentleman," Strange sounded out as he stepped into view of the two heroes. "Those two are not the cause for the destruction you see before you."

"Doctor Strange?" Peter asked with widened eyes after the three heroes stared at each other in
"Strange?" Stark's visor concealed his face, but the surprise was evident in his voice. "Well I'll be damned, this must be serious if Stephen Strange himself crawled out of that cave you call a brownstone."

"What took you so long, Stark?" Stephen said sternly, pushing through the snark.

"Geez, you're grumpier than usual," Stark replied, his visor lifting up and revealing his face underneath. "You been watching reruns of House again?"

"Such childishness—"

"Relax, Chandu!" Stark retorted, earning a scowl from Strange. "I was already dealing with another incident before I got called out to the Project Pegasus labs!"

"Another incident?" Strange's face paled considerably, wondering if Ikiji had committed even more malicious mischief than he previously thought. "Was it related to what occurred here?"

"That's what we're here to find out," Stark said. "And given the severity of the situation here, I'm tempted to say that they are."

"How severe are we talking?" Strange asked as he strode forward. "Stark?"

"...Several of the Iron Legion were stolen from Avengers Tower," Stark responded bleakly. "No trace of the perp on security either."

Strange whirled around in thought as Izuku and Mei watched the scene unfold in silence. The Iron Legion. Stark's group of droids armored in his likeness that functioned as security and support whenever and wherever the Avengers required them. For several drones to be whisked away into the night right from under Stark's nose, at Avengers Tower no less, was a serious breach of security.

*But was Ikiji responsible?* Strange thought to himself. He recognized his fallen apprentice's handiwork all over the incident with Project Pegasus, and could even infer what his motives might be, but had he also targeted Stark's drones and managed to get away without being caught on security? It seemed unlikely. Another party was probably responsible for the theft of Stark's property, but who?

*Questions for another time,* Strange mused as he turned back toward Stark and Peter. "No, given what I know, I don't believe these incidents are directly related," Strange finally said. "The villain responsible for the thefts is a separate entity than the villain who carried out this wanton destruction."

"And where is the villain responsible for all this, then?" Stark asked. "You didn't let him get away just because you're not technically a Pro Hero, did you?"

"Oh, he's here...and there...and there..." Mei snickered, drawing a mortified look from Izuku.

"Hatsume!" Izuku yelled, appalled by his new acquaintance's choice of words. "Too soon!"

"Excuse me?" Stark asked as he turned toward the two adolescents he had Peter web up, looking at the chagrined green-haired boy and then the pink-haired girl. "Mind letting me in on the joke, Inkling?"

"My protégé—the boy—and his acquaintance—the girl—defeated the villain responsible for the attack at the labs and here," Strange informed them.
"Excuse me, what? Stark blinked as he focused down on Izuku who had fallen silent, a discomforting disquietude settling over the boy as he stared down at the ground. What excitement he had in his eyes, voice, and body movements had all but vanished now, reduced to zero. The boy was clearly made uncomfortable about something, and Stark could possibly guess what it was.

"Protégé, huh?" Stark asked as he stepped closer to Izuku. "I assume you've explained to him the dangers of using magic along with vigilante activities, right, Strange?"

"As much as I would have liked for my student to not be involved in such conflicts, what happened here was most assuredly self-defense, Tony," Strange assured.

Magic? Mei wondered as she looked between Strange, Stark, and the suddenly crestfallen Izuku. What on earth was Mr. Stark talking about? Had he meant to say 'Quirk'? It was pretty jarring hearing her scientifically-minded idol throwing such a ludicrous word and a ludicrous concept around like that.

"You defeated the villain?" Stark asked Izuku, receiving a nod from the boy. "Where is he now?"

"He's...dead, sir," Izuku replied meekly.

Ah, there's the rub, Stark thought. He got the hint loud and clear. Whatever villain was attacking this Square Park and the people in it met his end by this boy's hands—the hands of Doctor Strange's student. It was a hard pill that many an aspiring hero found difficult to swallow, the inevitability of death—whether by their own hands or the hands of villains—that came with the profession.

Sorcerers, Stark knew, were no different. Strange was no stranger to death nor was he above killing enemies when he deemed it necessary.

Better now than later, Stark told himself as he approached Izuku and Mei. If the boy was going to become a sorcerer in Strange's footsteps, then as far as Stark was concerned, he needed to face this reality before he found himself standing against the kind of mystical or cosmic opponents he knew Strange was familiar with.

"Hold still, kiddos," Stark sighed as he raised his arms toward them. A fine icy mist began spraying out from his armored gauntlets, causing the two would-be U.A students to shiver as it cascaded atop their heads and shoulders. The adhesiveness of Spider-Man's webbing began degrading almost immediately, sagging off their backsides in soggy heaps.

As soon as he completely free of the webbing, Izuku got to his feet and briskly walked away from the scene, his head hanging low and his cloak wrapped around his body, as if trying its best to comfort him, though it sadly seemed ineffective.

"Hey, Midoriya, where are you—!" Mei yelled out to Izuku, stepping forward as if to follow after him, but a hand on her shoulder stopped her from taking another step. Mei turned and looked up to see Doctor Strange gazing down at her, a face that was seemingly equal parts strict and sympathetic.

"Let him go," Strange said gently as all eyes present slowly drifted after the boy, who stepped over debris and rubble before sitting down atop a patch of fountain wall not destroyed by Marcus's indiscriminate shockwave attack.

Geez... Stark thought before glancing over at Peter. An idea suddenly spawned in his head, something that might kill two birds with one stone. "Spider-Man," Stark said, jostling his own protégé to attention. "Look after him, will you?"

"Wha—? Me?" Peter asked incredulously, the eyes of his costume widening comically in
conjunction with the eyes beneath. "But, I-I'm not very good at this kind of thing—" But Stark's face left for no compromise or alternative. Giving a resigned nod, Spider-Man slowly approached Izuku and took a seat next to him, their conversation well out of earshot of the others.

"Now then," Stark said, turning his attention away from the boys and to the sole girl on the scene. "I guess I can ask you a few questions—huh? You okay, kid?"

Mei was also keeping her gaze glued to the ground, as if in shame, as she cradled the remains of a gadget of some kind in her hands. It looked singed beyond conventional repair, with prongs and metal bits dangling pathetically by a mere handful of wiry threads.

"This, uh, isn't how I wanted to meet you, Mr. Stark," Mei said without looking up at her idol. "I don't feel I should even ask you for an autograph or anything."

"You were at the Junior's Exposition," Stark said with a hint of recognition in his voice. "First place jet pack from your Junior High Science Fair if I remember correctly. Rudimentary design and functionality, but not at all unimpressive."

"But I don't want to just be unimpressive!" Mei suddenly countered. "Building things—being an inventor of Support gadgets—that's my passion! I got part of that passion from you, who's the very best! I can't stand meeting you like this...being unable to show you the absolute best of my babies and only coming out as 'not unimpressive'! But all I have to show for tonight is a rudimentary design...and now a broken failure of mine."

Stark stayed silent as Mei espoused her remorse and contriteness. He eyed the remains of her ionic torch in her hands, recalling vividly now the critical failure of the device when she was presenting it to a passing panel of judges, forcing her to shut it down before it blew and effectively sealing her fate in terms of scoring. But even in spite of that...it had still caught his eye, briefly as it may have been.

And anything that caught Tony Stark's eye was worth a second glance, at the very least.

"Broken failure, huh?" Stark asked, getting down on one knee to get a better look at Mei's torch. "Last time I saw that thing it was still in one piece. What happened to it?"

"I turned it on and threw it at the villain," Mei replied lamentably. "It blew and gave Midoriya and the man that was with him enough time to escape his grasp."

The man that was with him? Stark shot a questioning glance toward Strange, who was standing impassively to the side, looking toward his student, though it was clear the sorcerer was also listening in on his conversation, too. Stark mentally sighed—yet another question for later.

"So you used your broken torch to help an innocent," Stark deduced. "Doesn't sound like a much of a failure to me."

"What?" Mei looked up at him, the surprise and even the hint of fear on her face clearly discernible to Stark. "But my torch—"

"Blew up? Didn't do as you intended?" Stark hazarded a few guesses to what Mei was going to say. "Listen, kid: the gadgets we inventors build for others, whether they be heroes or not, don't become failures when they don't do what we built them to do. They become failures when we deem them failures."

"Failure is the mother of invention," Stark continued. "Thomas Edison once said that. Just because an invention doesn't work as intended doesn't mean the effort is wasted...and your efforts certainly weren't wasted if they saved Broccoli Hair over there."
Mei cracked the smallest of smiles, and Stark saw that he had gotten through to her in some way. He reached out and retrieved the broken remains of her torch into his own armored hands as a bluish liquid substance seeped through his armor and enveloped the busted invention.

"What are you—?" Mei began to ask.

"It's alright," Stark interjected as the bluish substance began molding the device back together, pushing wires and metal bits back in place and filling the gaps of what was missing. "I'm just using my Quirk on your torch."

Oh right. His Quirk. A power Stark had all but perfected in his rise to the top of both Heroics and inventing. Just as any normal body produces both red and white blood cells, Stark's body also produced a near endless amount of nanites that he could bond with any technology. It granted a direct interface with any electronic device, which he used to complement the many armors he wore while working as a Pro Hero. The nanites could also repair technology it bonded with, restoring it to previous undamaged states.

Stark, being the eccentric and distinctive person that he was, gave his unique Quirk an equally unique name: he called it...Extremis.

The bluish substance—the millions upon millions of nanites Stark used on the torch—retreated back beneath his armor, leaving what seemed to be a perfectly restored ionic torch in Stark's hands.

"You...fixed it..." Mei whispered, peering over her restored torch with wonder in her voice.

"I didn't really 'fix it' as much as I simply put it back together," Stark corrected her. "Functionally, it's exactly the same as it was before: every bit the broken failure you deemed it as."

The already weak smile faltered and Mei glanced down at her torch contemplatively, reflecting on Stark's words.

"You should think about what I said," Stark added. "Those that reach the top never do so without failing every now and then, sometimes often. The best of the best are never above failure, myself included. So embrace it, kid. Embrace your failures. You'll never get far without them."

When Stark sent Peter to look after the green-haired boy, a wave of apprehension swelled in the young hero's chest. It was an aspect of hero work that he wasn't quite skilled at or even really comfortable with given how relatively fresh his career still was. Hell, even during his Provisional License Exam, it was listed as an area he was weak in, and he naively thought he had all the basics nailed to a tee.

Quirk training? Check.

Beating up bad guys? Check.

Friendly, approachable attitude? Double check.

Being perfectly emotionally supportive of people in obvious distress? Less than a check...?

He couldn't help it that he always ended up so awkward around other people! That awkwardness stubbornly persisted, too, even in spite of his comical nature and the snark he'd picked up from Mr. Stark. Perhaps it was just residual from when he was primarily a loner. Before he joined the Avengers or participated in his Hero Internships in High School, Peter could never recall being outwardly social or particularly extraverted.
Having his first internship with Deadpool probably didn't help much, either.

So when Peter took an awkward seat next to Izuku on the crumbling fountain wall and seeing the palpable despondency on the younger boy's face, Peter began wracking his brain for possible solutions and ways to approach this.

*Well, I guess I could...start with a joke? Maybe if I can at least make him crack a smile, he'll open up to me better!* Peter thought. *The simplest solutions are often the best.*

"So..." Peter spoke to Izuku, trying a bit too hard to sound as casual as possible. "Doctor Strange's protégé, huh?" Upon receiving a slow nod from Izuku, Peter pressed on. "Has he taught you any of his fancy card tricks yet?"

"...What?" Izuku cautiously asked as he turned to look at Peter.

*Oh, he's, uh, looking at me like I've grown a second head,* Peter thought. *Not the reaction I was hoping for!*

"I'm...sorry, Spider-Man," Izuku said with a forced smile. "As excited as I was to actually be able to meet you...I'm not exactly in the mood for jokes."

"Yeah, I understand," Peter said with a sigh. "I got to admit, even though everyone says I'm really exceptional at fighting villains and being a positive role model for newer heroes, I'm not very good at the whole 'consoling' part of being a Pro."

Izuku gave Peter a bit of a softer look, exerting a lot less strain on keeping up his fake smile. He was fairly surprised, hearing such an admission from a hero like Spider-Man who publicly carries himself about as being extremely humorous, even clownish at times.

"Perhaps this will help a bit," Peter muttered before surprising Izuku even further by pulling off his spider mask, revealing the brown hair and hazel eyes that lied beneath, along with a slightly nerdy face that Izuku could tell somewhat resembled his own. The comparison between the two of them was much more comforting than the comparisons he had drawn between himself and Marcus.

"The villain you faced here in the park...you killed him, didn't you?" Peter asked softly, cutting straight to the matter at hand.

"He was a lot like me," Izuku gulped, composing himself as best he could. "He was Quirkless like me, suffered unjustly throughout his life, he even said the same thing I once said, about how Quirkless didn't have to mean powerless. Having to fight against someone I could relate with so strongly...it was disturbing, to say the least."

Peter nodded along as Izuku spoke. He sympathized with Izuku, having seen firsthand the kind of discrimination Quirkless people had to endure on a daily basis. It wasn't nearly as prevalent as it had once been, but one didn't need to do much digging to find it all the same.

"Spider-Man," Izuku faced Peter with a beseeching look. "Please tell me: how do you deal with this? I always tacitly knew that heroes risked being put in these situations, but killing that man...it made me feel awful."

"Hmm..." Peter rubbed his chin thoughtfully as he tried to think of a proper response; he ended up sticking with plain old honesty. "To tell you the truth, I've yet to actually end the life of a villain myself."

"Oh..." Izuku whispered, sounding more than a little bit helpless again.
"But," Peter continued. "You still felt that you had a responsibility to put an end to that man's attack, didn't you? You had the power to stop him from hurting innocent people, and so you fought him. Even in spite of his circumstances, in spite of his story, his pain, and especially the similarities between the two of you." He gave Izuku a genuine smile. "It's...Midoriya, right? Listen, Midoriya, when someone has the power to prevent bad things from happening, but doesn't, those things—villain attacks or not—happen because of them. It's a lesson I wish I had learned when I was your age."

Izuku perked up at that. "What do you mean?"

"You know my Quirk, right?" Peter asked. "My 'Spidey Sense'? It's a precognition type of Quirk that alerts me to incoming danger. But when I was your age I tried abusing it in some less than legal underground fighting matches in order to raise a bit more money for my aunt and uncle. Well, the man running the gig wouldn't give me the earnings I'd won, and then a thief stole what money he'd kept. He asked me to help stop the man, but...I didn't. I let him escape. I ignored the sinking feeling in my gut and did nothing except watch that thief run off into the night."

"What happened next?" Izuku asked, enthralled by the story Spider-Man was telling him, even though he didn't like where it was clearly headed.

"That same man killed someone I loved," Peter said, clearing his throat as he reminisced his most profound failure thus far. "I had the power to stop him. I didn't. My uncle's death was on me. I swore then that I'd become the hero he always thought I could be, stopping villains and preventing tragedies wherever I could. That's the promise of responsibility I carry out every day, in his memory."

Izuku was floored. Hearing Spider-Man describe such a personal tragedy, all in the hope that he could glean an important lesson from it, made him respect the young Pro Hero that much more.

"A promise of responsibility..." Izuku whispered. "And that promise alone helps keep you going forward, even through situations like what I went through?"

"No, not alone," Peter conceded. "Over the last four years I've been lucky enough to find support and advice from a variety of people. If advice with continuing onward in the face of adversity is what you need, then I can help with that. 'Whatever happens after this, just promise me one thing: that you will stay who you are. Not as some perfect hero, but as a good man.' That's what Cap told me."

"Cap?" Izuku asked, not recognizing the name.

"Oh, he's not a Pro Hero," Peter added. "But he's a hero nonetheless. Perhaps one day you can meet him. I think he'd like you, Midoriya."

"I'd like to meet him, too," Izuku smiled. "I think I'd like to meet anyone that Spider-Man looks up to!"

"Ready to rejoin the others?" Peter asked. "You look a lot more presentable with a genuine smile on your face, after all."

"Yeah, I'm ready," Izuku nodded. Just stay who you are. What happened here tonight wasn't easy. It won't likely get easy anytime soon. But that doesn't mean it has to change you. "Hey, Spider-Man?"

"Yeah?"

"You can call me by my first name, Izuku."

"Alright then, Izuku," Spider-Man said as he extended a fist out to the boy. "Then you can call me
Peter, too. "Izuku chuckled and nodded, bumping his fist against Peter's.

"Midoriya!" Mei called out to the boy with her restored torch in her hands as both he and a re-masked Spider-Man returned to rejoin the others. "Look what Mr. Stark did—"

"Are you hungry, Hatsume?" Izuku asked out a bit forcibly, whipping out a small scrap of paper from his pocket. "I figured it's only fair I buy you some food since I technically endangered you tonight. And I promise to explain myself the best I can since I also lied about my 'Quirk'."

Izuku looked over to Strange pleadingly, and the man frowned but gave his student a nod. He wasn't openly scowling or saying anything in objection, so Izuku would gladly take what blessings he could.

"Free food?" Mei blinked. "Who am I to turn that down? Lead on, Midoriya!" Mei twirled back toward the other heroes and offered a courtesy wave. "Thanks again, Mr. Stark! I'll treasure all of my fail-babies until the day I die!"

Fail-babies...? Everyone else present simultaneously sweatdropped.

"I-if I remember correctly, the vendor was located on the other side of the park," Izuku stammered. "Hopefully it wasn't reduced to rubble, too..."

As Strange intently watched his student depart with his newest acquaintance, Stark faced his own successor.

"You can go back to Avengers Tower, Parker," Stark said. "You've done well enough for one night. I won't make you put up with the S.H.I.E.L.D. agents who are taking their sweet time getting here."

"Oh, thanks Mr. Stark!" He turned and gave a wave to Strange before shooting his webbing toward the nearest building outside the park with a swift fwut. "It was nice seeing you again Doctor Strangelove!"

"That nickname was never clever!" Strange barked as Spider-Man swung up into the air and out of sight.

Seems I really was the last among us to have a successor of sorts picked out, Strange mused as he watched where Parker had swung out of view. I think Izuku will find himself right at home among the Pro Hero community, alongside Peter as well as the boy Toshinori chose to inherit One For All.

A movement of red and gold out of the corner of his eye caught Strange's attention, and he turned just enough to see a grinning Stark with his hand held up. Strange felt his face pale for a moment before descending into a full scowl, knowing damn well what Stark wanted to do.

"Come on..." Stark said teasingly.

"No," Strange replied, crossing his arms in front of his chest. "I told you I would never do that again."

But even after a solid minute of posturing, Stark did not relent. Strange sighed in defeat, raising his hand and halfheartedly slapping it against Stark's in a high five.

"Awesome facial hair bros!" Stark yelled.

"You're despicable."
"I...cannot believe it..." Izuku muttered as Mei absentmindedly followed behind him, all of her attention on her restored ionic torch, mumbling to herself about potential improvements. Under possibly any other circumstance, Izuku might've thought it was charming to be in the company of another mumbler like himself (a girl to boot), but the sight before him was too much to ignore.

"How is the pork-stuffed pretzel vendor still standing!?!" Izuku exclaimed. True enough, the vendor selling the pretzels Izuku had been curious about was still miraculously in one piece, even as the vendors flanking both of its sides had been reduced to smoldering rubble. Izuku offered Mei food as a courtesy, but he wasn't holding out much hope that this place would still be standing, much less operational! After such a hectic evening, things were really starting to look up for Izuku!

"Hey! I was waiting for you kid! Not a bad job taking care of that villain if I don't say so myself!" Generalissimo said from behind the vendor, his trademark smile as brilliant as it had been when Izuku recognized him. "I thought about jumping in myself, but I had confidence in your abilities. Seems that confidence wasn't misplaced!"

Gener—ah...Mr. Lee!?!" Izuku exclaimed. "You run the vendor that sells the pork-stuffed pretzels!?!"

"Yep! I may be a retired Pro, but I still have part-time gigs all over the place! Helps me keep track of all the latest news, but never mind that. You came for some pretzels. Still got that coupon I gave you earlier, True Believer?"

Izuku just stared at the living legend flabbergasted, even as he exchanged the coupon and took a seat at the vendor beside Mei, who was none the wiser to the exchange that just took place, as she was focused entirely on her precious baby.

"So, Mei..." Izuku spoke through the stupor that had set in, obtaining her attention at last. "What do you know about magic?"

There was an unspoken rule among the shady, criminal elements of Yokohama City: when it rains, you cease from committing any illegal activities out in public. After all, why draw more attention to yourself on the less crowded or empty streets from the dauntless, patrolling Pro Heroes when you could simply put your operations on a brief hiatus and go inside, where safety and warmth were nearly guaranteed.

Besides, such weather allowed for more thorough meetings between crime bosses and their villain lackeys. Not that Ikiji Kokotsu would ever deign to label himself a mere lackey and All For One a simple crime boss. Not even the black fog Kurogiri, who was also present, deserved the lowly title of lackey. The man possessed warping capabilities superior to nearly any sorcerer, and Ikiji could respect that kind of versatile power.

Both Ikiji and Kurogiri flanked All For One as he sat relaxed in his seat, hooked up to his usual medicinal machinery. The glare from the monitor before them illuminated his twisted visage as well as the desk before him, along with the Darkhold and numerous other pages and pamphlets the man had scattered in front of him.

"Magic...what a fascinating subject, what a field most worthy of further study," All For One mused aloud, both men present stiffening to attention as he spoke. "How fickle the rules of magic can be, hmm? Twist a ritual in even the slightest manner, and the consequences can be far-reaching and more severe than one can possibly imagine! Omit ingredients for a mystical concoction—or better yet: add more than needed—and your yield may very well be unrecognizable! Botch an incantation too horribly and your patron deity might borrow your energy, instead! Infinite possibilities and
experiments to consider for an infinitely intriguing field of study."

"I take it you were pleased with my work?" Ikiji asked. He knew he certainly was; watching that poor sap from the labs descend down a spiral of madness, paranoia, and hunger offered Ikiji a boon of entertainment for the evening. Not even witnessing Doctor Strange's accursed successor striking the madman down managed to put much of a dent into his enjoyment of the spectacle.

"My curiosity has been sated," All For One affirmed. "Now that we are aware of the potential dangers of fulfilling the ritual on a body unaccustomed with magic, we may now take the necessary steps to prepare for such possibilities, and to take such risks into account."

"I desired such a solution to protect myself should the ritual go awry," All For One continued, running his fingers along the length of the Darkhold's spine. "And the tome, as expected, offered one without fail: the Diacatholicon Remedy." With a snap of his fingers, the Darkhold swung open, infinite pages violently flitting by before settling on a single one, the words bleeding onto a previously blank page and revealing its contents to the men present.

Ikiji widened his eyes in recognition. "This is...!" Ikiji studied the illustration shown in the book: he recognized the golden links of the necklace and the three small, resplendent pendants dangling from the relic's chain. "The Diacatholicon may indeed defend yourself from the ritual's effects," Ikiji said. "But it is located within the depths of Stephen Strange's New York Sanctum, likely hidden in vaults even I have not seen. It will take every ounce of my skill if you desire for me to break into the Sanctum to retrieve this relic for you."

"Just a moment, Ikiji," All For One said, raising a hand. "We must employ a greater deal of subtlety if we wish to achieve this newest objective of ours. I have no doubt that Stephen Strange realized you were involved with the incident orchestrated at Pegasus Labs. Like a veteran hunting dog, he is locked onto your scent, ready to track you down without a moment's hesitation should the opportunity arise. It will be necessary to throw even that man for a loop if the League desires victory."

Silence fell over the room as each man present quietly pondered over how to best pull the wool over the Sorcerer Supreme's eyes for their next operation. A sinister smile soon graced Ikiji's lips, indicating he had hatched a plot most insidious and ingenious.

"I believe I have an idea," Ikiji spoke, garnering the other men's attention. "We can simultaneously outwit Stephen Strange and also increase the restless Tomura's notoriety in a single strike." That last bit, Ikiji knew, was sure to get All For One's attention.

"I say we approach that man to do the job for us," Ikiji continued. "Do you know who I speak of, sensei?"

"I do, indeed," All For One replied, stroking his chin as he ruminated the proposed plot. "You speak of the one who was also at the Stark Expo causing his own mischief, correct?"

"Correct," Ikiji affirmed. "While our test subject was rampaging through Manhattan, that man put on a splendid show of his own...and whisked away several Iron Legion drones right out from under Iron Man's gold-plated nose."

"...How soon can he be available for us?" All For One said after a brief pause, no doubt giving some serious credence to whatever plan Ikiji had in mind.

"He's a very busy man," Ikiji said. "He typically takes assignments in advance, completing them one at a time until his schedule is clear again. It could be a couple months before he can have an audience
"You may recall that patience is a virtue, Ikiji," All For One reminded the zealot. "But I am a patient man. Very well, I have decided—that man will be a sacrificial lamb for the sake of Tomura and his fledgling League."

"Excellent," Ikiji said, his smile twisting even further. "Then I shall complete what affairs we can as quickly as possible. Sensei, Kurogiri," Ikiji bid his two superiors adieu and promptly vanished through a portal of his own creation.

"Speaking of a sacrificial lamb," Kurogiri leaned down, speaking for the first time since arriving at his leader's hideout. "What thoughts do you have on Ikiji's future usefulness for the League?"

"The closer we approach the destined time, the quicker the boy's usefulness will run dry," All For One conceded. "But I promised I would guide him, and guide him I shall: Ikiji Kokotsu will die a death that best benefits Tomura's League of Villains, much like the lamb he was more than happy to volunteer for the task at hand. He is a dog destined to feed a bigger beast, one that he cannot even currently comprehend. He need only do what his master could not, and live long enough to see my efforts come to fruition..."

As if sensing its wielder's dark desires, the Darkhold sprung to life once more, its pages flipping back with ferocious flutter until it landed on another page, ink bleeding forth and bringing another illustration into view: this time depicting an ominous gauntlet with six resplendent lights adorned on its form.

Seemingly pleased with his sensei's answer, Kurogiri prepared to warp back to the bar before something else on his master's desk caught his eye.

"Excuse me, sensei," Kurogiri said, motioning toward one of the pamphlets that was haphazardly scattered across the desk.

All For One handed his trusted servant the pamphlet, the letters F.E.A.S.T. imprinted along the top in bold font. But it wasn't the letters that caught Kurogiri's attention, but rather the man depicted on the pamphlet's cover.

"Is this—?"

"Yes," All For One responded plainly. "I've located one of them. One of the subjects we lost that day nearly six years ago...I confirmed his identity at long last."

"After all this time..." Kurogiri said shakily as he dropped the pamphlet. "To think he'd grow to such prestige in the span of a few years...are you planning an assault against him, sensei?"

"No," All For One shook his head. "Not right now, anyway. After all...'Martin Li' has made quite a name for himself these days."
The Entrance Exam

Chapter Summary

The day of the U.A Entrance Exam is finally here. As Midoriya partakes in the exam, he becomes acquainted with future prospective classmates, including one Eijiro Kirishima. A week later, and his test results have arrived: he's passed! Izuku hurriedly rushes to the Sanctum in order to surprise Doctor Strange, but the boy is dealt his own surprise—and not a pleasant one, either.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

February 26th. The day of the U.A Entrance Exam.

Izuku sat on the edge of his bed, staring down at his hands as the faintest hint of morning light trickled through his window blinds. He was already out of his pajamas and dressed for the day's tribulations. The sun had not even risen yet; there was just the cool crimson glow of a sky foretelling the crack of dawn and the beginning of Izuku's next obstacle toward becoming a hero.

But Izuku was up long before the crimson glow had appeared. He had shuffled around the room restlessly, unable to get much sleep, but how could he? Today was the day. If he wasn't running countless possibilities in his head about how the day could go, he was gazing down at his hands, taking in every faded scar.

His hands didn't shake anymore. Or at least, when they did, it never proved too detrimental to carry out tasks such as gripping things and writing. They didn't shake anymore—truly a testament to his growth as Doctor Strange's pupil over the last 18 months if there ever was one.

"Izuku, honey?" He heard his mother's voice on the other side of his bedroom door, preceded by a light rapping on the wood. "Are you up? I heard some shuffling in here, so I thought I'd check on you."

"Yeah, I'm up, mom," Izuku replied as he opened his door to face Inko. She, too, was out of her nighttime garb and already dressed. They both observed each other's faces for a moment, and it was clear that neither of them had acquired much sleep last night. Yet despite that, they both seemed wide awake and aware, without a hint of much exhaustion, as if they were being driven by sheer anticipation alone. Hope carried the Midoriyas more than caffeine ever could.

"Are you nervous?" Inko asked quietly.

"Incredibly," Izuku replied with a quick nod.

"I know it's only six o'clock, but we should at least put some food in you before you head off to U.A," Inko suggested.

"I-I don't know, mom," Izuku said with a gulp. "I'm so nervous right now, I'm afraid I'll throw up anything I eat."

"That would be an unfortunate way to commence the day," Strange's voice rebounded through the
hallway before the good Doctor stepped through a blazing portal that opened up in the middle of the hall.

"Doctor Strange," Inko greeted him with a warm smile. "Just in time; would you like to join us for breakfast before Izuku heads out?"

"Actually," Strange said, returning her smile with his own. "I was going to invite you both for dinner."

Dinner? Inko and Izuku both gazed at the man confusedly before Izuku remembered the time differences between here and New York, where Strange normally resided.

"Oh yeah, it's still 4 P.M. yesterday over there, isn't it?" Izuku asked. 14 hours of difference. Strange had taken to odd hours throughout Izuku's training, more so when he'd returned his Sanctum to New York and when they'd moved to Kamar-Taj for the summer. Izuku wondered how Strange could adapt to the changes so quickly; he figured the man was just used to it after so many years as the Sorcerer Supreme.

"Correct you are, Izuku!" Strange said, stepping aside to give the Midoriyas room to step through his aperture. "However, I made sure to adhere to our morning sensibilities, assembling an appropriate array of breakfast foods."

The Midoriyas and Strange stepped through the portal, directly into the Sanctum's dining room, and Inko and Izuku were instantly wowed by the display of floating and dancing platters and trays carrying everything from biscuits to fruits to sausages. The Sanctum's curtains were pulled back, letting the first floor bask in the glow of a setting afternoon sun, a stark contrast to the crepuscular morning sky they'd just witnessed.

Everyone promptly took seats at the table, and Strange and Inko readily engaged in conversation as the platters danced or floated by them, one by one, giving those seated ample time to pluck whatever foods they desired. Izuku smiled at the procession of food and trays dancing on by, subtly reminded that even in spite of the ferocious power his sensei commanded, his magic could still be used for harmless, innocuous, even outright nonsensical and silly purposes, much like how All Might possessed terrifying power but used it to ease the hearts and minds of the people. But Izuku opted to sit quietly and watch the food dance on by, not taking any for himself.

"At least eat some fruit, sweetie," Inko addressed her son, taking notice of his reluctance to eat.

"Your mother's right," Strange added. "You'll need as much energy as possible for the exam—"

"What if I fail?" Izuku suddenly blurted out, causing Strange and Inko to blink where they sat. The procession of trays and food came to a clattering halt as everything stopped, a tense stillness settling over the room. Izuku locked worried eyes with Strange.

Strange wordlessly stood up and strode over to Izuku's side, not once taking his eyes off the boy. When he reached Izuku's side, he turned the chair he sat in and kneeled down, placing both hands on his shoulders.

"You are nervous," Strange stated as simply as one might state that Izuku's hair was green. "And I understand why. It can be easy for one trying to enter U.A to think that the entrance exam is the sum total of all their preparations. That this day will either open wide the path of the hero or close it shut forevermore. I advise you not to think this, Izuku. This day is not the final step—it is merely another step forward, and win or lose, you must never stop moving onward. Failure today will not determine your path, but neither will success. What happens after the test, regardless of your scores, will be up
to you entirely. And I have utmost faith in you, Izuku Midoriya."

Izuku felt his lip quiver and a familiar wetness dribbling down his cheeks. He always was a crier, something he felt ashamed of, but Strange never admonished or berated his tears. He wanted to throw himself into his sensei's arms as he had before a strong embrace caught him off guard, making him stop. Strange had initiated the hug this time, a rare event for Izuku, though not an unwelcome one.

"You have exceeded my expectations at every turn," Strange spoke encouragingly as Izuku shed tears. "In spite of everything unexpected that's happened, I couldn't be prouder of you, Izuku. So shed your nervousness with your tears, son, because I have no doubt that you will stand tall among all the Quirks you'll see today and earn your spot in the hero course."

"Then I won't let you down!" Izuku yelled as he abruptly ripped himself out of Strange's embrace and reached across the table, plucking an orange in one hand and a biscuit in the other. He proceeded to chow down on the assortment before him, with a mother over one shoulder lecturing the boy on etiquette and a teacher over the other shoulder chuckling at the sight.

"I know you must hear thanks from my son often," Inko said as she approached Strange after Izuku had finished eating. Said boy was washing himself up in the Sanctum's kitchen a room over, and Inko was speaking in hushed tones so he wouldn't overhear what she wanted to say. "But I believe I must offer thanks as well, Doctor Strange."

"It's absolutely no worry, Mrs. Midoriya," Strange said politely, using his magic to sort out all the dishes on the table in one fell swoop, marching the procession directly back into the kitchen. "And besides, your son—"

"—absolutely cherishes you," Inko interjected before Strange could finish, making the man blink in surprise at the words she spoke. "I don't know if you realize this—I'm not sure Izuku even fully realizes it—but over the last 18 months you've filled more than one hole in my son's heart, Doctor. You've done more than simply replenish his hope."

Ah. Looking back, it made perfect sense. Unintentionally or not, Strange was beginning to fit the fatherly role and attention Izuku was missing—and was probably subconsciously craving for—ever since his biological father left.

"He tells me often in our private conversations," Inko continued, "That he worries Izuku thinks he actually left because our son is Quirkless. He left for the States shortly after Izuku was classified. Izuku has no problem responding to letters, but...he isn't comfortable speaking with Hisashi over the phone. He hasn't spoken to his father in years. I'm sorry, Doctor, I didn't mean to thrust our family history onto your shoulders—"
"No, no, it's quite alright," Strange replied, ushering Inko back into a state of calm. "Your husband sounds like a very brave man. It takes a certain amount of resolve to sacrifice so much for the sake of one's loved ones."

"I guess what I'm trying to say," Inko took in a deep breath to compose herself. "Is that Izuku idolizes you nearly as much as he does All Might now. All he ever talked about for so many years were heroes and Quirks, and nowadays all he ever seems to talk about is magic and...you. When you pledged to protect him with your life, he likely made the same pledge to you subconsciously, without even thinking about it. So please..." Inko clasped her hands together and pleaded to Strange. "Stay by his side, and continue guiding him as best you can, but also continue keeping an eye on him. We both know he can be too self-sacrificing for his own good."

Upon hearing her heartfelt words, Strange could only nod solemnly in response. What else could he do? What else could he say? His stubbornness already ensured he would not deviate from his promises, and Inko could see that clearly.

Perhaps, Strange thought as he restarted the procession of dirtied dishes into the kitchen, perhaps he had been subconsciously beginning to see Izuku as not merely a pupil...but as a son, as well.

Izuku steeled his nerves as he approached the main building of U.A along with the numerous other students chasing their dreams. The building towered prestigiously, its glassy exterior reflecting brightly upon the people walking below, as if it were a literal beacon of heroism and justice. Izuku paused, staring up at the illustrious school, clenching his hands tightly. The building proved to be imposing to all who looked upon it, but Izuku could feel the confidence burgeoning within his chest with each breath he took.

I'm going to do this, Izuku assured himself emphatically. I'm going to become a hero!

"Deku," A familiar biting voice reached Izuku's ears, causing him spin around 'til his eyes landed on Bakugo. "You came after all."

"Kacchan..." Izuku whispered, watching his former childhood friend, hunched over slightly with his trademark scowl plastered on his face, with apprehension. Izuku wished things between them would improve, but their relationship remained as rocky as ever. Between Izuku saving Bakugo and making him and nearly everyone else believe he had a Quirk to his insistence on sticking with his dream, Izuku was beginning to resign himself to the possibility that there was nothing he could do make himself 'worthy' in Bakugo's eyes. Izuku truly worried their friendship would forever be a thing of the distant past, a brief, happy prelude to a slew of memories and experiences he'd much rather forget.

"Hmph," Bakugo snorted as he passed by Izuku, roughly bumping into the boy's shoulder with his own. "They don't stick people from the same middle schools in the same testing areas, I hear. At least now you won't get in my way, Deku. You can just stay back and watch me blast my way into U.A."

"And I'll be right behind you, Kacchan," Izuku retorted, glaring at Bakugo's backside with determined eyes. "I've worked too hard these last 18 months to simply fail now. You watch, too! I'll definitely become a hero!"

Bakugo's body bristled and seethed at the audacity of Izuku's claim—nay, challenge. He grit his teeth but didn't turn back to face Izuku or offer a retort of any kind. He merely stomped away faster than he'd been before, vanishing into the crowd of irritating extras and out of Izuku's sight.

Kacchan... Izuku thought morosely before shaking his head of those thoughts. He couldn't distract
himself with remorse when the entrance exam was literally upon him! Feeling his confidence becoming reinvigorated, Izuku observed a few of the other students heading inside: one was a hulking, multi-armed masked male, imposing in his own right, while others stood out more colorfully such as a horned, pink-skinned girl standing alongside another boy with excessively spiky red hair. Others still appeared more ordinary, such as a round-faced girl with shoulder-length brown hair, who looked admittedly cute.

"Excuse me, young man!" An authoritative voice rang out, snapping Izuku out of his people-watching. His eyes fell on a tall boy with dark hair and rectangular glasses who had him fixated in a stern gaze. "No dawdling! If you are here for the exam, then I must urge you to come inside before the doors close!"

Ah. Izuku blinked and glanced about him, confirming that he was indeed one of the last people to enter the doors of U.A.

"C-coming!" Izuku stammered as he bolted toward the U.A auditorium, the tall boy who chided him watching his behavior with disapproval as he passed by.

City Block C...

Izuku thought in amazement as he and the rest of the applicants assigned to this particular testing ground beheld the tall, narrow doors that gave entrance to the mock city on U.A grounds. To think the school had so much land and resources to build such expansive and realistic urban layouts!

This test really is competitive, Izuku mused and thought over the rules of the practical as he scanned his eyes through the crowd, observing as much of the competition that he could before it officially began. He noted with some relief that the boy who'd chided him earlier was not assigned to the same testing area that he was. But that boy had seemed as competent as he was authoritative; Izuku felt sure for some reason that he was guaranteed a spot in the hero course, and hoped he'd end up in a different class than him.

The rules were simple enough, for a practical: go out into your assigned city area and immobilize any 'villain bots' you came across before time ran out, racking up the points necessary for admittance into the hero course. No fighting among applicants was allowed, as expected.

"Everyone is crowding the door..." Izuku muttered as he watched the throng of applicants restlessly vying for a spot directly before the towering doors, trying to position themselves to be the first to enter into the urban villain-infested maze. "Those doors are too narrow to be doing that kind of thing —"

A light bulb suddenly lit up in Izuku's head. The doors are narrow on purpose! Izuku realized. The school is purposely trying to capitalize on the competitive nature of the exam by subtly making it more difficult for examinees to enter while also weeding out those that break the rules and attack others!

As the crowd jostled among each other aggressively (though not with hostility lest they be disqualified for unruly behavior) for a prime spot in front of the door, Izuku did the exact opposite and backed away from the other applicants, his eyes glued to the area right above the sea of bobbing heads and shoulders. Opening portals without a clear picture of your intended destination wasn't possible for him, and he had no clue what the city looked like on the other side of the doors, but when they did open it should give him more than enough time and more than enough to see to pull off the cheeky idea formulating in his head.

Sure enough, the doors finally opened unannounced, with such abruptness that the crowd ceased
their pushing and fell silent, as if awaiting further instructions.

"What, were you expecting a countdown!?" Present Mic's voice boomed through an intercom. "Battles in real life don't have countdowns, you know!"

The pushing began again in earnest, but Izuku had put his plan into motion before Present Mic had even finished speaking.

Leaping up into the air, Izuku conjured a shield beneath his feet as a platform, elevating him above even the tallest applicants, and giving him a clear view down the elongated street leading directly through the heart of the mock city. Getting precisely the visual he needed, Izuku dispelled his platform and whirled his hand, opening a portal directly beneath him that he fell through. Izuku glanced about and confirmed his location: he'd successfully opened a portal to the heart of the urban zone, the narrow doors still in view a fair distance away. Izuku Midoriya was effectively the first applicant to enter the city, giving him first dibs to rack up the villain points he needed.

As if on cue, several large automatons came spinning out of the back alleys, their red lenses narrowing in on Midoriya as they approached him to attack.

1-pointers! Izuku recognized the bots by the unmistakable white ‘1’ plastered on their chassis. His hands blazed with ethereal fire in response. No choice but to start small then!

Izuku flailed his flame whip at the nearest robot, targeting its wheel and tripping it up with a well-aimed lash. It summarily spun out of control, its trajectory effectively ruined as it whirled past Izuku and crashed into another 1-pointer approaching from behind, sending metal bits flying. Izuku wasted no time in materializing a second flame whip in his other hand, leaping as high as he could before striking the other two 1-pointers present, landing fiery blows directly onto their heads and obliterating their plating and lenses. The robots crashed to a halt, whirring and groaning as they lost power.

Four points, Izuku panted as some movement and flashes caught his eye. He turned toward the doors and witnessed a multitude of applicants stampeding their way through the mock city, laying waste to any robots they crossed with their Quirks. Izuku gulped; his plot gave him but a few moments of extra time ahead of those at the front of the pack, and it seemed his head start had just run out.

Darting down a random street to search for more points, Izuku ran right past another attendee—an extremely diminutive boy with grape-like hair—who scurried on by, crying dramatically. Rounding the next corner, Izuku saw a whole pack of 2-pointers powered down or otherwise toppled over, their legs immobilized by numerous purple balls of some kind.

That's right, Izuku reminded himself. The rules said the robots had to be immobilized. They don't necessarily have to be destroyed. He decided then that he would avoid touching those spheres. He also recalled there being buttons on the robots that stealth-based or non-offensive competitors could press to turn off and therefore 'defeat' them, which helped explain the next scene he saw.

A flurry of birds suddenly filled his view as he rounded another corner, causing Izuku to yelp and dive into the nearest alleyway for cover. Two 3-pointers were swarmed by the persistent flock, confusedly beeping as their programming likely did not allow them to target wildlife. Izuku spotted a large rock-headed boy timidly run up to the robots as they were blinded, pressing their power switches located somewhere on their backsides and swiftly running away, the flock of birds departing after him and leaving two effectively downed robots in their wake.

"I need to hurry or else there won't be any more villain bots for me!" Izuku chastised himself as he sprinted toward a mostly empty street.
"Damn it!" He heard a voice from up above, looking up and leaping to the side just as the mangled remains of a two-pointer landed where he just was. *Holy crap!*

The spiky red-haired boy he’d spotted earlier had punched that robot out of an office window, leaping out of the room he was just in and launching himself into another nearby high-rise.

*Of course!* Izuku yelled to himself. *They must have placed robots all over the city, not just in the streets and alleyways outside! I bet I can find a bunch inside the buildings, too!*

Luckily for Izuku, he wouldn’t have to find them inside the nearest building—they found him instead. Right as he passed another nondescript office building, the glass of the lobby exploded as a horde of 2-pointers emerged from within. The robots, seven of them in total, clunked along on their four legs, scorpion-like rear appendages flailing wildly as they spotted Izuku and went on the attack.

*I know it’s too many for my eldritch whips to be effective!* Izuku thought before grinning, letting his hands crackle with electricity. *I’ve got options, though...!*

Izuku waited for all seven villain bots to get well within range before unleashing the torrent of magic building within his palms.

*Bolts of Bedevilment!* Izuku extended both palms out and engulfed the robots with mystical lightning, rending their mechanical components and destroying them outright in a frightening display of strength.

*That should get me up to 18 points!* Izuku calculated as he ran through the cloud of dust his spell had kicked up before the last of the 2-pointers had even finished falling over.

Izuku’s feat did not go unnoticed—his Bolts of Bedevilment spell had been seen in full by one envious Denki Kaminari, who fidgeted uncomfortably as he saw a more skilled electric user in the same testing area as him. He could only unleash electricity indiscriminately from his body, but he couldn’t control its trajectory like that boy clearly could.

Kaminari felt like he would fall over from dejection before a fresh horde of 2- and even 3-pointers emerged from the same lobby as the last one did.

*Sweet!* Kaminari thought, perking back up immediately at the prospect of more points. *If that guy had stuck around, then he would’ve nabbed all those points up! More for me!* Kaminari’s body crackled with electricity as he rushed toward the pack of villain bots. *And what the hell am I doing, moping in the middle of this exam?! I won’t let that guy one-up me!*

"Indiscriminate Discharge!"

An ominous rumbling shook the entire testing area, causing the very buildings to shudder and groan. Izuku skidded to a halt, already cursing his bad luck at not being able to locate anymore villain bots and now wondering what was causing these unsettling vibrations. A sudden chorus of panicked shouts drew his attention, and he saw a flurry of fleeing attendees running down the street he was perpendicular to. Rushing out to see what the commotion was, Izuku shielded his eyes from an equally sudden dust cloud that got kicked up. Glancing up, Izuku felt his knees shivering weakly as an impossibly large shadow loomed over him.

*T-this is the 0-pointer...! The one Present Mic said to run away from!*

The immense robot took a colossal step forward, its footprint crushing the ground beneath it and kicking up even more impenetrable dust, snapping Izuku out of his daze and reminding him to flee as
instructed.

"Help! Help us!"

Izuku froze as the cries for help reached his ears; turning his head he saw a small group of applicants huddled in a dead end alley, surrounded by debris that fell from the encroaching 0-pointer. Some of them looked down—passed out.

All instructions from Present Mic flew out the window when he saw the danger they were in. Izuku rushed over without a moment's hesitation, scrambling over the wall of debris that separated him from the small group. He recognized two of them: the grape-haired boy he'd seen was lying on the ground, bleeding profusely from his scalp, while the rock-headed boy from earlier was standing over him protectively, along with two other downed people. One of them was a bulky, full-lipped guy who was groaning indiscernibly, while the other was a blonde guy babbling incoherently with a silly face, flashing a thumbs-up repeatedly.

"H-hey!" A feminine voice sounded from among the group as Izuku struggled to dislodge the wall of debris separating them. Izuku strained his eyes; he didn't see any girls among them. "Help us out!"

This time the voice was much louder, causing Izuku to recoil slightly in surprise.

"W-where are you!?" Izuku stammered out as the 0-pointer took another step closer, cloaking the alleyway in its shadow.

"I'm invisible!" The girl exclaimed, fear evident in her voice. "That's my Quirk!"

What a interesting Quirk—no! Snap out of it, Izuku! They need help! Izuku mentally chided himself as another figure suddenly appeared by his side.

"Need any help, bro!?" The red-haired guy he'd spotted earlier shouted as he wrenched a concrete block out of the pile, aiding Izuku.

"Thank you!" Both Izuku and the invisible girl shouted before a loud groaning from up above cut their cries short. The 0-pointer slowly raised its lumbering, metallic fist and let it drop, much to the horror of those who would be caught beneath it.

No time to make a portal...! Izuku hurriedly raised his hands and conjured a shield over himself and extended it over the entire alleyway, hoping to protect the boy by his side as well as those trapped behind the rubble. Izuku grit his teeth as he struggled to maintain the shield at its strongest capacity.

The gargantuan fist impacted the ground around them all, inadvertently striking Izuku's shield and shattering the barrier under its immense weight. Izuku felt the violent recoil from the strike and went limp with a soft gasp, feeling himself collapsing to the ground.

That is, until a pair of hardened arms caught him by the torso, preventing him from falling completely and propping him up to catch his breath. "Breathe, bro!" The red-haired boy yelled with a toothy grin. "Nice save, by the way! I'm Eijiro Kirishima!"

"I-Izuku...Midoriya..." Izuku panted as he caught his breath and regained his senses. He glanced down the alley and felt a surge of elation as he saw the trapped attendees unharmed. Shaken, but unharmed. His barrier had successfully absorbed the brunt of the attack and protected them all.

"It's gonna punch again!" Kirishima grunted as he witnessed the 0-pointer raise its other fist after taking yet another step forward. "You don't look like you can take another one of those!"

"If I had enough time and strength left, I could open a portal and get all of us to safety..." Izuku
"wheezed."But as it stands, I can't create shields and portals at the same time."

"Shields and portals?" Kirishima widened his smile and arced a brow. "What kind of Quirk does both?"

Izuku tensed, mentally cursing himself for speaking so casually about his powers. "It's, uh, complicated..."

"Well, you can tell me all about it when we both get into the hero course!" Kirishima beamed. "After we defeat this villain bot, of course!"

Defeat it? Present Mic said it wasn't worth any points, yet Izuku hadn't the energy left to whisk the trapped students to safety, but neither of them were about to leave them behind, either. Izuku looked between the unbelievably optimistic Kirishima and the 0-pointer towering above them, readying a second strike to the earth below. They had no choice if they wanted everyone to survive this, it seemed. They had to destroy the 0-pointer.

"If you can launch me as high in the air as you can with one of your barriers, I'll take it from there," Kirishima said in a surprisingly calm manner.

Izuku looked at him questioningly, and thought about protesting, but the smile on Kirishima's face seemed...so sure of success. It was a smile that invoked victory, and Izuku wasn't going to argue against that.

"Alright!" Izuku conceded, forming a much smaller barrier beneath Kirishima's feet and lifting him into the air. "Have you ever done something like this before!?"

"No!" Kirishima replied, causing Izuku to gawk at him in bewilderment. "Truth be told, I've been trying to make it work throughout this entire test! That's why I wanted to use your barrier as a foothold! But I've got a good feeling it'll work this time...I know it will!"

Kirishima crouched and shot into the sky as a blazing red aura enveloped his body. Izuku gasped as the boy became a blur before appearing high in the sky, fist raised against the unstoppable 0-pointer.

It's just like you said, All Might...! Kirishima's mind raced as his fist glowed and swirled with stockpiled power. Just clench your butt cheeks...and scream from the depths of your heart...!

"SMASH!" Kirishima bellowed as he made impact with the colossal robot, crashing his fist against its bulky head. The 0-pointer groaned and shuddered before violently falling back from the punch, a series of internal explosions destroying it utterly as it collapsed to the ground in a broken heap, sending a veritable storm of dust and smoke high into the sky.

H-he did it...! Izuku thought, stunned at Kirishima's prowess, watching the boy gripping his arm in midair while falling. He destroyed the 0-pointer and...and he's not slowing down!

Izuku hastily erected a barrier with the last vestiges of his strength, wrapping the energy around Kirishima's body before it could hit the ground and gently lowering him to his own two feet, collapsing down to his knees out of exhaustion as he undid his spell.

"T-thanks..." Kirishima said as he gripped his hardened, bleeding arm. His legs, too, seemed stiff and unmoving.

"You're bleeding..." Izuku panted, watching Kirishima worriedly.

"Yeah, I kind of broke all the bones in my arm with that attack," Kirishima conceded with a weak
chuckle. "And also my legs when I made that jump, but...my Hardening is keeping everything together, even though I can't move anymore..."

"Thank you so much!" The invisible girl exclaimed. Izuku and Kirishima turned their heads to see that the trapped competitors had managed to wriggle their way to freedom through the debris—or, at least, the invisible girl and the rock-headed boy had managed to get out with the three incapacitated applicants slung over the timid boy’s shoulders or tucked under his arms. The blonde guy was still babbling and waving a thumbs up in the air. "Maybe it's not too late to acquire some more points —!

"And time is up, ladies and gentlemen!" The boisterous voice of Present Mic boomed over the mock city and probably all the other ones, too.

Izu and Kirishima both looked at each other, visibly dismayed.

"I...don't think I got enough points to pass," Izuku said softly, disappointment creeping up his spine.

"Me neither," Kirishima morosely conceded as well, looking over his broken yet hardened body. "I spent so much time trying to make my Quirk work, I didn't get nearly as many points as I'd hoped for."

Izuku and those they helped protect stayed by Kirishima's side until Recovery Girl came by (much to Izuku's shock and awe) to whisk the hardening boy and the three unconscious boys to safety with stretcher-carrying robots.

Hagakure and Koda, as they came to introduce themselves to Izuku and Kirishima, left the exam feeling grateful for their help.

Izuku and Kirishima left the exam feeling disheartened, each wondering if they could've done better.

The dimly lit scoring room for those participating in the Entrance Exam was filled to the brim with analyzing U.A staff and faculty, meticulously pouring over the footage collected so that villains points could be accrued...and rescue points could be rewarded on an individual basis. The room was aglow from the lights of many monitors, displaying footage from dozens of angles from multiple testing areas. The U.A staff were kicking it into overdrive to accomplish this task, a task that the newest addition to the eclectic ensemble of academic Pros—All Might—was more than happy to help with, seeing as he sat front row and center and making remarks wherever and whenever he needed to. Seated next to him was Nezu, the esteemed yet chimerical principal, partaking in All Might's counsel whenever he spoke.

"Everyone," Nezu spoke with his usual soft tones, silencing every hushed deliberation and garnering the attention of everyone in the room. When the principal spoke, you damn well listened. "I think it's time we draw our undivided attention to, and deliberate on, the two biggest events that occurred during this year's Entrance Exam."

He flipped a switch on a remote lying in his lap, and every monitor in the room tuned into the exact same scene: the participant Izuku Midoriya and the participant Eijiro Kirishima cooperating to defeat the 0-pointer that presided over City Block C. The scene played over and over in a loop for the staff, beginning with the two boys attempting to aid the other trapped participants before combining their efforts to instead save them by demolishing the giant robot.

*Young Midoriya...Young Kirishima...you both did a splendid job!* All Might grinned as he looked between the protégé of Doctor Strange and his own.
"As you all know, cooperation is highly discouraged during the Entrance Exam," Nezu spoke almost
lackadaisically. "It's why we divide students who attended the same middle school and make the
practical so competitive. Simply put: you try and help other participants in destroying villain bots,
you stand little to no chance in earning enough points to secure a seat in the hero course. Villain
points, after all, are not shared between competitors."

Nearly every head in the room nodded at the principal's words. This was all information they knew,
but they also knew their intelligent rodent companion well enough that he would never bring this up
unless he was going somewhere...unconventional with it.

"However, while villain points cannot be shared," Nezu said with a knowing smile, leaning back
into his comfy recliner. "I don't believe the same can be said for our rescue points."

The room was silent for a beat before the imposing form of Vlad King approached the principal.
"Are you suggesting that both boys be given identical rescue point scores for their actions during the
exam?" He inquired.

"I am indeed," Nezu said with a nod, his eyes glued to the monitor as he addressed his staff. "I
merely wanted my faculty's thoughts on the matter since this is rather unprecedented—we've had
participants stand up to the 0-pointers in the past, but two working together to destroy one? Unheard
of in any of our tenure."

No one in the room raised any objections; even the reputedly strict Aizawa did not emerge from the
shadows of the room to protest the principal's suggestion.

"Then all that is required is to decide what rescue points will be rewarded for such unprecedented
teamwork and selflessness," Nezu continued, "And award both boys equally."

A tally of points was given by each of the faculty presiding as judges—including All Might, Vlad
King, and Aizawa—ranging from 1 to 10, and the sum decided on was 60 rescue points that would
be rewarded to both Izuku Midoriya and Eijiro Kirishima. That put Midoriya at 78 total points, and
Kirishima at 88 total points—currently second and first respectively for point totals.

Welcome to the hero course, young men! All Might thought proudly.

"With that out of the way, all that's left is..." Nezu trailed off as he pressed another button, causing
every monitor to fill with a similar scene from City Block B.

"I don't care if you're worth zero points, you're in my way!" One livid Katsuki Bakugo roared as he
slammed his explosive palms against the fist of the City B 0-pointer, slamming it to the side and
preventing it from crushing a round-faced girl caught under some rubble from the robot's rampage.
"Piss off already so I can get back to racking up more villain points!"

Many of the staff in the room raised their eyebrows, if not at Bakugo's coarse, venomous speaking
skills, then at the prospect of participants from two different testing areas confronting their respective
0-pointer. Granted, Bakugo didn't destroy the 0-pointer (he only deflected its attack) but still...this
was an unprecedented exam, indeed.

"Now we must determine how many rescue points Katsuki Bakugo shall receive—"

"Zero," A dull voice sounded from the corner of the room.

Every pair of eyes whirled about as Shota Aizawa strolled from whatever nest he'd made for himself
away from the prying eyes of the rest of the staff, stepping out of the shadows and into the dim
illumination from the room's monitors.
"That's a bold proclamation," Nezu said, though he still had that knowing smile that implied he didn't necessarily disagree. "Care to argue your case, Aizawa?"

"The purpose of the rescue points are to reward genuine selflessness shown by participants throughout the exam," Aizawa explained. "This is what allows certain prospective students to shine when the 0-pointers arrive—will they follow the recommendations Present Mic gave and flee when it appears or will they ignore their instincts and brave it in order to help those that may be in need? Intent should be a critical factor when awarding these rescue points."

"And you believe Katsuki Bakugo lacked the intent necessary for rescue points?" Nezu prodded Aizawa to continue; it was clear the principal was enjoying this deliberation.

"It is only logical," Aizawa said, stifling a yawn. "Compare Bakugo's actions with the actions of Midoriya and Kirishima. It is clear that the latter two were motivated by sheer selflessness when they determined that attacking the 0-pointer was the best course of action to protect the trapped participants. Of course, whether or not it was the best course of action is debatable, but ultimately, it is their intent that matters most here. Bakugo did not attack the 0-pointer to rescue the girl caught beneath the rubble—he didn't even notice her. Instead, he attacked it because it was preventing him from acquiring more villain points, something the 0-pointer is supposed to do."

Nezu maintained that sly smile of his as Aizawa glanced around the room, seeing that all the other faculty, even the critical All Might, were following his logic and were not going to argue.

"Heroes do not accidentally or unintentionally save people," Aizawa drove in the final nail.

"Then it is agreed," Nezu spoke, getting the final say on the deliberation. "Zero rescue points for Katsuki Bakugo and he'll still maintain a point total of 77 villain points—still frighteningly impressive, if I say so."

You may be overwhelmingly strict, Aizawa, my boy, All Might thought to himself. But even I can't argue against where you're coming from.

And so the Entrance Exam wrapped up, the staff finishing up their deliberations and commentary after sorting through the top three participants of the practical. As they shuffled about, Aizawa had his eyes glued on the three boys that had caught everyone's interest.

He viewed Bakugo with apprehension.

He viewed Kirishima with curiosity.

He viewed Midoriya with wariness and suspicion.

"Sensei!" Izuku yelled ecstatically as he rushed into the Sanctum through a hastily built portal, opened just long enough for the happy weeps of his mother to be heard before it closed shut. Clutched in his hand were the results of the Entrance exam...and his acceptance into U.A.

To say Izuku was overjoyed was an understatement, having waited a long, tense week for the results to be mailed in. He was equally glad to see that not only had Kirishima been accepted as well, he'd scored the highest amount of points overall, too. And to top it all off? Izuku had scored higher than Bakugo. By a single point.

When the holographic message first played, Izuku was a little bummed out at first. Sure, he was surprised to see his idol All Might, and was even more surprised to learn he'd be teaching at U.A, but the man started the message by stating that 18 villain points hadn't been enough for entry into the
hero course—that 28 points had been the bare minimum for entry this year.

Then he got to mentioning the rescue points, and...here he was now. Yelling through a seemingly empty Sanctum for his sensei to share the good news with him. It was 10:00 A.M. when he'd left Japan, so it was only 8:00 P.M. here in New York. Surely Strange hadn't retired to bed already, had he? Izuku would've been most embarrassed to rouse his master from sleep, even if it was to share his admittance message.

"Geez, a kid?" An unfamiliar nasally voice rang out, startling Izuku. "I wasn't told I'd have to deal with kids on this job."

"W-who's there?" Izuku demanded, throwing wild glances around the lobby, trying to ascertain where the unknown voice was coming from.

"Relax, kid," The sickeningly nasally voice spoke again. This time some movement caught Izuku's eye, drawing his attention to above the staircase right as what appeared to be a balled up red mass dropped from the ceiling. The mass seemed to unfurl itself as it landed on the staircase, unrolling its legs and arms and finally straightening out, revealing a human body. The man, dressed in a red jacket and hoodie coupled with red sweatpants and boots, and also carrying a crimson satchel, sighed and stretched out his limbs as Izuku regarded him dangerously.

"Who are you!?" Izuku yelled, his fists blazing with magic as he took a defensive posture. "How did you get in here?" Izuku didn't know if the man was an acquaintance of Strange's, but he wasn't about to take that chance given his sensei was nowhere to be found at the moment.

"Easy, easy," The man said coyly, slipping on some yellow sunglasses he'd fetched from his pocket, not feeling threatened by Izuku in the least. "You see, I just so happened to be in need of a doctor, and I figured this Sanctum, I believe it's called, makes for a perfect place to attend as an outpatient! I'm just here to pick up some kind of 'wonder drug' and I'll be on my way."

"So you're a thief then!" Izuku snarled, seeing right through the man's pretense.

"Thief?" The man laughed haughtily. "What low brow language! Ah, but where are my manners? Please," The man gave a mocking bow. "Call me Brigand."

"I don't want your name, I want you out of the Sanctum!"

"And not accomplish my mission? My reputation would surely take a blow if I did that!" Brigand chuckled before letting his nonchalant demeanor melt away, a cold, calculating fury creeping up his face. "And to think I patiently waited for that damned sorcerer to finally leave only to let a child catch me while I was working. So sorry, kid." The man slipped a gun out of his satchel and aimed it straight at Izuku. "You were just at the wrong place at the wrong time."

Brigand promptly pulled the trigger.

Chapter End Notes

Yes, Kirishima will be All Might's successor in this story.
No, Bakugo and Uraraka won't be paired here. Those tags above are correct, it will (eventually) be Uraraka/Kaminari; they've not been acquainted with one another yet.
To Fight a Brigand

Chapter Summary

An unexpected confrontation in the Sanctum turns ugly as the enigmatic Brigand forces a gravely wounded Strange to surrender a relic in order to guarantee Izuku's well-being. Izuku rushes to get help from Master Wong as Strange lay dying on the Sanctum floor, a potentially lethal corruption spreading through his body via a dark relic of Brigand's. Placing the sorcerer in a stasis, Wong and Izuku then hurry off to gather allies of their own in order to track down Brigand and retrieve the stolen relic capable of saving the Sorcerer Supreme.

Even as Brigand slipped his hand into that suspicious satchel of his, Izuku's hands were already moving, weaving a screen of magic in front of him to defend from whatever attack the thief had in store. Izuku tensed but stood his ground as the man quickly brandished a gun, feeling confident his mystical shielding could block an ordinary, manmade bullet. The man pulled the trigger, the gunshot cracked through the air, and Izuku instinctively shut his eyes as the sound rammed into his ears, rattling around his head as he was already planning his counterattack.

What Izuku hadn't been planning on was the sudden whooshing of wind that seemed to overtake him right before his eyes were shut, pushing him back by several feet before he skidded to a halt. His eyes fluttered open as a terse silence fell over the Sanctum, and he felt a surge of elation as the rippling red cape of his sensei filled his view.

"Sensei!" Izuku exclaimed; Doctor Strange had zoomed in front of Izuku with his superior Cloak of Levitation and conjured a barrier of his own, far greater in size and density than his student's to boot.

"Are you okay, Izuku?" Strange asked in a slightly strained voice, confusing his student.

"I'm fine!" Izuku replied with a small frown. Something wasn't right. Why was his voice strained? Why was Brigand smirking, looking so confident even though the Sorcerer Supreme was here, in his own Sanctum, too? Why was Strange shaking—?

Drip.

Izuku took a few cautious steps to the side, slowly drawing his horrified eyes to the floor to confirm what he'd begun to fear.

Directly ahead of Strange's abdomen, a small hole—barely perceptible and surrounded by a multitude of fragile cracks—could be seen in the shield he'd erected. The center of his blue tunic was darkly stained, blood slowly oozing through the fabric and dripping to the floor.

"S-sensei..." Izuku stammered, the color in his face draining considerably.

"I go out for a brisk walk, and I come back to find you in trouble yet again," Strange said with a pained chuckle. "You certainly have a penchant for trouble, don't you, Izuku...?"

Strange uttered one last gasp of pain before summarily collapsing to the ground, cloak and all, in a steadily growing pool of his own blood. As his body seemed to drop lifelessly, Izuku could see in the
middle of the crimson puddle a single silver, crumpled, piece of metal—all that was left of the bullet that somehow pierced through Strange's barrier and his body, cleanly passing through before being stopped by his cloak.

"NO!" Izuku shrieked as he dropped to Strange's side, clutching his master's body, desperately grasping him with shaking hands as Brigand laughed maliciously from where he stood.

"What did you do to him!?!" Izuku yelled, his mind a panicked maelstrom of volatile emotions. Despair and fear surged through his body, as well as emotions he never felt in great abundance before: anger...and rage.

"How ironic!" Brigand smirked. "I always love to see a doctor getting a taste of their own medicine!"

With an uncharacteristic roar, Izuku flew into the air, hands crackling madly with energy as he launched an impressive volley of lightning toward Brigand.

"Whooa!" Brigand winced as the first bolt went soaring past his head, singing his hoodie and exposing the short, rugged blonde hair that lay beneath. The man performed a bizarre maneuver to dodge the rest of Izuku's unbridled bolts: Brigand seemed to turn limber as he bent down to grab his toes, forming an O-shape with his entire body as he pushed back and rolled up the stairs, bounding and zigzagging up the steps as he expertly dodged each blast Izuku sent hurtling his way. Each of the lightning bolts impacted the staircase, blasting chunks of wooden splinters and scorched carpeting all over the walls and floor of the Sanctum lobby.

The sheer bizarreness of Brigand's bodily movements caused Izuku to halt before he could unleash another tirade of magic his way. His rage and panic slowly simmered, allowing his usual analytic mind to assess the situation.

"Man, do I hate magic," Brigand grumbled as he rolled to the top of the staircase. His body unrolled itself as he slowly and calmly stretched, unfazed by Izuku's anger, joints painlessly snapping back into place. "Are there even any rules?"

"Your body..." Izuku muttered, analyzing the way Brigand's limbs finished locking back into their standard places. "An emitter-type Quirk where your body can be limber like rubber..."

"Bingo!" Brigand sneered at Izuku. "That's the work of my Quirk: Contortion! My flexibility is so great I can painlessly dislocate and relocate any joint and limb and stretch any muscle and tissue I have to pull off maneuvers like what you just saw! Not the flashiest Quirk on the block, but it makes do in a pinch."

"Speaking of a pinch, you nearly took my head off with the blast of lightning! You clever little sneak!" Brigand continued, mockingly applauding Izuku's failed attack. "Should've known you were a sorcerer-in-training, popping up here in the Sanctum all suddenly and whatnot. Guess that makes you a pupil of the good...er, not-so-good doctor down there?"

Izuku clenched his fist, trying his hardest to reel in the unfathomable anger that he wasn't even aware he had to begin with. "What's it to you?!"

"Long story short: I was hired by a particularly shady individual to steal a specific 'drug' of some kind from this very Sanctum," Brigand explained. "Something called the Diacatholicon, and I cannot, for the life of me, seem to find it! I've searched every floor of this place and even perused your gloomy little basement!"
"There's a basement in the Sanctum?" Was Izuku's first thought. This was the first he'd heard of there being a basement; Strange didn't even bring it up when he gave a tour of the Sanctum to Inko and him, although knowing Strange, he always had a reason for doing—or not doing—something.

"So congratulations!" Brigand snapped Izuku out of his thoughts. "Not many places or people can claim to have stumped the almighty Brigand! So here's the plan, kid: you're going to find that Diacatholicon and bring it to me." 

"I've never even heard of this 'Diacatholicon' before today!" Izuku retorted with a bit of defiance. "I can't help you find it because I don't even know where it is!"

The condescending smugness on Brigand's face slowly drooped as it did before, quickly replaced with thinly veiled irritation and impatience. "So this is the hill you want to die on, eh?" He flashed his gun to Izuku again, lazily pointing it in the direction of Strange's body. "Maybe a few more rounds in the old man will get you to cooperate?" He then swiveled the gun over toward the boy after he cried out in protest. "Or maybe I just cut my losses and end this charade here and now?"

"S-stop!...!" Izuku and Brigand both tensed as Strange called out weakly. They turned to see the sorcerer turned over on his side, one hand clutching the wound beneath his tunic and the other reaching out toward Brigand pleadingly. Strange's face was twisted in pain and agony and, worst of all, fear. "Please...! Spare the boy, and I will give you the Diacatholicon!"

Brigand was silent for but a moment, not needing much time to think it over apparently. He lowered his gun and looked between Izuku and Strange with a markedly calmer demeanor. "No honor among thieves, but never let the same be said of a brigand," The thief—er, Brigand—said. "I'm impressed you're still alive, Doctor. This isn't an ordinary gun I use, although I'm sure you know that by now. The bullets it fires are laced with energies so dark it would take probably a dozen of your barriers to counter it."

*I figured some dark magic was at work, Izuku thought. It wouldn't have made sense for an ordinary bullet to pierce his defenses!* Frankly, though, Izuku was just glad his sensei was still alive.

"How did a scoundrel like you acquire such a relic?" Strange demanded through grit teeth.

"Nabbed it from another warlock-looking sorcerer," Brigand said with a smirk. "Named...Mordo, I believe?"

"Don't tell me you—!"

"Relax, I didn't kill him," Brigand interjected, raising the gun at Izuku in a threatening manner. "Now stop stalling. The drug, if you would, Doctor."

Strange looked between Brigand and Izuku, resigned eyes meeting emerald, tear-filled ones as he finally relented, bringing the fingers of his outstretched hand together as he focused what magic he could to summon the relic desired. The lobby was briefly illuminated in a shimmering light before fading to reveal a long, flowing golden chain hovering in the air. Attached to the chain were three resplendent orbs, each roughly the size of a tennis ball. The orbs radiated a jade-colored energy, which swirled within their confines mesmerizingly.

Strange gave the briefest of motions with his hand, directing the orb adorned chain—the Diacatholicon—to Brigand's grasp. The red clad ruffian greedily snatched it by the chain, lifting it high in the air to inspect the relic as the brimful orbs dangled before his eyes. His eyes narrowed as he chuckled mischievously, seemingly pleased as he began stuffing the sizable chain into the satchel resting by his hip.
"Well, can't say it hasn't been fun, boys," Brigand spoke nonchalantly, glancing amusedly between a bloodied sorcerer and his terrified apprentice. "But I don't want to keep my employers waiting! Professional standards and whatnot! Ta-ta!"

At that, Brigand gave a mocking salute as his crimson satchel opened wide, a powerful suction emanating from within its unknown depths. The unexpected vortex pulled the man and his prize in before seemingly sucking the satchel itself in as well, twisting in the singularity before vanishing entirely with an audible 'pop'.

Izuku stared at the spot where Brigand was for but a second before flying to Strange's side, who was suppressing a cacophony of painful groans as he clutched his stomach. "Sensei!" Izuku screamed as he helped roll Strange over on his back, sitting the man up slightly as he inspected his wounds. The tunic staunched the blood considerably, but Strange had already lost more than Izuku was comfortable with. "I'm so sorry, sensei—"

"Are you safe, Izuku?" Strange interrupted the boy, pressing his hand against Izuku's chest and abdomen, as if confirming his student wasn't shot or otherwise harmed by Brigand. Realizing Izuku was unharmed, Strange's pained face sprouted a weak, sincere smile. "You're safe..."

Letting his eyes droop shut, Strange went limp again as Izuku held him, his hand dropping to the ground and landing on the U.A acceptance letter his student dropped in the chaos, never having the chance to see it for himself before Brigand's attack.

"Sensei?" Izuku trembled, gently laying Strange down and grasping his shoulders, shaking him slightly. No response. "S-sensei!" Izuku clenched his eyes shut to stop the inevitable deluge of tears. This couldn't be happening...he just got accepted into U.A, and it was Doctor Strange who'd helped him come so far! He couldn't die, not when he needed his guidance now more than ever!

"D-dad—" Izuku abruptly croaked out, surprising himself before he heard the faintest of breaths coming from his teacher. Izuku hastily placed a hand atop Strange's chest while he pressed his other against his neck. His chest slightly rose against Izuku's palm, indicating he was still breathing, and there was a pulse.

Izuku wanted to scream out and tearfully rejoice, but he understood well enough that time was running short. Setting Strange down and shakily getting to his feet, Izuku turned and opened a portal to get help from the first person that sprang to mind.

Today was a fair day, in Wong's mind. Most days to Wong were fair, in fact, regardless of the weather. Sunny days were fair because they allowed him to go on peaceful walks, and rainy or snowy days were peaceful because he could read in the peaceful solitude of the library, confident no novices or apprentices would seek any tomes on those days.

Today was gearing up to be one such day, and the library was dim and quiet for all but the fluttering of the occasional page and the pattering of rain that could be heard outside. He'd even given Zelma time off her library duties to catch up on her other studies. Unfortunately for Wong...this would not turn out to be a fair day.

"Master Wong!" He heard the shrill voice of one Izuku Midoriya, Strange's student whom he hadn't seen in awhile, cry out as he stumbled through a portal of his making. The normally reserved Wong was now doubly on guard; he hadn't been told ahead of time Midoriya would be returning to Kamar-Taj soon, and while Strange was never the best at keeping him informed, he certainly would not have forgotten this. Izuku's next statement, however, told him all he needed to know: "Master Strange is dying!"
Wong wasted no time in dropping the tome he was perusing and dashing through Midoriya's portal, the young boy hot on his heels, sniffling uncontrollably. He hurried to Strange's side as soon as he saw his old friend lying in a puddle of fresh blood, carefully ripping his tunic open to better inspect the wound.

*The bullet passed all the way through, that's good at least,* Wong thought as he ripped a piece of Strange's tunic off, fastening it into a makeshift gauze and lightly pressing it against the wound to halt what bleeding remained. *But the corruption from whatever dark energies it carried is surely spreading...*

Wong laid Strange back down and stood over him, weaving his hands with positioning and muttering incantations Izuku didn't recognize in the slightest. This was the work of a Master, after all. A stream of golden energy seemed to flow from Wong's fingertips like a stream, coursing down and enveloping Strange's dying body in a transparent cocoon of sorts. The cocoon suspended Strange slightly off the ground, and Izuku noticed for the first time that his sensei's veins were visible on his chest and neck, appearing black and sickly, as if infected with something vile.

"Stasis...complete," Wong muttered before turning to Midoriya, the concern in his eye swiftly replaced with a calculating seriousness. "Tell me everything that happened, Midoriya."

And so Izuku began from the very beginning, from entering the Sanctum with his letter of acceptance in hand, to Brigand confronting him and the chaos that ensued, what with Strange taking a literal bullet for his student and the uncharacteristic explosion of anger that followed. Wong took a glance behind him, surveying the damage to the staircase Izuku had unintentionally inflicted with his Bolts of Bedevilment.

"Master Wong," Izuku said pleadingly. "Master Strange isn't going to die, is he? He can still be saved, right!?"

"There is a corruption spreading through his body," Wong said, stepping past Izuku as he eyed the staircase perceptively, as if searching for something particular. "I placed him in a stasis of sorts that has considerably slowed its spread. But if we do not expel the darkness coursing through his veins, then Strange will undoubtedly perish."

"What do we need to expel the corruption from him?" Izuku asked hopefully as Wong continued scanning the lobby, narrowing his eyes as he caught sight of some singed fabric resting on one of the steps.

"One of the orbs of the Diacatholicon that was stolen can expel the corruption in an instant," Wong informed Izuku as he knelt down, examining the fabric studiously.

"But we'd have to get it back from Brigand," Izuku balled his hands into fists, feeling his hope dwindling once again. "And we have no way of knowing where he went..."

Izuku widened his eyes, realizing his first attack wasn't entirely dodged by Brigand after all; his initial bolt had narrowly missed his head, skimming off a piece of his hoodie and the top part of his hair, it seemed, though the normally blonde strands were scorched black by his magic.

Izuku darted upstairs toward his assigned room in the Sanctum, tiptoeing around the holes he'd blasted in the stairwell before disappearing down a hall. Wong hardly noticed, giving all of his attention to the fabric and hair loosely tangled between his fingers.
This should be enough for me to hone in that brigand's location, Wong pondered, tempted to simply use it and open a portal to the man's location and get it done with as quickly as possible, but he knew he had to play it smart, and with a healthy dose of discretion. But I will need allies if he has a weapon that can counter and pierce through my defensive spells.

"I'm ready, Master Wong!" Izuku cried out as he descended the stairs.

Wong looked up with a raised brow as Izuku approached him, clad in his crimson apprentice's tunic and with his personal Cloak of Levitation attached to his backside. The boy seemed...amped, as if sensing his intentions, eager to face off against Brigand once more and retrieve the Diacatholicon for Strange.

"You cannot come, Midoriya," Wong said bluntly, watching impassively as the boy's face turned from excitement, to confusion, then indignation.

"Why not!?" Izuku cried out in protest.

"While it's true that I will require allies for the coming confrontation, I cannot permit another magic practitioner to join me, let alone a mere apprentice such as yourself," Wong explained as eloquently as he could. "This Brigand possesses a relic that can bypass any of our barriers, Midoriya. Unless we can disarm him swiftly and without detection, any defense we mount will be for naught."

"I...don't care," Izuku said, surprising Wong and most of all himself. "I have to come along, Master Wong. Da—Doctor Strange took that bullet for me...he's nearly dead because he saved me! Again! I can't just sit back and do nothing while you and any others try to retrieve back the Diacatholicon. So please don't ask that of me. I have to save him back!"

Wong gave Midoriya a stern stare, but the boy didn't wilt and falter like he normally would have. He instead gave Wong a look of determination and defiance—the budding hero within Izuku would not take no for an answer...and Wong could see that. The stoic Master finally relented with a drawn out sigh, turning away from Midoriya as he weaved his hand in a circle, preparing another portal.

"Very well," Wong said. "But you will have to strictly follow the orders of myself and the ones I am going to recruit for what comes next."

"I-I can do that!" Izuku yelled, nodding his head repeatedly. "Where are we going first?"

Wong replied bluntly as his portal roared to life: "Avengers Tower."
Some Assembly Required

Chapter Summary

Upon returning to his base of operations, Brigand has an encounter with a familiar figure among members of the Underworld. Wong and Izuku rush to Avengers Tower and recruit the only Avenger currently available into their mission. Short on allies and desiring discretion, Izuku contacts one other person to help them bypass Brigand's security measure.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The office room was cloaked in darkness and dust, sparse of all decor and furniture aside from a single desk, chair, and a black safe that rested underneath it. The walls were equally bare, with only the simplest of analog clocks being supported by a single nail and thin strand of wire, filling the room with an incessantly methodical ticking that accompanied the darkness quite well.

Suddenly, the space in the middle of the room began to warp, twisting and distorting in such a way that the spatial torsion would've been apparent to anyone else who may have been in the room, regardless of its current lack of light. The space twisted until the smallest of tears formed, belching out a vaguely humanoid shape. The man grunted with a kind of discomfort that could only be lessened after years of experience with such unorthodox displacement. The rift spat out a red handle, followed by a crimson satchel, the rift slowly dissipating and ultimately disappearing into the confines of the bag. The leather flap gently closed shut, and the distortion was no more. The room returned to a state of pitch darkness and ticking, now punctuated with a man's ragged, nasally breath.

Brigand threw his hoodie—what was left of it—back, running one hand through his short, blonde yet slightly singed hair as he fumbled toward the wall for the light switch, a routine that he was fairly familiar with after so many months in this new base of operations of his.

His hand soon found the switch, and Brigand kept his eyes shut as he flipped it up, letting his eyes adjust to the sudden influx of light without resorting to inadvertently blinding himself. Once he felt adjusted enough, Brigand cracked his eyes open, his view filtered through the yellow lens resting on the bridge of his slightly deformed nose. He shrugged the magical satchel off his shoulder with a huff, letting it drop onto his solitary desk almost noiselessly.

Noiselessness was important to Brigand, especially in his line of work. He took a great deal of pride in the efficacy of his abilities and the efficiency with which he could bring about desired results for his employers. It was why he'd been in such high demand for the last couple years. Demand was so high, in fact, that he'd hardly had any time to carry out pro bono work for his own enjoyment, such as when he'd managed to sneak into Avengers Tower just a few months ago and pilfer from that pompous Stark's own Iron Legion. Damn, that was a fun night; he'd have bragging rights in the merc community for years, and not even Taskmaster would be able to look down on this particular accomplishment.

Even better was that the incident was never reported to the media, likely at Stark's bequest. All the better, Brigand thought: the No. 2 Pro Hero could maintain his ego, but deep down, Brigand would know that the man would always be just a little bit more paranoid because of his feat. And to
Brigand, living in Stark's head rent free was worth the lack of media attention. Besides, reprogramming the numerous drones he'd snatched to suit his own purposes was reward enough, too. Good thing he'd laid claim to this abandoned warehouse along the Upper Bay; big enough to house his trinkets and trophies, and equipped with just enough security so as to not attract the attention of busybodies or the authorities.

And he'd soundproofed the walls, too. Again: noiselessness was important. Noise means ruckus which means attention which means eyes and witnesses which means heroes and cops which means prison.

Brigand plopped down at his rickety desk; he definitely wanted to unwind and ruminate on the day's events before he contacted the League of Villains again to inform them of his success.

League of Villains, Brigand mentally scoffed. They were a nobody group as far as he was concerned, just another fledgling crime syndicate with few members and no notable ones, save for the mist man Kurogiri, whom Brigand vaguely recognized. It would only be a matter of time before Hero Society ripped open whatever rocks and logs they were hiding under and they would scurry away from the light, fleeing like the cockroaches they truly were. But hey, at least they had the money to afford his services. And that was all that mattered in the end, wasn't it?

Brigand casually tipped the satchel over on his desk, patting the bottom until the golden chain of his latest prize peeked out. He carefully slid the relic out in its entirety, making sure the orbs attached to it didn't bump the edge or surface of his desk and possibly crack or shatter. He couldn't tell how fragile the vial-looking objects were at a glance, but he wasn't going to take any chances, not with this. This was his paycheck, after all.

And my bonus, too, Brigand ruminated as he inspected the Diacatholicon in all its magical glory.

"Bring us the Diacatholicon from the lair of Stephen Strange," He recalled the instructions from one petulant-sounding Shigaraki Tomura over a burn phone. "In one piece, as well." When he'd received a visual aid from the League of what the relic he was searching for looked like, all he had to go on was an illustration of an orb, with a jade-colored glow. He hadn't been anticipating a chain to go with it, and he certainly hadn't been anticipating that there'd be three orbs attached, too.

The League—Shigaraki—had only specified one vial with the illustration he'd sent Brigand's way. Therefore, as far as Brigand was concerned, they'd only paid for a single one of the orbs. If they wanted the others...well, they'd have to pay extra to get their hands on them, which they were about to find out.

Or they can try and steal it off my cold, dead body like this prick who thinks he's sneaky, Brigand thought as he quickly activated his Contortion Quirk, shifting his body to the side and sliding the relic and his satchel across the desk as an electric gun staff smacked against splintered wood from behind. The staff crackled as the electric tip burned into the desk's surface, scorching it black.

His right arm painlessly dislocated itself, flailing backwards in a wild uppercut that sent his mysterious attacker sprawling backwards. Brigand sprung to his feet, snapping his arm back into place as he sized up his new opponent. The man—he assumed it was a man by the figure's bulk—was dressed in a solid black suit and dress pants, with a white undershirt accentuating a black tie. Most prominent, however, was the silvery Oni-Mask covering the man's face, glaring back at Brigand bestially. Every inch of the man's body was covered, except for his hands, which looked as if they were bleached white.

"Tsk tsk," Brigand said mockingly, wagging a condescending finger at the masked man who'd recovered from the blow remarkably quickly, far quicker than he'd anticipated. Brigand wasn't
worried, however—this was his turf, after all. "Given the reputation of your organization, I expected better from you!"

"Do you know who my master is, then?" The masked man inquired threateningly. "He who is attached to nothing; he who is one with all—"

"Yeah, yeah, I know who your boss is," Brigand nonchalantly interrupted the man. "Anyone who's anyone knows who that man is."

"It has come to my master's attention that you've acquired an artifact that interests him greatly," The oni-masked man said, relaxing his stature as he deactivated the gun staff he wielded, indicating he was no longer seeking to go on the attack. Not that Brigand was fooled—an Inner Demon was always ready to attack. "He has sent me to make a...professional offer."

"I didn't realize a 'professional offer' included killing the seller," Brigand retorted.

"Testing our associates is always part of our offers," The masked man retorted right back. "You lived; anyone who survives the first strike is deemed worthy enough in our organization's eyes. Now then..." The man slowly rolled up his sleeve, revealing more of his bone-white skin, except his arm was also littered with numerous black splotches. Brigand watched with thinly veiled anticipation as the man ripped one of the blotches off his skin and stretched it, planting it on the nearest wall once he'd extended it wide enough. The Inner Demon proceeded to stick his entire arm in through the black spot, all the way to his shoulder joint. A moment later, he retracted his arm, and he was now carrying a huge, bulgy rucksack. He summarily dropped it to the ground, giving Brigand a clear view of what was inside: it was practically filled to the brim with thick stacks of currency. "Do we have a deal?"

Brigand took a cursory glance over the rucksack before looking back to the Inner Demon. He pursed his lips before replying: "No."

The electric gun staff crackled to life as the Inner Demon took an offensive position once more. Brigand, however, looked thoroughly unimpressed.

"Cut the shit," Brigand said bluntly. "You were sent to make a deal, not to start a fight. And if you want a deal so badly, I'll make you one myself: go back and tell Mr. Negative that if he wants to do business with me, then he'll do it the right way—my way."

The Inner Demon stood deathly still, the gun staff dangerously flickering with arcs of bluish electricity emanating from its length before it shut down a second and final time. The masked goon, dropped his stance and picked up the money-filled rucksack without uttering another word. Keeping his masked visage fixed firmly on Brigand—as if trying one last time to intimidate him—he slowly stepped through the blackened hole he'd planted on the wall. He lingered for but a moment before disappearing entirely, reaching out with his ghostly hand and gripping the edge of the hole, tugging on it until he pulled it into its depths with him with a barely audible 'pop', vanishing in a manner not too dissimilar to Brigand's own warping satchel.

_Crazy Quirk for a crazy fucker_, Brigand mused as he reached over and flipped another light switch. This time, the room adjacent to the office—the main warehouse space—flickered to life. Brigand scanned the desolate warehouse floor through a one-way window between both rooms, as if confirming the Inner Demon had truly left the premises. He glanced upward at the multitude of Iron Legion drones strung up to the ceiling by thin wires, lifelessly awaiting activation as he flicked the lights off, cloaking them and the rest of the warehouse beneath shadow once more.
I can't believe I'm actually in Avengers Tower...! Izuku yelled to himself as he entered behind Wong through his portal which seemingly led to the center of the esteemed hero group's sanctuary. Izuku was positively trembling, starkly contrasting the hurried pace of Wong, who was most certainly thinking of the more pressing matters at hand. Izuku realized this, and tried his best to shake his head free of any and all excitement. *This isn't the time for nerding out, Izuku! Sensei is going to die if we don't get him the Diacatholicon right away!*

Easier said than done; the dazzling blue-and-grey halls Wong and Izuku marched down were lined with portraits of incidents and villain attacks the Avengers and All Might had stopped over the years. One enlarged newspaper clipping hanging on the wall in particular stood out above all the rest:

*All Might and Newly Dubbed Avengers Defeat A.I Menace: Ultron!*

"Don't dawdle," Izuku heard Wong chastise him, making the boy realize that he had indeed noticeably slowed down when passing by the articles, portraits and artifacts belonging to the Avengers.

"S-sorry!" Izuku stammered out a reply, quickening his pace to catch up with Wong.

The two rounded a corner at the end of a hall and entered a remarkably open room, with wide, pristine windows that offered guests a clear view down Manhattan, the city's night life reflected well by its near-blinding luminescence. Toward the back of the room was a spacious bar, ostensibly for adult guests, and there was plenty of seating to be seen. The room was conspicuously quiet and bare except for a single person dancing awkwardly in the center of the room.

Izuku blinked; he recognized the brown hair and voice vividly—that was Spider-Man, or rather, Peter! But why was he singing and dancing so weirdly? Wong and Izuku soon found out what the newly admitted Avenger was doing when they approached ever nearer. Peter was dressed casually, holding an Iron Man visor to his face, and he was simulating flying as he sang:

*Iron Man, Iron Man! Does whatever an Iron Man can!*

*Builds a suit, any size! Soaring through the New York skies!*

*Look out! Here comes the Iron Man!*

Peter spun around with a *whoosh* and immediately jolted as he caught sight of Wong and Midoriya staring at him with bafflement evident on their faces. Izuku's jaw had visibly dropped and his eyes were wide, while Wong's lips were taut and his eyebrows were scrunched, a stark dichotomy between utter bewilderment and disturbed confusedness that only made Peter even more uncomfortable.

"...Please don't tell Mr. Stark," Peter quietly pleaded as he gently set the Iron Man visor he'd appropriated onto the glass table beside him.

"Where are the rest of the Avengers?" Wong asked, putting that awkward display behind him immediately and cutting straight to the issue at hand.

"They're...not here at the moment," Peter fidgeted.

"What?" Wong blinked, genuine confusion appearing on his face for a brief moment. "Where is Stark?"

"Convention," Peter replied quickly. "He, uh, didn't exactly tell me where he was headed."
"He didn't tell you?" Wong asked, looking at Peter doubtfully.

"Mr. Stark doesn't tell me everything!" Peter retorted, looking and sounding flustered now.

"And where are the twins?" Wong asked, deciding to move on. "Scarlet Witch and Quicksilver?"

"They went to S.H.I.E.L.D. Academy to meet their father," Peter replied.

"Quake?"

"S.H.I.E.L.D. meeting," Peter responded, fidgeting more under Wong's intense gaze. "She, uh, didn't give any more information besides that."

"Obviously," Wong said drily. "And what about Thor?"

"He, uh..." Peter stole a quick glance at Izuku before turning back to Wong, throwing his hands up and making air quotations. "He had a 'family emergency' he had to deal with."

"So what you're saying is..." Wong said after a long, drawn out sigh. "You are the only Avenger currently present here in the Tower?"

"Um...yes?" Peter blinked.

"You will have to suffice then," Wong said, almost resignedly in Izuku's eyes. "A crisis has unfolded at the Sanctum. Earth's Sorcerer Supreme is on the cusp of dying, and we must retrieve a stolen artifact if we are to save his life."

Thwip!

Peter had shot a strand of webbing across the room in an instant, surprising Izuku. It seemed Peter had his web shooters on his person even when out of costume and while not patrolling, which made sense—Pros had to always be prepared to respond and offer their aid at a moment's notice, after all.

"Give me a minute to suit up!" Peter yelled as he swung across the room, rounding another corner and disappearing from view. Wong tapped his foot impatiently, but true to his word, Peter—or rather, Spider-Man—swung back into view in less than sixty seconds, landing before Wong and Izuku in a crouch. "Alright! I'm ready! Let's go save Doctor Strange!"

I get to work alongside Spider-Man and save sensei in the same day...! Izuku gulped, trembling tremendously.

"Yo, Izuku, you okay?" Spider-Man asked, noticing the younger boy's shaking. "Hey, don't you worry! I might not know him as well as you do, obviously, but I think we can both agree that Strange is one tough hombre." Spider-Man placed a hand on Izuku's shoulder. "He'll get through this, Izuku. We'll see to that."

"If you're both finished and prepared," Wong interrupted. "I will open a passageway directly to our destination."

"I know Strange's life is on the line, but are you sure you don't want some of the other Avengers?" Spider-Man asked. "I mean, Quake, Scarlet Witch, and Quicksilver are all at the Triskelion—"

"Absolutely not!" Wong all but yelled, before forcing himself to calm down in order to explain himself to both boys. "Look...I understand that the Avengers and S.H.I.E.L.D. have a close yet professional relationship, but the sorcerers of Kamar-Taj do not possess such a bond. We must
complete this operation as quickly and as discreetly as possible, and if that means we fail to recruit some allies, then so be it. We cannot allow S.H.I.E.L.D. to learn of Strange's predicament; they could very well make a move against Kamar-Taj or the Sanctums should they learn he is on the verge of death."

"Fury would never—" Spider-Man attempted to protest.

"It is not Fury I am worried about," Wong interjected with a tone of finality. "Izuku. Spider-Man. We will apprehend the brigand that wounded Strange so grievously, take back the relic he stole, and use it to restore our fallen friend before the night is done. Time is of the essence, and I am ready to open a portal near his exact location; are you ready?"

"So you had figured out his location?" Izuku questioned. "I never asked before, but...how? I thought a sorcerer had to know what a destination looked like before they could open a portal to it?"

Wong gave Izuku a wry smile. "Strange has taught you much, Izuku, but he certainly hasn't taught you everything." He held out a palm, showing Izuku and Peter a bundled up ball of blackened fabric and hair, the very same he'd collected from the Sanctum. The singed bundle had been blasted off Brigand's head by Izuku's emotional attack. "With just this, I can ascertain his location, and we can make our move from there."

"To think you can track a person and open a portal to their location with just a sample of their hair..." Izuku said under his breath. "I don't know nearly as much about portals as I should."

"No, but you'll learn," Wong said simply as his hands blazed with magical energy, his fingers forming a glowing triquetra as they strung the hair and fabric about intricately, almost too fast for Izuku to follow with his eyes. The lobes of the complicated shape Wong had created quickly melded together in a circular motion, widening until a portal had inadvertently sprouted before them. Izuku and Peter both peered through the fiery passageway: it led toward what they both guessed was a darkened dock of sorts, evidenced by the putrid, salty breeze flowing through.

"Ugh," Izuku groaned, pinching his nose as he strode through with Peter and Wong. "It may take a few minutes to adjust to the smell." Should definitely add a respirator of sorts for my costume or invest in a 'clean air' spell of some kind...

"So where are we, anyway?" Spider-Man asked quietly, masked eyes darting around with caution. He was less affected by the smell, but that was to be expected—his mask, Izuku had once noted in his Hero Analysis Notebook, could filter air naturally.

"We are in one of the most odious, uncharted realms that any mortal has ever dared to traverse," Wong said ominously, seemingly unaffected by the salty odor. "The portal led us to...the Bronx."

Spider-Man snorted beneath his mask.

"Is that the building?" Izuku softly inquired, peeking around a corner alongside Wong. The master was glaring into the night toward an obscured warehouse of sorts located along the water. There was little in the way of light in the immediate area, aside from a few weakly flickering street poles and a loose lamp dangling above the door of the warehouse they were currently staking out.

"Not much obvious in the way of security," Spider-Man observed, his mask eyes narrowing as he scanned what was visible of the warehouse. "There aren't even any cameras."

"Makes sense," Izuku nodded. "Too much security could attract unwanted attention, either from Pros, police, or other thieves."
"And yet there is still security," Wong pointed out, motioning toward a diminutive, seemingly rusted numeric keypad attached to the warehouse door, barely visible under the precariously hanging light fixture above.

"Covers the bare essentials," Spider-Man muttered. "Seems your perp even rusted it to discourage any would-be busybodies from even thinking about messing with it. Any incorrect combo of numbers will tip him off to a potential intruder." He turned toward Wong, seeking confirmation. "Are you sure we can't simply bust the door down and take the relic back by force?"

"We cannot risk it," Wong said, shaking his head. "Aside from the relic he stole and the one he used to incapacitate Strange, he possesses yet another artifact that grants him teleportation capabilities, from what Izuku has told me. Busting through the door will tip him off immediately, and he may feel compelled to use it to escape before we can properly restrain him."

"Hmm..." Spider-Man hummed, peering over the rusted keypad thoughtfully. "I'm not terrible when it comes to electronics, but it's certainly not my forte. I could probably figure it out given enough time, but..."

"We don't have time," Wong and Izuku said simultaneously, each worried about the metaphorical clock silently ticking down to Strange's doom.

As Izuku pondered over the sole security device that threatened to thwart their retrieval and rescue operation, an idea popped into his head. It was not a particularly good idea—hell, he was positive Wong would be against what he wanted to propose outright, but...what choice did they have? They needed to slip past this device without immediately alerting Brigand to their presence, and there was only one person Izuku could think of at the top of his head that could possibly help in such an endeavor.

"Master Wong...Spider-Man..." Izuku piped up, catching their attention as he slipped out his phone and wallet, thumbing through its folds until he pulled out a familiar card. "I have an idea."

Izuku used the light of his phone to illuminate the card, allowing him to hastily memorize the number emblazoned on it before tapping it into his cell. It only rang once before the recipient energetically picked up.

"H-hello, Hatsume?" Izuku sheepishly spoke. "I, uh, need your help. It's an emergency."

Chapter End Notes

Avengers roster for the story confirmed!
The roster is as follows:
- Iron Man
- Spider-Man (Age 19, newest and youngest Avenger)
- Scarlet Witch
- Quicksilver
- Quake
- Thor (Thor and the Asgardians, when they appear, will be more like their MCU counterparts rather than their Earth-616 counterparts, but I'll still aim for somewhat of a balance between comics and movies)
Apprentice No More, Part 1

Chapter Summary

Brigand double-crosses Tomura and the League while Mei uses her Quirk to bypass the security in the heroes' way. After entering and engaging in an exhausting fight against an unexpected arsenal, Izuku fears that Brigand may have already fled. But the slippery thief has other plans...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"...Come again, Brigand?" Tomura seethed into the cellular burn phone in his hand, gripped with four fingers as the villain's thumb twitched dangerously above the device, just itching to initiate some disintegration and decay. "Maybe I didn't hear you properly, but it sounded to me like you were reneging on our deal."

"You asked for the Diacatholicon, and I delivered," Brigand's nasally voice crackled through the phone. "The visual aid you gave me indicated a single orb, so that's what you got. You never mentioned there'd be more than one, on a gold chain no less! As far as I'm concerned, you asked and paid for a single one of those orbs."

Tomura's thumb brushed against the phone for but an instant, the device's chassis instantly cracking from his decaying Quirk. "So let me get this straight, Brigand: you're refusing to hand over the rest of the Diacatholicon unless we fork over more money to you? Is that it?"

"You catch on quick, kid," Brigand snorted. "Fork over double what you've paid so far and the other orbs will be yours! Oh, and you can toss in a smidge more for the gold chain, if you'd like. Can't say if you're a jewelry fan or not, but I figured you might be with all those creepy ass hands you wear—"

"Just wait until I get my hands on you..." Tomura hissed, his voice laced with venomous hatred. "We'll see how much banter those lips of yours can shoot off after I've turned them into dust!"

"But you won't get your hands on me, now will you?" Brigand responded, clearly not intimidated by Tomura's anger. "You only found me the first time because I let you. I always let my prospective employers seek me out, not the other way around. And how do you think you'll find me? By tracking me? Through a burn phone? Get real. My satchel is one-way, too, pal."

"You're dead, Brigand," Tomura growled. "Do you hear me? You've got one life left, so enjoy it before I personally deliver you your Game Over."

"...Look, I can see you need some time to think on my offer," Brigand said nonchalantly. "How about this: I'll hold onto this burn phone for another hour, and you can call me back after you've taken however long you need to calm down. And if you wait too long...? Well, I've got other buyers lined up to step in. Ciao."

"...Wait! Brigand!" Tomura yelled into the phone, but to no avail—the man had already hung up. The bar was silent besides Tomura's ragged breath and Kurogiri's methodical rummaging and cleaning before the fledgling villain let out a horrid yell of frustration, clenching the phone in his
hand until its ashen particles spilled through his fingers and onto the bar top. Kurogiri mindlessly ran a wet cloth over the counter, wiping the pile of dust away with ease, as if he'd performed this action many times before. "I will grind that man into compost!"

"That would be rather lovely," Kurogiri added. "I was thinking a bit of greenery was just what this bar needed!"

"Your anger is understandable, Tomura," The voice of All For One sounded through the blank monitor in the bar. "But allow yourself to grow and learn from this experience. This encounter with Brigand has no doubt taught you to be extremely specific and cautious when requesting the services of third-party mercenaries. Remember: you are paying for their services before their loyalty. It is in their best interests to twist and smear agreements with employers whenever possible. We are no different, either."

"I understand, Sensei," Tomura said, releasing a sigh of defeat and letting his shoulders sag as he took a seat at the bar.

"Besides, a single orb of the Diacatholicon will likely suffice for our goals," All For One added as Kurogiri delicately held up said jade-colored orb in his misty hand. "Kurogiri, if you would be so kind..."

"Of course, sir," Kurogiri's hand twisted into a small vortex, into which the magical orb slipped through, ostensibly to All For One's exact location.

"But still...!" Tomura shook, the last vestiges of his anger becoming apparent as he scratched at his neck. "Brigand sullied our League! He insulted us! Insulted me! For that alone, I should kill him!"

"Need I remind you, Tomura, of precisely why it was decided Brigand would be solicited for his services to begin with?" All For One gently chided his protégé. "It was so the League itself would not have to invest members and man hours into what would be a costly incursion into the very home of the Sorcerer Supreme himself. Brigand possessed the skills necessary for such a feat, but even with what meager arsenal he commands, he will be defenseless once the vengeful might of Kamar-Taj is brought down upon him. Ultimately, we hired Brigand to fail in the long run, so we wouldn't have to. That insignificant man is but one more piece constituting the grander puzzle that is the growth of your League, my dear Tomura."

Tomura seemed to calm down considerably as he considered his master's words, while Kurogiri stood by just as silently, mindlessly cleaning a glass as he, too, listened on.

"Why, just think about the numerous objectives that have been accomplished with this simple operation of yours, Tomura," All For One continued. "An important relic secured in our grasp, a third party that will take the fall, and, when they inevitably catch him, your notoriety will be sure to increase tenfold!"

"My...notoriety?" Tomura questioned.

"They will be expecting Ikiji to be the mastermind behind this encroachment," All For One explained. "And while that boy certainly plays his role, it is you, Tomura, who will be shaped as a force to be reckoned with in the eyes of those feckless sorcerers. It will be you—not Ikiji, not any of our Nomu, not even myself—but you, who will render the world's sense of Justice obsolete. All of this...is for you, Tomura."

Tomura seemed to straighten his posture a bit more, and he dropped his assault on the skin of his neck as his master spoke. All for me...
"So dwell no more on Brigand," All For One said with finality. "Leave that man to his inevitable fate as we turn our attention to the finishing touches of our other project: our prized Nomu."

"Progress is nearing completion, sir," Kurogiri spoke up. "Our special Nomu will be battle ready before the year's first term begins."

"As I'm sure you both know, it was recently announced that All Might would begin cultivating a new generation of heroes at U.A this year," All For One said.

"The media is certainly in a tizzy about it," Kurogiri added.

"Quite right," All For One chuckled. "How does this sound for a proper headline: 'All Might, Symbol of Peace, killed during his first week at U.A'?"

"This is a terrible idea," Wong muttered as a familiar sight to Izuku—a pink-haired girl with crosshairs in her eyes—warily eyed the flaming portal she was stepping through, as well as the dark alley she was stepping into. "Involving a civilian like this."

"It's like you said, Master Wong, we don't have time to consider any other possible alternatives!" Izuku said in defense of his plan to involve Hatsume, before turning to greet her with an awkwardly wide smile and a silly wave of his hand. "U-uh, hi there, Hatsume!" The girl was grumpy, with inky blots dotting her cheeks and workshop clothing, with some gadget-like apparatus strapped to her head; it was clear she was in the middle of working when he'd called, and hoped she wasn't too upset with his request.

The flaming portal fizzled out of existence, cloaking those gathered in near total darkness once more. Despite this, Izuku felt a rush of wind against his face and could practically feel Hatsume's eyes and face hovering directly in front of his own, causing him to squeal comically.

"Have you invited me to get another look at your babies!?" Mei asked excitedly before backing off ever-so slightly, a knowing look on her face that was evident even in the dim alleyway. "Or did you call me back to wow me with your 'so-called magic'?"

'So-called magic,' Mei's words rattled in Izuku's head. She had used those exact same words when he'd tried explaining his abilities to her months ago at Washington Square Park, in the aftermath of Marcus's rampage. She'd laughed off his confession, confidently declaring that magic was completely bunk. Her initial words had hurt Izuku a great deal, but she wasn't done speaking quite yet:

"Magic is bunk, it has to be; even hearing Mr. Stark utter those words, I know there must be something more to it, something explainable," Mei had said, looking far more somber and contemplative than what she had usually expressed toward Izuku. "But, you know...you don't strike me as the kind of guy that would really lie so maliciously, even about something so ridiculous, you know?"

Her words sparked something within Izuku that night, as they munched on their pork-stuffed pretzels: the thought—that maybe finding people who he would be willing to share his secrets of magic with wouldn't be as difficult or impossible as he once feared.

Their first encounter had been brief (and incredibly dangerous and life-threatening to them both), but Izuku trusted Hatsume. And with his sensei's life on the line, that trust was all that mattered to Izuku at the moment. But she didn't know that yet.

"Actually, I called you because I...we... really need your help," Izuku said, fidgeting with his fingers.
"That warehouse over there?" Izuku pointed at the dimly lit derelict building. "We need to get inside discreetly, but there's a number pad we need to get through first."

"And you were thinking that with my Quirk and tech know-how, I'd be able to figure out the correct numbers, right?" Mei asked as Izuku nodded his head in return. She looked at the other two men present, recognizing Spider-Man instantly, but not the portly robed man. "...You haven't even started U.A yet and you're already palling around with an Avenger?"

"Will you be able to get past this security device, or not?" Wong asked a tad bit impatiently.

"Of course I'll be able to!" Mei beamed proudly. "And if I help you guys succeed..." She suddenly invaded Izuku's personal space again, eyes wide with glee, much to the poor boy's discomfort. "Will you put in a good word in for me to Mr. Stark!?"

"S-sure!" Izuku hastily stammered, trying to back up, but to no avail as Mei just inched closer and closer. "Spider-Man can put in a good word for you!"

"Wait, what?" Spider-Man blinked through his mask, having not gotten a word in as he was thoroughly perplexed by the pink-haired girl they'd summoned for aid.

"Then it's settled!" Mei proclaimed excitedly. "I'll use my Zoom Quirk to get that number combination for you lickety-split, and then, boom! Stark Industries internship, here I come!"

"That's...not exactly how that works," Spider-Man sweatdropped, though his words had fallen on Mei's deaf ears.

"And you're certain your Zoom Quirk can secure us silent passage into the building?" Wong inquired with a sense of urgency that likely wouldn't go away anytime soon.

"I assume you wouldn't have called me if your Quirks and know-how of security devices could've gotten you inside without notice," Mei said cheekily, eyeing Wong curiously. "Out of curiosity...what is your Quirk, anyway? Are you a Quirkless 'sorcerer' like Midoriya is?"

"My Quirk is called Humorless," Wong leveled a stern glare directly into the crosshairs of Mei's pupils. "I am incapable of laughter."

"Is—is he joking?" Mei leaned in and whispered to Izuku, who looked just as flabbergasted as she was.

"I have no idea..." Izuku whispered back.

Quickly putting all that aside (for the time being, anyway), Mei quickly and quietly made her way across the street to the dimly lit entrance of the warehouse, the rusted number pad barely discernible beneath the weakly flickering light fixture hung above the door. She leaned her face in close to the pad, activating her Quirk as the crosshairs within her eyes began to focus and narrow.

Midoriya was right to call me, Mei thought excitedly at the accolades Stark might give for her success here. With Zoom, I can focus in on things at a distance, and coupled with my newest baby, my Focusing Goggles, my Quirk gives me almost microscopic vision on things close up!

Mei pulled her red goggles over her face and grinned as she roamed her eyes over the number pad. With the goggles enhancing her Quirk, she could clearly see four fingerprints on the pad: One, Three, Five, and Eight were the numbers pressed, but Mei knew it wasn't necessarily in that order. She focused her goggles more and more with a twist of a dial at the top of her headgear until she had a clear view of the fading leftover sweat, dead skin, and microscopic threads of red fabric left
impressed on each used button. Scanning through the four buttons and comparing the amount of microscopic material left on each of them, Mei was able to determine the correct order within a few moments. She silently waved Izuku and the others over.

"Did you figure it out?" Izuku hurriedly whispered.

"Sure did!" Mei said, dialing back the goggles and lifting them off her face. "I—whoa!" Mei suddenly swayed and fell forward, being caught shakily by Izuku before she could hit the ground. In her excitement she'd forgotten that suddenly switching from microscopic vision to normal vision made her crazy dizzy.

"Thanks for the save, Midoriya," Mei said woozily as she tried to lift herself back up, but soon found that Midoriya was still holding her, shaking lightly.

"No...thank you, Hatsume," Izuku responded.

"Huh?" Mei blinked, the quiet desperation in Izuku's voice not going unnoticed.

"I never told you what we're here for," Izuku spoke softly. "Well, long story short: my teacher, who you met back during the Expo, is dying, and the only thing that can save him was stolen. We think the relic we need was brought here, and we're going to get it back. We're going to save him."

"So please," Izuku pulled back, revealing to Mei a teary yet deeply thankful expression. "Please stay out here, away from danger, while we go inside and finish this."

Mei could only nod dumbly; she was rendered somewhat speechless by the sheer sincerity of Izuku's plea, and quickly punched in the correct numbers into the pad, stepping aside as the door audibly unlocked and Izuku, Wong, and Spider-Man cautiously entered the warehouse...

A warbled, robotic voice screeched out from the encompassing darkness of the building, startling the three as they entered through the door.

"Wait...that voice. Is that—oh God!" Spider-Man felt his Spidey Sense absolutely bristling as numerous lights suddenly flashed on, blinding him and the two sorcerers. Wong and Izuku both raised their hands over their faces, but he took immediate action, his senses practically screaming about the danger careening towards them. Peter shot duel web strands towards their ankles and gave them a swift tug, pulling them off their feet and onto their stomachs right as a metallic body came barreling past where their heads just were.

So much for a discreet entry!

Wong and Izuku both gave rough grunts as they fell but didn't raise any complaints, their hands moving at once to conjure a barrier over themselves to give them some brief respite as their eyes adjusted to the sudden light.

With his mask covering his face, Spider-Man wasn't nearly as affected by the light as the other two were, allowing him to get the first glimpse of their robotic attackers.

"Is that—!?" Spider-Man blinked, seeing but not quite believing. "It's Mr. Stark's Iron Legion drones!"

Indeed they were; a dozen robotic replicas, all assembled into Tony Stark's heroic likeness, buzzing
around the room with their built-in repulsors and firing upon them indiscriminately with said weapons.

Don't tell me... Peter pondered as he propelled himself into the air with a quick *thwip*, kicking one of the drones into another and causing them to veer wildly into the ground. *That Brigand was also the same guy that infiltrated Avengers Tower during the Stark Expo!?*

Several more drones flew toward Midoriya and Wong, raining blast after blast down upon them with their repulsors. Izuku let out a panicked yell as his barrier shattered from the repetitive barrage. The strain forced Izuku down onto one knee, with Wong darting in front of him with his own barrier to deflect and absorb the oncoming blasts. Izuku mentally cursed; his barriers were still somewhat lacking in strength and durability, evident by Wong's barrier lacking any noticeable damage from the Iron Legion's constant barrage.

Seeing his sorcerous allies pinned down by the reprogrammed drones, Spider-Man swung around toward their backs, turning in midair and launching a few well-aimed shots of webbing directly onto the visors of the drones attacking Wong and Izuku.

"Switching to infrared mode!" He heard the drones say as a vividly crimson light glowed from beneath the webbing he'd splattered on their visors. They abruptly ceased their attack on Izuku and Wong and took to the air, with Peter locked in their sights.

"Oh crap!" Peter squealed as he shot more webbing across the steel girders of the warehouse ceiling, keeping himself ahead of the drones hot on his heels. With trepidation, Peter noticed that there were even more Iron Legion drones that had yet to activate, still strung up between the girders by wire. "I think you built these a little too well, Mr. Stark!"

Wong lowered his barrier, giving himself but a moment's respite as he watched Spider-Man draw those particular Iron Legion droids away from himself and Izuku. He turned to gauge Izuku's stamina, but the sound of clunking metal footsteps drew his attention back toward the fray. Several non-flying drones were rushing his location, their palm gauntlets opening up and revealing various combat tools, from saws to jackhammer-like appendages. Wong weaved his hands to and fro, conjuring numerous energy bolts which he pierced through the arc reactors of the attacking droids with a flick of his fingers.

"Master Wong! Above you!" Izuku yelled out in spite of how mesmerizing it was to watch the master do battle with robots, of all things.

Heeding the boy's warning, Wong promptly leaped into the air with his fist drawn back, grabbing hold of the drone before it could mount an attack and summarily driving his fist straight through its plated head. It dropped to the ground with a loud, lifeless thud as Wong wasted little time in raising another barrier to deflect more repulsor blasts from newly activated drones dropping from the ceiling.

"Yes, I *know* we're in danger!" Spider-Man yelled, his Spidey Sense tingling nonstop as he swung between the girders, trying his best to web up drones before they dropped while also keeping a close eye on Izuku and Wong to ensure they weren't overwhelmed by Stark's tech.

"No you don't!" Spider-Man swung down toward a drone whose arm gauntlet had opened up, pointing and launching a newly revealed missile of sorts directly at Izuku. Peter connected a thick strand of webbing to the tail-end of the projectile with a flick of his wrists, swinging over the drone's head and redirecting the missile back toward the unsuspecting droid with a hefty heave. "Bombs away!" Peter yelled as the iron legionnaire exploded spectacularly.

"You okay, Izuku?" Peter asked as he landed in front of the boy, who had only just managed to pick
himself back onto his feet.

"Yeah, I—look out!" Izuku shouted, raising his hands almost on instinct and blasting an incoming drone with a torrent of magical electricity. Peter's Spidey Sense had given him barely enough of a heads-up to duck before a metallic fist or a blast of lightning collided with his head. The automated armor broke apart into several sizzling pieces, colliding to the floor around Peter and Izuku's feet. Peter raised his head, giving Izuku a look of incredulity.

"...Sorry!" Izuku whimpered, at an otherwise loss for words.

"Between you and me, Izuku, I'm just glad we're not fighting the real deal, or else I'd probably be a red-and-blue colored spider smear all over the nearest wall!" Peter yelled.

"If you two are quite finished!" Wong grumbled as he jumped backwards toward them, dodging another round of repulsor blasts from incoming drones and shielding them as they took a more defensive positioning.

"They just keep coming...!" Izuku exclaimed as more drones dropped from the wiring that held them to the steel girders up above, activating and circling Wong's barrier like vultures as they took seemingly random pot shots at it. But as confident as he was in Wong's skill, even Izuku knew the master's barrier could only handle the strain of so many concussive blasts, and if it broke then he could be down for a considerable amount of time.

And Izuku wasn't confident he could stave off the drones long enough for Wong to recuperate his strength, even with the fabled Spider-Man at his side. They had to come up a plan to end this quickly, and fast.

"Hey, Spider-Man...!" Izuku yelled, getting the youngest Avenger's attention. "These drones aren't capable of breaking out of your webbing, right?" He pointed up toward the ceiling, having noticed a plethora of activated armors struggling to escape the sticky bonds of the webbing's tensile strength to no avail.

"No, the Iron Legion are only made from steel-titanium, not the stronger materials Mr. Stark uses for his wearable suits!" Peter informed Izuku before the eyes of his mask widened with realization. "You've got a plan!"

Izuku motioned for Wong and Peter to lean in as he shared his idea with them. Wong's face briefly scrunched up with doubt as he silently ran his own calculations in his mind, while Peter checked the cartridges locked into his web shooters. They were both more than 50% full, and he had extra cartridges to use just in case, but he still had his reservations.

"We'll have to be quick if we go through with this!" Peter said as he set his web shooters to eject all their web fluid at once. He was glad he'd long since upgraded his equipment for this endeavor; his earliest models had a tendency to burst whenever he shot all the web fluid in them out at once. "And I'll be out of commission for a few moments until I can reload regardless!"

"Either this'll be done quickly, or we'll be done quickly," Wong mused as the three of them sprang into action.

Wong leapt back and lowered his magical defenses for but a moment, narrowly dodging a volley of concussive blasts from the armors flying overhead as he erected another barrier, this one wider and thinner than the ones before it and parallel to the floor.

"Let's hope this works...!" Spider-Man prayed aloud as he aimed his left web shooter at the barrier.
With a press of a button, he unleashed all of the web fluid contained within and resisted the knockback as the sticky contents splattered all over the barrier, coating in with copious amounts of webbing. Izuku was up next, conjuring a second wide, thin barrier over the web-coated one Wong had created. Spider-Man repeated the process with his right web shooter, coating it profusely with all the webbing it contained.

"It's all up to you two now!" Spider-Man yelled as he immediately went to work discarding his now emptied wrist cartridges in order to replace them with brimful ones, taking refuge directly behind Wong and Izuku as he did so.

"Right!" Wong and Izuku both yelled as they lifted the barriers with their hands, raising it upright to absorb a slew of blasts from the drones and propelling it forward, making the web-covered barrier collide into the nearest droids homing in on their position. The drones became instantly entangled in the webbed shield, thrusting into and pulling against it fruitlessly as it weaved to and fro to the motions of Izuku and Wong's hands.

"It's working!" Izuku exclaimed as he and Wong moved in tandem, fluidly controlling the entrapping barrier from side to side, top to bottom, colliding into armor after armor as if it were a giant, sticky fly swatter of sorts, littered with struggling, ensnared drones.

The top barrier that Izuku constructed eventually shattered after it had collided with the tenth armor, causing Izuku to momentarily reel from the magical knockback. He swiftly corrected himself, however, focusing instead on helping support and guide Wong's sturdier barrier in swiping up the remaining legionnaires. With a final upward flick of their wrists, the barrier went parallel to the ceiling and careened toward the girders, shattering upon impact but leaving all remaining functional Iron Legion armors squirming uselessly against the webbing that left them completely and utterly adhered.

"W-we did it!" Izuku stammered, feeling utterly spent as he felt like falling to his knees, but knew he had to keep his wits about him. They still had to contend with Brigand, after all, but Izuku had a creeping fear that the man had already warped away to safety. He was nowhere in sight, and the last thing they needed was for the trail to go cold here, not when Strange's life was slowly fading back in the Sanctum.

"Seems our victory is short-lived," Wong mumbled as a sudden rumbling noise shook through the warehouse. It emanated from the shadows on the other end of the warehouse, where no Iron Legion drones had even originated from. Another rumble. And another. The rumbling came with enough consistency to imply...footsteps. Heavy, ominous footsteps.

"I thought all that was stolen from the tower during the Stark Expo were Iron Legion drones," Wong whispered accusingly toward Peter. Izuku had his jaw dropped and he quivered fearfully as the giant metallic figure lumbered out of the shadows. Wong was fairly certain Peter had a similar expression under his mask.

"I'm so sorry guys..." Peter bemoaned as he clicked his second spare web cartridge into place, not that it might make any difference against their newest foe. "It's like I said: Mr. Stark doesn't tell me everything!"

Directly before the trio, lumbering out of the remaining shadows of the warehouse, emerged what Stark had affectionately referred to in the past as one of his 'Hulkbusters'. It looked marred and deformed from what was obviously Brigand's haphazard tinkering, with one entire fist missing and patches of red and gold plating removed, exposing the thickened circuitry and complicated machinery that coiled just beneath the armor.
It's helmeted, dome-like visor lit up as it narrowed in on the two sorcerers and sole Pro, raising its remaining fist high above its head as it slowly approached with cumbersome footsteps. It was perfectly poised to deliver a devastating blow on the barrier Wong hastily erected, and while it certainly lacked the gargantuan size of the 0-pointer Izuku had faced off against during the Entrance Exam, he had no doubt it would pack quite the punch. Tony Stark doesn't skimp on his tech, after all.

Suddenly, and without warning, the hulking battle suit began to grind to a halt before it could crash its clenched fist down upon them. Its inner machinery whirred and groaned as it shut down one function at a time, its glowing eye slits flickering off, signaling a quiet conclusion to what could have been a most disadvantageous battle for Izuku, Wong, and Peter.

Regardless, Izuku and the others remained cautious and defensive, ready to dodge or spring into battle at a moment's notice. The warehouse fell into an eerie quiet as the Hulkbuster suit shut down, the silence ringing in everyone's ears.

Why had the suit shut down so suddenly? Had Brigand's tinkering damaged a crucial section of wiring? Had it not been recharged through proper, efficient means after it was whisked away from Stark? Izuku, Wong, and Peter soon found their answer, though, when the Hulkbuster's helmet slowly slid open with a hiss, and a familiar pink-haired head popped out from the suit's confines.

"H-Hatsume!?” Izuku exclaimed as Wong dropped his barrier, a look of sheer confusion etched on the man's face—a look that he did not have very often, either.

"Phew!” Mei sighed loudly as she clambered out of the suit, her already inky work clothes blackened even further from whatever oils and lubricants were inside the mechanical monstrosity. "I managed to sneak in during the scuffle and shut it down right on time!”

"H-how the heck did you know how to shut it down!?” Spider-Man stammered, exasperated and bewildered beyond belief.

"I didn't!” Mei responded rather cheerfully and...proudly? "But no matter how complicated a piece of tech is, even one developed by a genius like Tony Stark, wiring is still wiring and parts are still parts!”

"So you just pulled wires and components apart from the inside until you managed to force a shutdown?” Izuku asked Mei, eliciting a quick nod from the girl as he approached her. "That was...risky, Hatsume. I told you to stay outside, away from danger until we finished this, didn't I?”

"You're welcome!” Mei responded, blowing a raspberry teasingly at Izuku. "Or did you really think you'd've stood a chance against Mr. Stark's Hulkbuster, of all things, in your condition?”

Izuku blinked as he stole glances at both Spider-Man and Wong. Wong was still standing strong, but he could see that the master still looked visibly depleted from the battle. Having to maintain barrier after barrier had to take its toll on the man. Spider-Man, too, looked somewhat exhausted, although he had the added benefit of a mask covering any explicit signs of fatigue. And Izuku...well, nobody needed to tell him the obvious: he was fairly winded by this point. So perhaps Mei had a point. Perhaps her sneaking in unnoticed as their battle raged was for the better. Perhaps it had saved them a ton of time and energy in the long run.

"We're not finished yet,” Wong informed everyone, glancing around the warehouse cautiously as his eyes landed on a solitary door and a window that was conspicuously not see-through. "We still have to locate Brigand and the Diacatholicon...although it may be that he has already fled."
Izuku walked alongside Wong and Spider-Man as they cautiously approached the office door, unsure of what they might find inside. Would it be the Diacatholicon, or were they too late? Had the stolen Iron Legion fulfilled its purpose and granted Brigand the window he needed to escape? Or was he still lurking about the premises, just beyond detection?

A sudden scream of shock from Mei soon answered the heroes’ inquiries, as they whirled around, only for Izuku to pale considerably at the sight before them. A smirking Brigand had appeared seemingly out of thin air, a fading distortion indicating the use of his teleporting satchel, with one arm wrapped around Mei’s neck while the other held the same gun that brought the Sorcerer Supreme near death to her head.

And to make matters worse, there was no Diacatholicon in sight.

"You know, you really should've listened to the boy," Brigand hissed into Mei’s ear.

Izuku felt his mouth run dry as panic threatened to take the reins; perhaps it would've been better if Mei had stayed outside after all.

Chapter End Notes

Well, we've finally made it. This story is now completely caught up with the original story posted on FF.net. From this point onward it'll be back to a more intermittent upload schedule, and both FF and AO3 will be uploaded on the same days. However, all you AO3 readers will receive the newest chapters slightly earlier, so rejoice! Thank you all for giving my first fanfic (ever) a chance, and I hope to continue entertaining you with what I hope will eventually be the greatest MHA x Marvel crossover yet!
Apprentice No More, Part 2

Chapter Summary

The heroes manage to restrain Brigand's body, but the battle is far from over. With questions that need answering, a relic to retrieve, and a life to save, Izuku and Wong take a drastic step and enter Brigand's mind itself...

Chapter Notes

I apologize in advance: this chapter was supposed to be the finale of the arc but I've decided to make this a three-parter due to unexpected circumstances and problems. The actual finale—the next chapter—will hopefully be posted soon.

"Hatsume!" Izuku screamed, leaning forward as if he was going to rush Brigand in his panicked state. Two hands landed on his shoulders, however, stopping him from making a dash for the gun and the man holding it. Izuku glanced back and saw both Spider-Man and Wong had slapped a hand on his shoulders.

"Remain calm, Midoriya," Wong said as he narrowed his eyes at the smirking Brigand.

"Yeah, relax kid!" Brigand sneered, poking Mei's cheek with the barrel of his gun as the girl stood deathly still. "You wouldn't want to spook me, would you? Who knows how itchy my trigger finger is today...actually, you do know, don't you?"

"Wait for the opportune moment," Spider-Man whispered into Izuku's ear, having faced more than one hostage situation before and during his tenure with the Avengers.

"The Diacatholicon," Wong spoke, perhaps hoping to gleam some information from Brigand while stalling for time all at once. "I see that you do not have the relic on your person."

"The chain with the orbs? Yeah, already sold one of them off," Brigand informed them. "Made quite the haul with a single one, too. Good thing I kept the other two around. I had a hunch I'd get buyers, but they must be quite the catch if I'm getting heroes and sorcerers lining up to my front door!"

"Unfortunately for you, we're not here to make a purchase," Spider-Man glowered.

"Oh, I'm well aware what you're here for," Brigand said smugly. "But unfortunately for you lot, now you're going to have make some deposits on my behalf!"

"What are you saying?" Wong inquired cautiously.

"You put me in quite a predicament financially, laying waste to my drones the way you did," Brigand explained, raising the tip of his gun and tapping it against Mei's temple. "And you're going to help me recoup my losses if you want this pretty little thing back in one piece!"

"...You want more relics from the Sanctum in exchange for the girl's life," Wong said with a frown.
"Bingo!" Brigand guffawed. "I'm well aware that magic isn't something the average schmuck knows anything about, but if my latest incursion is proof of anything, it's that relics can fetch top coin if you can find the right buyer! Tokyo, Chinatown, Latveria—all will be lined up at the door of Brigand!"

"We won't let you use Hatsume and us as a way to make off like a bandit!" Izuku growled, clenching his fists as he desperately sought an opportunity to save Mei and take down the thief.

"It's Brigand! I'll make off like a 'brigand'!" Brigand angrily berated. "Kids these days, I swear...no sense of professionalism! Besides...you've no one to blame but yourselves for this! You didn't consider the possibility of having the tables turned on you so quickly or easily, did you? But me? I'm always looking five, ten, twenty steps ahead!"

"You have a really annoying voice," Mei suddenly piped up. A strained silence fell upon the warehouse and everyone inside it as all eyes were on the girl being held hostage. "It's nasally and really unpleasant to listen to."

"What did you just say?" Brigand snarled, giving Mei another hard poke in the cheek with his mystical gun.

"H-Hatsume, please—" Izuku stammered, appearing particularly tense.

"Let me guess: deviated septum?" Mei continued with a chuckle. "Yeah, I recognize it from personal experience. I once broke my nose as a kid when a giant wrench smacked me right in the face. It's an occupational hazard for an inventor, I suppose...and also one for a professional thief like you, too."

"It's 'brigand'!" Said Brigand spoke with a snarl, exasperated at having to correct a kid once again. His eyes were wide with anger, repeatedly shifting from Mei to Wong and the others before him, trying not to divide his attention too much. "And stop talking!"

"I've only broken my nose once, but I can tell you've probably had yours broken multiple times over the years," Mei said, tilting her head down as she spoke. "I bet it would be really easy to break it again, too!"

Mei swiftly slammed her head backwards, striking Brigand directly in the nasal bridge as the rear of her support headgear simultaneously shattered his yellow sunglasses, driving in numerous shards of glass into his eye and cheek. Brigand reared back and bellowed painfully, his grasp loosening just enough for Mei to quickly drop to the floor and roll out of the way to safety. Blood flowed from the villain's nostrils as he angrily and shakily raised his gun toward Mei. The glass in his eye made it more than a little difficult to aim, but he never got a shot off as the heroes before him had sprung into action the instant all hell broke loose.

"Spider-Man!" Izuku yelled to his more experienced companion as his hands weaved open a tiny portal before them both. Right on the other side of the passageway the boy had conjured was Brigand's means of teleportation. "The satchel!"

Not needing to be told twice, Spider-Man instantly aimed his now refilled web shooter straight through the tiny, swirling passage. With an audible thwip, he fired off a thick deluge of webbing that cocooned the leathery relic nice and tightly shut.

Wong, too, had spun his hands and conjured a portal to close the distance between himself and Brigand. Reaching through the fiery aperture, Wong grabbed hold of the gun with one hand and Brigand's arm with the other.

"You might feel a small prick," Wong muttered before jolting his foe's body with violently arcing
streaks of electricity. Brigand screamed and convulsed uncontrollably, allowing Wong to snatch the gun out of the man's gloved grasp. Wong wasn't finished, however—he quickly followed up his bolt attack with a subsequent summoning of the Crimson Bands, which dutifully wrapped around Brigand, binding him securely in their rigid, magical hold.

"Hatsume!" Izuku was by the girl's side in an instant, worriedly checking her over for any injuries. Mei gently pushed Izuku's hands away with her own, responding with a comforting grin and chuckle to let him know she was alright, just exhausted if nothing else. Izuku fell to his knees alongside Mei, panting and apologizing profusely.

"You were so busy looking twenty steps ahead that you couldn't even see the steps directly before you," Wong said under his breath as he made sure Brigand was thoroughly restrained, with no hope of escape.

"So what now?" Spider-Man spoke in a hushed tone, standing beside Wong.

"There are questions that need answering, and quick," Wong replied, glaring down at the subdued brigand. "Even with a mystical arsenal in his possession, no mere gun-toting thug could pierce through the Sorcerer Supreme's Sanctum defenses so easily—not without help!"

"So you will answer me," Wong said loudly and directly to Brigand as he stepped closer to engage in questioning. "Who sent you to steal the Diacatholicon from the Sanctum, and where have you cloistered the rest of it away?"

Wong was met with silence as Brigand glared right back, long and hard. Then, the man burst out in a fit of laughter, wriggling against the crimson bands that kept him bound in place.

"What use is it seeking an answer that you'll never come upon?" Brigand queried with a knowing smirk. "My arsenal extends to that which you cannot see so easily, yeah? Mystical mental blocks, Monk Man. I've had this magic craft 'installed' over the years while doing work for and against magic users. I cannot reveal information about my employers, especially under compulsion! You'll never—!"

"Sleep," Wong said simply, and with a gentle poke to the forehead, Brigand was out like a broken bulb, head lolled to one side and lips parting as he began snoring lightly. All the while, Wong reached out with his eyes closed, trying to probe the thief's mind.

He didn't get very far. Brigand—thief that he may be—wasn't lying about the mental blocks.

"Search the rest of the warehouse," Wong instructed Spider-Man as he continued testing Brigand's mental defenses. "There may yet be clues that can help us decipher this conundrum."

Spider-Man turned to inform Izuku and Mei about their next course of action, and the trio soon set off across the component-riddled warehouse floor, walking over and occasionally combing through piece by broken piece of Stark's now destroyed Iron Legion, searching for any kind of clue as to the location of the Diacatholicon.

"Ooh, how exciting!" Mei exclaimed to herself, thumbing through the junk and lifting the remains of a facial visor from one of the demolished drones. "To get a close and personal look at some of Mr. Stark's technology...what a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity!"

"Hey, don't forget what we're really here for!" Spider-Man chided the girl, snatching the visor out of her grasp with a well-aimed strand of webbing. "And please don't steal any of Mr. Stark's tech, either!"
"Is it really stealing if it's stolen from someone else who already stole it first?" Mei asked coyly.

"Um, guys?" Izuku called out from the barren office door beside the one-way mirror, interrupting whatever retort Peter was about to give Mei and snapping Wong out of his meditative state. "I think I found something."

Izuku led the other three into the seemingly desolate, empty room. All that stood out was a dingy desk—nothing too out of the ordinary. But Izuku soon directed their attention to the pitch blackened square shape of a safe that lay beneath the desk, blending nearly perfectly with the shadows. Adorned in the center of its face and jutting out slightly was a large, silvery combination lock. It wasn't a huge safe, since it was situated beneath the desk, but it was definitely large enough to contain the rest of the Diacatholicon.

"Could it be in there?" Izuku asked what everyone was surely thinking aloud.

"Only one way to find out," Wong replied, ushering Izuku and the other two back as he circled his hands, closing a portal around the safe nearly as soon as he'd opened it.

Izuku gulped nervously as the flaming aperture sizzled and sputtered as it was closed around the safe. He'd been instructed on the potential dangers of portals by Strange before, and why it was important for him to get used to allowing his own portals to fizzle out of existence instead of closing them shut—the forceful closure of eldritch portals could prove effective at slicing objects caught in it in two...and that could apply to other people, too. Gruesome images of decapitations and lobbed off limbs sent a horrific shudder up Izuku's neck.

However, the safe was not cut cleanly in two as Izuku had been expecting. Wong too seemed particularly surprised; he grunted with exertion as he tried his hardest to close his portal completely around the top of the safe, but the metallic vault simply refused to budge. The portal soon fizzled out with a slight groan from Wong, who'd apparently relented. After spending a moment to catch his breath, Wong leaned down to inspect the safe closer. He ran his fingers across it carefully, examining the barely visible scorch marks that were imprinted on the metal. The safe itself appeared otherwise completely unharmed.

"Adamantium," Wong soon muttered, standing back up and looking down at the safe with disdain. "My magic alone will not be able to slice through such material."

Adamantium? Izuku was bewildered by this newest revelation. He'd read about the impossibly rare and seemingly impervious material via links found on various Pro Hero and Quirk forums. It proved to be a boon to whoever managed to get their hands on a sample of it, heroes and villains alike. It became highly regulated by S.H.I.E.L.D. authorities as a result. It wasn't something that could fall into the lap of the average citizen...but then again, Brigand proved to be anything but average, or even a simple civilian. Not only that, but he'd managed to craft the adamantium he possessed into a safe of all things. *Just how deep do his criminal connections run?*

"How are we going to get in there then?" Peter asked Wong before turning to Mei. "Think you can lend us your Quirk to help get past this like you did for the key pad earlier?"

"My Quirk affects my eyes, not my ears!" Mei responded, crossing her arms.

"It seems we will have to employ other methods if we wish to get into Brigand's safe," Wong spoke as he exited the office, staring down the slumbering man bound in crimson bands. Izuku and the others were hot on his heels, wondering what the mystic master had in mind. *Less...savory methods.*
"Master Wong?" Izuku questioned, watching confusedly as Wong began twitching his fingers in intricate, unreadable motions before Brigand's body. Wong then circled his hands, and this time, much to Izuku's amazement, a shimmering green portal sprang into existence on the ground before them.

"Where does...this portal lead to?" Izuku asked as he cautiously stepped closer, peering down into the swirling, verdant abyss.

"Into this brigand's mind of course," Wong replied. "I will need you two to stay out here in order to keep a close watch over Brigand's body, as well as if any other parties arrive at the warehouse," Wong addressed Spider-Man and Mei.

"And what about me?" Izuku asked with some trepidation.

"You will be joining me into Brigand's mindscape," Wong responded, stepping closer to his portal's edge. "Mostly as potential backup to help pull me out if these enigmatic mental blocks prove too strong even for me."

Joining him? Into another human being's mindscape? Izuku had learned throughout his apprenticeship with Doctor Strange of the sheer versatility of magic, but even he hadn't considered the possibility of physically delving into another person's mind. What would it look like? How would it feel? What would he see?

This was so going down on the next page of his Magical Analysis for the Future notebook.

"We'll keep everything under control on our end!" Spider-Man exclaimed. "Just don't be in there too long! We've still got a doctor to save!"

"...Be careful," Mei whispered apprehensively as she kept her eyes firmly on Izuku. It was obvious she was still somewhat rattled from Brigand holding her at gunpoint, and the additional exposure to even more magic was probably keeping her mind reeling.

"Everything's going to be okay! Hatsume!"

And with that, Izuku and Wong descended through the portal, into the mind of a ruthless, opportunistic thief and killer.

Izuku instinctively shut his eyes as he fell through the portal. The sensation of falling didn't last long, and his feet soon landed on something squishy yet stable. He immediately tried sighing in relief, only to discover the air had become incredibly thick and cumbersome. His eyes snapped open as he reached for his throat, only to go stiff and wide-eyed at the sight of his surroundings.

Entering into Brigand's mind was similar to entering an entirely new realm: the sky pulsed with vibrant hues of pink and purple, and seemed to envelop Izuku and Wong entirely, stretching endlessly from top to bottom, side to side, with no end or beginning to be seen. Izuku glanced down at his current foothold and nearly yelped in surprise at the fuchsia-colored sheath beneath him.

He and Wong were standing on a gigantic neuron, a bulbous cell body that erupted into numerous branches and axons that led to yet more seemingly suspended neurons that fibrillated in a steady rhythm. The sea of spindly sheaths and tendrils seemed to stretch as far as the surrounding sky did—endlessly and beyond sight.
"On your guard, Midoriya!" Wong shouted, snapping Izuku out of his bewilderment and awe at entering such an environment for the first time. Wong had crouched into a defensive position and had his sights set on something above them. Izuku looked up as well and paled considerably—standing above their heads on another level of connected axons and neurons stood Brigand, staring down at the sorcerers tauntingly as he leaned against a fleshy hillock.

"Man, oh man!" Brigand jeered down at them. "You must want some answers badly if you would go so far as to enter my own mind!"

"You delay the inevitable, Brigand!" Wong roared, fists blazing with magic. "We're going to shatter those mental blocks and retrieve the relic you stole!"

"Well then..." Brigand paused to chuckle ominously. "Let's see it, then."

Izuku tensed as the mindscape seemed to shudder and tremble. An oppressive force seemed to descend on the two sorcerers as they steadied themselves. A squelching, scraping sound caused Izuku to perk his ears up, and he nervously slid to Wong's side as the horrific squishing noises inched closer and closer. A gangly, clawed arm suddenly reached up, grasping the sheathed cell body the two were standing on. With a nightmarish gurgle, the creature hoisted itself to their level, squirming its revolting worm-like body onto the pulsing platform.

"Master Wong!" Izuku cried out as several more mottled, rotting limbs reached out from beneath their foothold.

"Stay by my side Midoriya!" Wong shouted as he prepared to fight off the creatures' attack.

"W-what are they!?” Izuku stammered fearfully.

Wong clapped a hand on the boys shoulder, as if trying to suppress his tangible fear with that single gesture. "At first glance, they appear to be Fear Eaters," Wong said guardedly, and Izuku could swear his heart had stopped beating for an instant. "Demons from the Dream Dimension that feed on one's fears..."
Wong and Izuku soon find the odds stacked against themselves as they struggle to apprehend Brigand from within his own mindscape. With the sands of time slowly ticking closer and closer to zero for Doctor Strange, will the two sorcerers be able to defeat Brigand's mental blocks in order to retrieve the relic necessary to save their Sorcerer Supreme?

Revelations will be made, lessons will be learned, and tears and blood alike will be shed in the conclusion of this arc, a culmination of sorts of all that has happened in the story thus far as the curtain falls on Act I!!!
"M-Master Wong...?" Izuku groaned weakly, rubbing his eyes as his senses were somewhat restored. "I'm back here? I thought I was...I-I guess it was just an illusion..."

Wong had half a mind to question Izuku as to what the demons had made him see, but they still had far more pressing matters to attend to. Brigand was still their highest priority. It was readily apparent that Izuku was at somewhat of a disadvantage here in the mindscape, but so long as he stayed by his senior's side where he could be defended and possibly even adapt, Wong still felt confident that victory could be theirs.

"Stay close at all costs, Midoriya," Wong ordered his young charge before turning to face the relentlessly smug Brigand standing above them, mockingly clapping over their apparent victory over the Fear Eaters.

"Well done, well done!" Brigand crowed. "Feisty little critters, aren't they? And yet you dispatched them far quicker than I was expecting! Bravo!"

"Did you really expect such meager obstacles to prevent us from achieving our goals?" Wong asked him with a scowl.

"Actually...yeah!" Brigand grinned and spread his arms as his body dropped backwards off the neuron he had been standing upon, plummeting down into the depths of his mindscape. "And I still do!"

"Follow!" Wong grunted as he dove after Brigand, sliding and leaping deftly down sinuous axons. Midoriya followed close behind Wong, though he was primarily relying on his Cloak of Levitation to glide and weave between the fuchsia sheaths that spread so haphazardly across Brigand's mind. Wong kept a close eye on Brigand's movements, glowering as their foe dexterously flipped and slid between neurons, keeping a healthy distance from his pursuers. Despite his narrowed focus, Wong remained acutely aware of the air of restlessness Midoriya was giving off.

"Master Wong!" Izuku cried out just as the mindscape seemed to undulate and shudder ominously. Both Master and Apprentice slowed their chase, gripping onto the nearest axon pathway until the foreboding shaking ceased, holding on tight as it writhed and rippled, as if it were actively trying to shake them off. Brigand was out of sight by this point, but that was now the least of the sorcerers' concerns.

Wong and Izuku winced as a sound comparable to grinding glass echoed through their eardrums. Pinpointing the nearly deafening sound to just above them, Wong tilted his head up and tensed considerably. The countless shards that had erupted from the Fear Eaters' obliterated forms were slowly reforming, the floating, glassy clumps sprouting a familiar tangle of mottled limbs and wolfish jaws as they landed on the axons above them, snarling and immediately dropping down in pursuit as soon as they were physically able.

"They regenerated!?!" Wong exclaimed in bafflement as he swiftly stepped in front of Midoriya, bashing the grisly worm-like forms away with a well-timed barrier to their heads. "Don't tell me...?!"

"That's right, Monk Man!" Brigand yelled out as he stepped out from behind a vertical sheath a safe distance away, watching smugly as the two intruders were once again on the defensive. "Those little critters are my mental blocks! And you can't just blast them away, oh no! They'll keep on coming back and they'll hunt you relentlessly, the perfect hunting hounds to take down a couple sorcerous little foxes!"

"They'll just keep coming...?" Izuku asked, a wave of otherworldly fear and uneasiness surging through him as the Fear Eaters approached.
"Midoriya! I said not to falter!" Wong shouted, hesitating with a fair amount of trepidation himself as he noticed Izuku's eyes had become wide and glossed over. Had the Fear Eaters gotten to him again? Was he being subjected to yet another illusion?

Wong wouldn't have any more time to ponder over it as the Fear Eaters renewed their assault, taking advantage of the master's hesitation. Rushing them all at once, the ghastly demons managed to successfully scrape and wiggle their way under and over Wong's barrier, grasping hold of their limbs and knocking them over as they swarmed. Wong yelled out as he tumbled off the platform and onto another one further below, the last thing he saw before being swallowed up by the demonic swarm was Midoriya being engulfed by the moldering mass of tenacious Fear Eaters.

*Don't falter! Do not hesitate! Or else...!

Wong struggled fruitlessly against the repugnant grey tendrils that constricted and sucked his body into the demonic mass that had set upon him. He instinctively covered his head with his arms, tumbling around like his robes in a dryer before being unceremoniously spat out, landing on a hard surface with a loud grunt.

Eyes wide and alert, the first thing Wong noticed was that he was seemingly no longer within Brigand's mindscape. As he lay on his back, all he could see at first was blue, with white wisps dancing atop it, eerily reminiscent of the sky of Kathmandu...

A brisk breeze rolled atop his face and body, and Wong jumped to his feet, glancing around fervently. The sky and breeze wasn't just reminiscent of Kathmandu—he was back at the compound of Kamar-Taj, standing in the middle of the courtyard. A sharper wind rolled through, causing the branches of the yard's sole tree to dance with delight. The chill bit into Wong's hand. It all felt so real...

But it couldn't be. It just couldn't be. The sensations may have felt real, but the silence that accompanied the wind was more than enough to convince Wong he'd been enraptured in an illusion as Midoriya surely had been as well.

Midoriya... Wong mentally cursed himself over his hesitation, placing all blame for jeopardizing the young apprentice's life and ending up in this situation to begin with squarely at his own two feet. Physically entering the minds of others was always a risky endeavor, but he'd underestimated just how potent the mental blocks in Brigand's mind actually were. Was Izuku safe? Could he escape the Fear Eaters without risk of harm? If only he hadn't hesitated...

"There you go again, allowing a fear of helplessness and the failure that might follow suit because of it to cloud an otherwise pragmatic mind," A hauntingly familiar voice piped up, shattering the silence of the illusory Kamar-Taj.

Wong's breath caught in his throat, and he stood deathly still. *No...it cannot be!* Wong slowly turned his head toward his domain that was the compound's library, nearly going slack-jawed and tearful all at once as his eyes locked with those of his former master—the Ancient One.

The Celtic woman, as sleek and bald and splendidly refulgent as Wong remembered her with those magnificently golden robes draping down to the stone ground, eyed him inquisitively.

"You...are not here," Wong said aloud, thought it seemed to be more directed at himself than her. "You are merely an illusion of a friend who has long since been dead."
"If I am merely an illusion meant to deceive you," The Ancient One spoke, taking a step toward Wong. "Then you should be perfectly capable of striking me down...without any hesitation or compunction to obstruct you."

"You are...dead," Wong repeated again, though he made no move against the illusion of his former master.

"Do you know why?" She asked softly.

"Me," Wong replied quietly, balling his hands into frustrated fists as his thoughts invariably drifted to the tragedy that befell Kamar-Taj nearly six years ago. "My hesitation that day caused your death, and the hesitation of Strange—"

"Were out of your control," She calmly interjected. "You could not completely control both occurrences. Such reactions in the heat of battle cannot always be helped, Wong. The root of your fear is not hesitation, but the lack of control you have come to associate with it. You cannot control every outcome; every variable cannot be accounted for. You must accept this."

An uncomfortable warmth licked at Wong's backside, prompting the sorcerer to whirl around. Where the courtyard once was, a raging inferno had now replaced it, obstructing Wong's vision with copious amounts of flame and smoke. Wong raised a hand over his face, straining his eyes as he caught glimpses of figures moving within the blaze. Enough of the flames soon parted to reveal those within: a bloodied and panting Strange, standing vindictively over the cowering body of the zealot Ikiji, and an enraged double of himself hollering at his friend.

"Finish him, Stephen!" The doppelganger Wong yelled. "You must put an end to him! He has given himself over to the corruption of Dormammu!"

Wong watched what followed woefully, every detail of that day seared into his very memory. Strange raised his hands, ready to smite the last zealot down with every ounce of magic at his disposal. And yet, in an act that Wong to this day could not decide was spurred either by pity or affection, Strange allowed his hands to drop, giving Ikiji the precious moments needed to use his fallen master's Sling Ring to whisk himself to safety, an act they were still paying for to this day.

"Strange!" Wong saw his double yell out in disbelief.

"He is not our priority," Strange responded, turning to face his sorcerous companion. "All For One is; we must hurry to All Might immediately. Hopefully we are not too late..."

Shunk!

Wong spun away from the vision in the blaze upon hearing a dreadfully familiar thudding and squelching sound, turning to see the Ancient One—his teacher, his guide, his friend—impaled from behind by a multitude of black and red tendrils, lifting her body into the air as she rasped excruciatingly.

"NO!" Wong cried out as he reached for her helplessly, just as he had on that day six years ago. And also just like that day, the visage of the man Wong had come to detest more than any other mortal on the planet materialized out of shadow from behind the Ancient One's impaled body. The shadowy form of All For One sneered maliciously, waving his victim's body like a bloodied victory banner before sending her flying off those abhorrent Quirk tendrils of his and rolling limply across the ground, directly into Wong's grasp.

Wong did not attempt to suppress his overflowing anguish by this point, his vision obscured by
dribbling tears and illusory smoke as he cradled the Ancient One's dying form.

"I could've stopped this," Wong choked out, trying his best to contain his master's blood, though he knew from memory it was a useless attempt. "Seeing this all over again only convinces me I could've stopped all this."

"It's as I said, my dear Wong: you cannot control every outcome," The Ancient One whispered, gently nudging his hands away from her wounds. "The sooner you accept that, the sooner you can begin better affecting the outcome of things you can control."

A shrill cry suddenly sounded off from a far distance, faint but pained nonetheless. Midoriya! Wong realized, remembering that the boy, too, was in danger, enraptured in his own illusion.

"Whether or not that apprentice succumbs is an outcome you can still affect, Wong," The Ancient One spoke quieter and quieter as she slowly faded away.

Wong remained crouched where he was for a moment longer, staring down at his hands contemplatively before springing back to his feet, newfound resolve coursing through his veins.

"My hesitation will not doom another practitioner," Wong solemnly declared, pressing his hands together as they burgeoned with magical force. "Not this one."

With a mighty swipe, Wong unleashed the accumulated energy all at once, shattering the very air surrounding him as the illusion splintered apart irreparably, thrusting Wong back into Brigand's mindscape. Glancing up, Wong saw the Fear Eaters that had consumed him fracture back into multiple shards, this time fading away for good instead of reforming. Rescaling the axon he'd fallen off, he spotted a bulbous mound of revolting flesh that was no doubt covering Izuku's body.

"Midoriya!" Wong yelled as he sprinted over to give what aid he could to Izuku, unaware of exactly what kind of torment he was surely suffering from.

"Get off...!" Izuku squirmed halfheartedly as the slithering husks of the Fear Eaters cocooned around him, squishing him down into something akin to a tunnel or burrow before the fleshy walls began undulating rhythmically, forcefully tugging the fearful boy deeper into depths unknown. Izuku wished he could put up more of resistance against the creatures, but they carried an oppressive, intimidating aura rivaled only by Bakugo's anger and rage, and even then the explosive boy might have his work cut out for him. Izuku was simply unprepared for demons, of all things.

"Get me out of here!" Izuku cried out indignantly. As if heeding his words, the repulsive, shifting hides of the Fear Eaters seemed to open up considerably and Izuku simply slid out, plopping on a hard wooden surface with a yelp.

Wait a minute—a hard wooden surface? Wasn't he just in some thief's squishy mindscape? Jolting alertness, Izuku sprang to his feet, arcane lightning buzzing between his fingers as he prepared for an attack from Fear Eaters at any moment.

But none came. And Izuku was left perplexed and disoriented beyond belief as he scanned his surroundings: the Fear Eaters had dropped him back at the New York Sanctum and had disappeared without a trace.

Or was this really the Sanctum? There was no doubt that everything seemed in order...well, mostly in order, as the staircase looked pristine and clean, and not littered with holes from wayward magic blasts that he was sure were still present when he and Wong had departed for Avengers Tower.
The anomalies continued to compound: a strange scent soon wafted into Izuku's nostrils, and the sound of periodic dripping could be heard throughout the building. The sound and scent complimented each other, but not in a way that was at all pleasant to Izuku. His mind puzzled over the oddities as he mindlessly stepped toward the staircase, pausing as he had suddenly stepped in a puddle of sorts.

Izuku glanced down and immediately wished he hadn't. The odious scent of flesh rushed into his nostrils and he nearly gagged, trying to step back but soon discovering, much to his horror, that the crimson puddle had now expanded across the entire floor. The Sanctum's ground level was drenched in an inordinate amount of blood.

"Izuku—" A weak, raspy voice called out to him, sending dreadful shivers down his back. It was a voice he knew well.

"M-master...?" Izuku replied, turning slowly toward the Sanctum's entrance and gasping as he beheld Doctor Strange's injured body, just as bloodied and grievous as he recalled the sorcerer being right after taking Brigand's bullet. Seeing his master lying in such a voluminous pool of blood made Izuku weak in the knees, for sure.

"Why, Izuku?" Strange questioned weakly, grasping the bullet wound that gushed far too much blood for Izuku's comfort with one hand while reaching for his student with the other. "Why did you leave me to die...? Why didn't you retrieve the Diacatholicon quickly enough...?"

Izuku was positively trembling as he tried to take a step toward his dying sensei, but his legs proved too shaky to even lift out of the pool of blood, sending out ripples through the crimson ooze as he stood rigidly, terrified out of his mind. Was he about to fail in his mission? Was Strange about to die, alone, in the stasis cocoon where Izuku and Wong had just left him? Was all of this for naught? No...no, it couldn't be...!

"I-I'm not going to let you die!" Izuku stammered tearfully. "I'm here to get the Diacatholicon back! I'm here to save you for once!"

"And how will you save me...when you can't even overcome what is now your greatest fear; you loathe the idea that one day I will no longer be there to guide and teach you," Strange explained woefully, his body slowly beginning to sink beneath the bloody liquid.

"No, no...!" Izuku's feet finally allowed him to move, and he ungracefully stumbled toward Strange's sinking form, falling to his hands and knees and splashing blood all over his garments as he feebly tried to free his sensei from the invisible pull that was steadily dragging him under. "You can't die! There's still so much I don't know yet! How will I become a fully fledged sorcerer without your help? How will I become a hero!"

"Yes, how will you?" Strange posed the question right back at the boy. He was nearly completely submerged by this point—only his head remained above the blood. "If I die...will your dream die with me, son?"

"No, please...!" Izuku cried hysterically as Strange disappeared beneath the bloody surface. Izuku continuously reached down, but his hands only met the floor with each desperate scrape and would go no deeper. His teacher, it seemed, was beyond his reach. "Dad..."

"Pitiful, Izuku..." A malicious voice danced into Izuku's ear, causing the boy's heart to thump fearfully. It looked as if he would not even get a moment's rest before being confronted by another familiar face—descending down the Sanctum staircase, adorned in golden and brown robes and sporting his trademark white hair was none other than the fallen zealot himself: Ikiji Kokotsu.
"You're finally beginning to realize that without the Sorcerer Supreme's support, you will amount to nothing, both as a sorcerer and a hero."

"Y-you're not really here, this must all be an illusion!" Izuku mumbled to himself, hunching over on his knees and clamping his bloodstained hands over his ears, smearing them red. Ikiji's voice, however, penetrated his mind anyhow.

"But who is to say that an illusion is incapable of speaking the truth?" Ikiji asked coyly, and Izuku could practically hear his mischievous grin. "And what better truth is there than this: Izuku Midoriya is nothing without his precious sensei, his 'father'!" Ikiji had all but spat that last word out.

"S-shut up..." Izuku quietly stammered, his cheeks damp from pitiful tears as he weakly tried to shake Ikiji's invasive voice out of his head.

"Don't believe me, do you?" Ikiji chuckled darkly, the echo of his malicious laughter ricocheting around Izuku's head painfully. "Then answer me: what is Izuku Midoriya without his precious Sorcerer Supreme holding his hand!?"

"I...I'm...!" Izuku racked his tormented mind for any possible answers, but nothing positive or encouraging seemed to pop up.

"Quirkless! Loser! Nerd! Deku!"

Those were the words his mind was dredging back into the forefront of his memory. Was that really all he was without magic— without Doctor Strange's tutelage?

"Banish those foul thoughts, Midoriya!" The voice of Wong suddenly pierced through the gloom and doubt, fighting off the painful echo of Ikiji's venomous laughter. "You mustn't falter and allow this heretical illusion to dictate your worth!"

"Master Wong!?!" Izuku cried out with a semblance of relief. The master was nowhere in sight, but his uplifting presence could still be felt throughout the illusory Sanctum. Izuku struggled, but he managed to raise himself back on his feet as the false Ikiji looked on in annoyance.

"Banish foul thoughts?" Ikiji said mockingly. "As if you can put any more trust in the words of that doddering old fool than you can your own thoughts! Especially when said thoughts betray you."

Izuku groaned in pain, rubbing his temples furiously as the deluge of doubt and shadow again cascaded through his mind. And again, the sagely voice of Wong rang clearly through the chaos.

"I admit, Midoriya, I had more than my fair share of doubts and reservations regarding your training under Strange, and said misgivings were not entirely without merit," Wong spoke, causing Izuku to pause and frown.

"However," Wong continued, "You have more than proven yourself since your days at Kamar-Taj. You have earned your position as Strange's personal apprentice. Your growth is all the evidence one needs to see to know of your potential. And I know you must find the idea of a world without the magnanimous Stephen Strange helping us to be incredibly frightening... and that's okay, Midoriya. Do you remember your Test of Heart?"

My Test of Heart... I showed that an indomitable spirit can stave off even the worst of one's self-doubts! Izuku reminded himself as he leveled a glare in the false Ikiji's direction, the once taunting illusion now seeming unsure and shaken. Doubts... fears... pain... it's okay to have them, so long as you don't allow yourself to succumb to them! Right, Generalissimo? Marcus? Sensei?
"You...you don't know what you're thinking!" The Ikiji illusion shouted at Izuku.

"I know exactly what I'm thinking," Izuku responded coolly, scarred hands brimming his magic as he stared down the illusion. "A world without a Sorcerer Supreme for me to depend on...maybe a day does come where that reality comes to pass, but it won't be this day! I will save Doctor Strange, and I won't allow anyone else to get in my way—no you, not Brigand, and especially not myself!"

"You wanted to know who Izuku Midoriya was without the Sorcerer Supreme?" Izuku continued with his declaration. "I'll tell you: Izuku Midoriya is the one who will follow in that man's footsteps!"

The false Ikiji screamed as its body was consumed in the magical fires Izuku had summoned forthwith, evaporating the pool of blood in an instant and shattering the mirage that was the fake Sanctum. Izuku gasped and caught his breath as he suddenly found himself returned to Brigand's pulsing mindscape, the Fear Eaters that had dog-piled him hissing and crumbling away into nothingness. A hand slapped the boy on the shoulder, causing him to jump—it was merely Wong, however, who seemed equal parts relieved and exhausted. He must've suffered through his own ordeal at the hands of the Fear Eaters.

"No...! That's not possible!" The nasally voice of Brigand shouted in dismay. Wong quickly helped Izuku to his feet as they both squared off with their real foe. "Those faux Fear Eaters were supposed to act as the ultimate mental block! How did you destroy them!?"

"You forgot one crucial thing when it comes to fears, Brigand," Wong said sternly. "Fears don't necessarily have to be overcome or defeated. Sometimes," He shot a knowing glance at Midoriya. "They just have to be accepted."

"And speaking of acceptance," Wong continued, glowering vengefully at the professional thief. "Are you ready to accept your defeat and give us the information we require?"

"Defeat?" Brigand retorted with hollow laughter as he prepared to leap off the sheath he was standing upon. "My mental blocks may be gone, but you'll get nowhere if you still can't manage to catch me!"

"With your mental blocks gone, I now have free reign over any and all mental and bodily faculties you possess," Wong explained. "Merely being in your mind has already sealed your fate. And that pain you just felt? That was your liver and kidneys shutting down. What shall I take away next, hmm? Your ability to breathe? Your ability to hold your bladder?"

R-remind me never to get on Master Wong's bad side! Izuku thought with a nervous gulp.

Groaning in what was likely both excruciating pain and frustration, Brigand finally relented, slumping against the nearest axon and raising his hands in defeat. "...Fine," He grumbled. "You win, sorcerer."

"Let's begin with the combination for your adamantium safe," Wong demanded. "And maybe I'll give a kidney back."

"13...51...44," Brigand begrudgingly replied, gasping from what Izuku assumed was the sensation of one of his kidneys kick-starting again, courtesy of Wong's 'gratitude'. "And yes, the remaining two orbs are still in there."
"Excellent," Wong said with a curt smile. "Now let's move onto the matter of your most recent employers." Brigand visibly gulped. "Was the man who hired you named Ikiji Kokotsu?"

"I don't know any Ikiji," Brigand responded.

"Balderdash!" Wong exclaimed angrily, digging his fingers into the myelin sheath as if silently threatening to take back the kidney he'd just returned or possibly some other organ or function. "Who hired you to steal from the Sanctum!?"

"Alright, alright, settle down!" Brigand shakily yelled back. He extended a hand and gave a snap of his fingers. The image of a hooded figure sprang into view before Wong and Izuku. The man seemed young, with messy blue hair and an unpleasant face featuring dull, cracked lips. And it wasn't a man either Midoriya or Wong recognized.

"...Who the hell is that!?" Wong exclaimed with an uncharacteristic level of confusion.

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Back in the warehouse, Spider-Man kept himself busy by dividing his time between patrolling the warehouse and keeping watch over Brigand's restrained, slumbering body. 'Patrolling the warehouse' generally meant either keeping an eye out in case anyone else showed up to the scene, and also making sure one Mei Hatsume didn't get any funny ideas with the proverbial scrap yard of Stark tech he'd helped Izuku and Wong create out of the stolen Iron Legion. He felt inclined to give Tony a call (again, his stolen property) but he decided to hold off at least until the master and student sorcerers had returned to the real world.

And judging by the portal making all sorts of otherworldly spooky noises, I'd say they're just about back, He told himself as he swung down to the portal left open by Wong.

Sure enough, Wong and Izuku emerged looking worse for wear. The portal abruptly snapped shut upon their return, and the once slumbering Brigand was instantly roused into a state of waking.

"Who!? What!? Where!?!" Brigand thrashed against the Crimson Bands for but a moment before stopping entirely, glaring bitterly at Izuku and Wong. "...Oh. We're back."

"Did you find what we were looking for?" Mei asked as she trotted over to them, dropping a gear when Spider-Man focused an intense mask-glare at her.

"That and so much more," Wong affirmed solemnly. "Some information we had expected, and others...not so much. Regardless, we can now open the safe and retrieve the Diacatholicon and return to Strange posthaste." Wong manipulated the bands restraining Brigand with a flick of his fingers, binding the thief's hands behind his back and hoisting him onto his feet as they entered the warehouse office. "And you will be staying close by in case we need anything else."

"Let's just get this night over with," Brigand spat as Mei merrily turned the dial on the safe to the appropriate numbers.

"13, 51, 44, and...click!" With a hefty pull, Mei swung the safe doors open, and all present peered inside as a jade-colored hue shone upon their faces. True to his word, the remaining orbs of the Diacatholicon were resting forlornly within the safe's confines.

Peter promptly reached in, grabbing one orb and handing it gently to Midoriya before pulling the other one out. However, just as he retrieved the final orb, a ghostly white hand slunk out of the shadows beneath the desk, startling everyone present as it snatched at the relic in Peter's hand.

"What the hell!?" Peter yelled out in astonishment as he began trying to tug the orb out of the
suddenly appearing white hand. The office erupted into chaos at that point, with Izuku guardedly cradling the orb he did have in his possession as both he and Mei were pushed aside by Wong, who drew out a fiery lasso to ensnare this mysterious white hand, which didn't seem all too pleased by the sorcerer's interference.

Brigand, too, took advantage of the sudden onset of bedlam in the cramped office space. With his hands now pressed together as if he were normally cuffed, Brigand began rummaging his fingers underneath one of his red gloves, pressing a series of buttons he had concealed—fail-safes for just such an occasion.

*Sorry to spoil your fun, heroes!* Brigand thought petulantly as he pressed the final button, activating the various explosive devices tucked away in the nooks and crannies of the main warehouse space. *I may be a professional, but I'm also a sore loser!*

The hidden charges beeped for but a second before detonating, rending the walls and steel girders crisscrossing the ceiling to pieces as the structure instantly began to collapse. The see-through window in the office burst, and the volley of impending glass shards forced Wong to drop his lasso in favor of a shield to protect himself and his comrades, absorbing the force of the blasts and the shrapnel.

"Master Wong!" Izuku cried out as he leaned over Mei's body protectively. "Where's the other orb!?"

"I-I don't have it!" Peter retorted just as loudly, combing beneath the desk frantically as rubble began raining down on Wong's barrier. "That damn ghost hand is gone, too!"

"We don't have time!" Wong yelled back. "Midoriya! Open a portal and get us out of here!"

Midoriya wanted to protest—he wanted to protest so *badly*—but he couldn't risk losing the one orb they'd successfully retrieved. Tucking it away in his tunic, Midoriya rapidly spun his fingers around, the floor giving way to the cool yet rank Bronx air as everyone present fell through the portal Izuku opened, landing back out in the alley they had initially scoped the building from. The warehouse finished collapsing, sending the heroes scurrying down the alley to put some distance between themselves and the debris cloud emanating from where the structure once stood.

"YOU!" Wong angrily snarled at the still restrained Brigand who got dragged through the portal as well. The petulant thief appeared conflicted—on one hand, he wanted to look smug and arrogant at having pulled a fast one on his captors despite being bound, but on the other hand...none of them had died, let alone been harmed. As unexpected as Brigand's final gambit had been, it proved to be little more than an inconvenience at worst.

*I have half a mind to reopen the portal into your psyche and fling your actual body down there, leaving you to rot for all eternity!*" Wong bellowed.

Thankfully for Brigand, who tried to cower away from the irate sorcerer, Spider-Man was the one to intervene on his behalf.

"Hold on, Wong! No need to go that far! We got one of the orbs, didn't we? Shouldn't that be enough to save Strange?"

"And what comes afterwards, hmm?" Wong inquired. "We cannot charge this brigand for the crimes he committed against the Sanctum, not without either involving S.H.I.E.L.D. or some other risk!"

"Maybe not those specific crimes, but I can guarantee Mr. Stark will have a vested interest in making
sure Red Riding Hood over here gets locked up nice and long for doing something as serious as stealing his Iron Legion!" Spider-Man proposed, ready to send a formal message to Stark right away. "Izuku, what do you think—"

Spider-Man, Mei, and Wong suddenly noticed their green-haired companion was no longer present. In his place stood a shimmering portal leading directly back to the New York Sanctum, and they didn't need to wonder what Izuku had rushed off to do.

On the other side of where Brigand's warehouse had once stood, a meticulously suited man sporting an oni-mask emerged from the smoke and shadows of the surrounding rubble, rising until his feet reached solid ground. Clutched in his pale, white hand was the final orb of the Diacatholicon, snatched away from the heroes' grasp amidst the chaos of Brigand's base imploding.

"Brigand, you fool," The masked man grumbled to himself. "Did you honestly think it wise to snub he who is ever living? Did you think we would relent when you turned down his initial proposal? You should know better. Once he decides his next objective, we—his Inner Demons—will not rest until he has acquired what he desires."

Slipping the final jade orb into his pant pocket, the masked man began slowly sinking back into the ground, as if he were becoming one with the very shadows beneath his feet.

"You are part of a dying breed, Brigand," The Inner Demon quietly mused to himself as he sank deeper. "Can you not see the battle lines being drawn? Can you not hear the winds of fate steadily picking up? Soon, there will be no room for people like you, who act as if they can profit off any side they please. All Might and Hero Society, the League of Villains, the Yakuza, us Inner Demons—everyone will have to pick a side."

"A war is coming," The masked man concluded. "And it will be a war of...infinite proportions."

"Are you safe, Izuku?"

It was the last thing he'd uttered before the relic's corruption tugged away at his consciousness. The distressed cries of his pupil soon faded into slow, undulating sound waves as he slipped into darkness. The ebbing sensations, the slowed pulse, the encroaching cold—Strange had intimate knowledge of what the hand of Death felt like. And despite that, he was not nearly as worried as he thought he'd be.

He had ensured Izuku's safety. Jumping before the boy he'd come to view almost like a son and taking a bullet for his young protégé came almost naturally; perhaps it was the Toshinori influence that had invariably rubbed off on him after working alongside the Symbol of Peace for over 20 years.

Not only that, but as he slumped to the floor, a quiet voice in the back of his head had faith that Izuku would respond correctly. He'd go to Kamar-Taj. He'd inform Wong of what occurred. They'd come up with a plan.

Despite the faith he'd placed in his apprentice, Strange remained plenty surprised—and drained—when he groggily regained his senses.

I'm alive...? Strange lethargically mused, his vision swimming as his senses returned, one by one. How much time...has passed?

"Easy, Strange," Wong's voice rang from above him. He drowsily swiveled his head in the direction of his friend's voice and tried to sit up, but a pair of firm hands clamped down on his shoulders,
stopping him. "Don't move; let the magic run its course."

Magic...? Strange pondered as clumps of red, green, and pink became increasingly focused in his vision. Izuku...and Spider-Man is here? As well as Izuku's friend from the Expo...

"What happened?" Strange blurted out as his entire body tingled with overwhelming sensation, nerves and veins firing off with newfound vitality as the Sorcerer Supreme struggled to make heads or tails of what's occurred.

"Long story short?" Spider-Man chimed in. "Izuku and Wong gathered a small strike-force worthy of Avengers cred, tracked down and beat down the goon that shot you, and used part of the relic he'd stolen to save your life, Doctor."

"The Diacatholicon...?" Strange asked, turning toward Wong.

"Midoriya didn't waste any time," Wong said with a twinge of a smile. "He used the orb that we'd recovered to destroy the corruption coursing through your body, down to the last drop."

Strange sat up a little further, raising his arms to inspect them. True enough, the putrid substance that had visibly spread throughout his body when the bullet penetrated had all but vanished, and his skin had returned to a healthy color. Patting his chest, Strange also discovered the bullet wound had also dissipated, and there was not a speck of blood on his skin or clothing.

"Izuku—" Strange started to speak, but stopped as his vision finally stopped swimming when he looked upon the face of his student. The boy's face was...complex: cheeks marred by tears, pain in his smile, eyes puffy with a hint of fear, green curls bedraggled with worry, and in spite of all that, what stood out the most to Strange was the sheer resoluteness on the boy's face, vividly apparent yet it was difficult to describe accurately. Tears of grief were coupled with tears of joy, his smile gave off as much resilience as it did anguish, and the fear in his eyes were overshadowed by an overwhelming fortitude.

It was all so much to take in that Strange was at a loss for words. You've gone through quite the ordeal, haven't you, Izuku...? I can tell; you've grown at a remarkable rate since you agreed to be my pupil!

Strange let his arms drop to his side as Izuku sniffled blithely, rubbing his eyes and nostrils over and over. Hmm? His arm rested on top of some sort of envelope. Scooping the torn open letter up between his fingers, Strange nearly jolted to attention when he saw the U.A seal—it was the results of the Entrance Exam. Had Izuku actually...?

Sliding the written correspondence out instead of the accompanying holographic message, Strange began skimming through the results, reading the most pertinent bit aloud: "Izuku Midoriya: 18 villain points, 60 rescue points, for a total of 78 points and second highest score among all Hero Course applicants."

Strange dropped the letter and stared wide-eyed at his pupil. "You did it," He said quietly, receiving a furious nod of confirmation from Izuku. "You got into the Hero Course."

"A-and it's all because of—"

"—You," Strange finished Izuku's statement. "Izuku, this accomplishment...is yours and yours alone." Strange reached out, pulling Izuku into a congratulatory hug. "I cannot express how proud I am of you."

Izuku hiccupped as he fell into his sensei's embrace, unsure of what to say, but it seemed Strange had
one more surprise in store for his soon-to-be not-apprentice. Izuku felt a slight tap against his chest and upon looking down saw his red apprentice tunic bleeding blue instead, turning violet for a moment before the dark blue color consumed the garment entirely. A minute later and Izuku was sporting a blue tunic nearly identical to that of his sensei's.

"For your deeds this day, Izuku Midoriya, I hereby proclaim you apprentice of Kamar-Taj no more," Strange declared. "From this day forward, you will be recognized as an official Disciple of the Sorcerer Supreme!"

Perhaps Izuku was a bit more sensitive than usual, and perhaps calling him a crybaby was not too far off the mark. It mattered little for he was in good company, surrounded by friends who would not think to admonish his tears.

"Congratulations, Izuku," Strange spoke again, this time somewhat mirroring All Might. "For making it into your hero academia!"
Acquaintances of 1-A

Chapter Summary

Izuku's first day of attending U.A starts off unexpectedly with a surprising call from his father, Hisashi. Upon reaching the school, Izuku becomes acquainted with a few of his new classmates, as well as an unkempt homeroom teacher, unaware of the test the jaded Pro Hero is preparing for his new students.

"I wish you were here to see his face light up when the U.A school uniform arrived!" Inko whispered excitedly into the phone pressed against her ear. "Izuku looked as if he'd received a brand new All Might figurine!"

"Oh, I'm sure!" The jaded voice of her husband, Hisashi, responded through the line with a chuckle. "I haven't forgotten what the look of wonder and excitement looks like on our son. In fact, it's practically engrained in my memory!"

Inko was pacing up and down the hall of their apartment erratically as she waited for Izuku to finish dressing and emerge from his room. She could hardly believe the last month and some change that's passed since the U.A Entrance Exam! Her baby boy had finished up his junior high work with no further issues (related to either schoolwork or magic) and was now transitioning into one of the most prestigious high schools the entire country had to offer!

The door to Izuku's room suddenly slid open and out stepped said boy, tugging at his U.A tie unconvincingly and looking himself over with a constant, critical gaze, as if he was unsure he'd put the uniform on properly. Inko, however, seemed convinced, judging by her cries of joy anyway.

"Oh my goodness, you look so dashingly handsome!" Inko cried to Izuku as the phone trembled in her hand. "Hisashi, if only you could see him now! Our little Izuku all grownup and actually attending U.A!"

Izuku appeared quite flustered with his mother showering him with praise, but the boy soon became pale and stiff as a board once he realized that she was on the phone. All embarrassment suddenly flew out the window as Izuku briskly walked past his mother, slinging his backpack over his shoulders and making his way to the door as quickly as possible.

"W-well, I better get going Mom!" Izuku said a little too forcefully. "I wouldn't want to be late for the opening ceremony, right?"

"Izuku, wait!" Inko called out to her son, smiling tautly as Izuku slowed to an uncomfortable halt. "It's...your father on the phone. Won't you talk with him for a moment before you head off to U.A?"

Izuku said and did nothing in response, his body not moving an inch besides the rising and falling of his chest as he breathed. Without turning toward his mother, Izuku slowly stretched out his hand to accept the phone.

"...Hello?" Izuku asked quietly as he pressed the phone against his ear.

"Izuku, my little champ!" Hisashi spoke excitedly to his son, though the exhaustion and fatigue from
what had to have been his long work hours continued to bleed through into his voice. "You must be the most excited young man in all of Japan right now, actually attending the most esteemed Hero Course in the nation!"

"Yeah, it'll be great," Izuku responded flatly. "I'm looking forward to it."

"Well, uh...good! Good, I'm glad you're excited for it!" Hisashi stammered, drained from both overtime and a dwindling sense of confidence in sustaining this conversation. "I just wanted you to know that, er, even though you may be a late bloomer when it comes to your Quirk, it won't stop you from becoming a Hero! Just remember to never stop working hard!"

"You mean like you?" Izuku replied with a bit more bite than he was probably aiming for.

"Um, yeah, I suppose like myself..." Hisashi said, sighing in defeat.

"I'm going to be late for school, Dad," Izuku said, not-so-subtly indicating that he wanted this talk to end already.

"Sure, sure, I'd hate to make you late for your first day...hand the phone back to your mother, will you? And Izuku," Hisashi called for his son right as the boy pulled the phone away from his head. "I'm proud of you, son."

"I'll...see you after the ceremony, Mom," Izuku said emotionlessly as he handed the phone back to his mother. He was out the door without another word, and Inko couldn't think of any other thing to say to get him to stay any longer.

"I'm sorry," Hisashi sighed again into the phone."I'm so sorry, Inko."

"Hush, my dear," Inko replied quietly. "We both know well enough of Izuku's discomfort when it comes to our circumstances and your oversea assignment. He just...doesn't understand. But he will one day."

"I couldn't turn down this opportunity," Hisashi said lamentably. "The money guarantees you and our son's quality of living, but...these past couple years I've begun to ask myself if my work with the Tastu Corporation has been worth the cost of being kept away from my family all these years...and if it was worth causing my own son to think I abandoned him for being Quirkless."

"You're not to blame, Hisashi..." Inko consoled her husband. "I understand why you did what you did, even though I miss you terribly. If anyone is to blame, it's that sanctimonious boss of yours, Martin Li! How could such a generous man work his employees like horses on their last legs?"

"Mr. Li is indeed a generous man, but he isn't really my boss," Hisashi replied. "He merely owns a majority of the stocks put into the corporation. I rather wish he would involve himself more, though...still, I appreciate your indignation, dear."

"Anything for my hardworking 'little dragon'!" Inko giggled.

"All these years and you still haven't given up on that old nickname of mine?" Hisashi asked amusedly.

"Even though by now it's probably more smoke than fire," Inko replied mischievously.

"Hey, hey, give me some credit here!" Hisashi laughed before falling silent. "Listen, Inko, I don't think Izuku quite heard me when he gave the phone back to you. When he comes home, can you tell him again how happy I am for him? How proud I am of him?"
"Yes, I can do that, dear."

"I'm happy he could awaken his Quirk before the Entrance Exam, even though I certainly didn't love him any less before," Hisashi sighed. "I just hope that when I return he'll realize that..."

And with that, Hisashi hung up the phone with an audible click. The line fell dead on Inko's end, and the poor woman dropped the phone rather haphazardly on the closest shelf. She shuffled her way to the couch and promptly slumped down on the cushion. The guilt hurt, having lied to her husband--lying for her son--regarding his new powers.

Hisashi was not aware of Izuku's new abilities being magical in nature or his status as a now Disciple of Stephen Strange. She had told her husband the same story as most people that were aware of the sludge villain incident had been told: that Izuku Midoriya, traumatized by his friend's capture by a ruthless villain, awakened his Quirk and rushed to save Bakugo's life.

Inko had not been able to relay this information to her husband until the middle of that summer, while Izuku was off training with Strange at Kamar-Taj. And then she learned of the attack by what Strange called a 'fallen zealot' and her worries over Izuku's new life as a sorcerer have only expounded since. She had fainted twice when being told of the attack on Izuku during the Stark Expo and nearly cried herself to exhaustion when she'd been informed of the attack on the Sanctum and the near-death experience Doctor Strange had suffered through.

After every incident that had occurred since her son began wielding magic, a voice in the back of her mind urged her to pull her son out of it, for his own safety if nothing else. The world of a Pro Hero was fraught with danger, and her son's reckless and self-sacrificing nature proved the life of a sorcerer could be doubly so.

But could she do that to him?

Inko could wield her authority as Izuku's sole present legal guardian and forcefully usher him into a life of relative normalcy, if not obscurity given what was once his supposedly Quirkless nature. But how would Izuku react? Would he begin to resent her as he had come to resent his own father?

Would it even be fair? And not just to Izuku, but also Stephen Strange. The man had been terribly sincere in his oaths to protect her son from harm, and it was obvious the two had bonded as the training progressed over the months, to the point where the Sorcerer Supreme was an active father figure in Izuku's life, one he needed in the absence of Hisashi. So giving in to her overbearing motherly instincts could be doubly negative for Izuku: it would not only end his training and deprive him of any chance of attaining his dreams, but it would also potentially end the budding father-son relationship Izuku had begun to foster with Strange.

Inko just...couldn't do that to him. The poor woman already felt like as if she'd failed her son in the past by not truly believing in his convictions to become a Pro Hero. She failed him by not having hope; she wouldn't fail him again by taking his hope away.

Even in spite of all her apprehensions--in spite of her fears that a terrible future could await her son if he continued on this path--Inko Midoriya just didn't have it in her to put a stop to Izuku's ambitions.

The alternatives just seemed so undeniably worse.

One would think that Izuku Midoriya, the technically Quirkless and once powerless boy with boundless aspirations to become a Hero, would've been profoundly ecstatic upon wading through intrusive reporters and crossing the U.A barrier. After all, his first day in the hero course was upon
him! Alas, his morning was marred with brooding thoughts concerning his biological father.

_I can't afford to think about him!_ Izuku shook his head, trying to clear his thoughts as he mindlessly trudged down the halls of U.A toward his class, the cheerful banter of fellow passing students tuned out entirely. _Why did he have to call on my first day? I didn't need to be reminded that you aren't here...and you haven't been for years..._

Izuku blinked as he suddenly found himself standing before an abnormally large door labeled '1-A'. It was...slightly intimidating, to say the least. Were there students in the past with large height-related Quirks? Would there be any giants in his class today? Speaking of which, what would his fellow classmates be like? U.A only had room for the best, or at least those that showed the most promise, so he knew Bakugo was a given. That overly stern boy with the glasses he encountered outside the gates on the day of the Entrance Exam seemed a shoe-in, too.

_I just really hope we aren't all assigned to the same class..._ Izuku silently prayed as he grabbed the door handle and slid it open, revealing...

"Hey, don't put your feet up on your desk! Don't you think that's incredibly inconsiderate to the upperclassmen and carpenters who made that desk!"

"Shut the hell up already, you damn elite!"

Izuku resisted the urge to fall right on his face in defeat. He'd already suffered through countless hostilities during his junior high years, he didn't need any more antagonism as he went through U.A!

"Hey! You passed after all!" A peppy, feminine voice exclaimed before Izuku found himself surrounded by several of his new classmates, one of them being a floating uniform that seemed to have no body accompanying it. Izuku realized it had to have been the invisible girl he'd encountered during the exam. "I'm Toru Hagakure!"

"Name's Rikido Sato," The tall, full-lipped boy introduced himself. "I heard you helped keep me from becoming a flattened shortcake during the Entrance Exam."

"Same here!" The grape-headed boy he'd also spotted said tearfully. "Thanks a bunch!"

Izuku recoiled slightly, flustered by the sudden and unexpected attention he was receiving and also Kaminari's words. Superior Quirk? Izuku knew he was in the same testing area for the Entrance Exam, but he'd only seen this guy in a stupefied state, babbling uncontrollably. What exactly had he seen before that?

"So, you made it after all!" Another cheerful voice sounded through the crowd, and Izuku soon found himself facing a crop of red, spiky hair and a familiar face pushing his way through the crowd.

"You're...Eijiro Kirishima, right?" Izuku asked. He knew the boy had taken the top score of the Entrance Exam, with himself behind in second place, but it had still been over four weeks since the test; he wasn't totally sure on any names yet besides Bakugo's.

"Glad you remembered!" Kirishima said, giving Izuku a supportive slap on his shoulder. "But I'm way more glad we ended up in the same class together! Manly students like us work best when they stick together!"

"Uh...yeah!" _Manly students?_
"Ah! You there!" The stern-looking guy with glasses caught sight of Izuku and marched his way over to him. "So, you were accepted into U.A's Hero Course as well, hmm?"

"U-uh, yes!" Izuku shivered under the boy's intense gaze. "And you are...?"

"Iida Tenya, from Somei Private Academy!" The boy responded with a dramatic arm chop. "I hope that you do not dawdle your way through your classes like you did before the Entrance Exam while you're in the Hero Course! We now have reputations as fledgling U.A students to uphold!"

"Relax, relax!" Kirishima jumped between Izuku and Iida, trying to calm the overly enthusiastic student down. "It's just our first day!"

As all the students surrounding Izuku engaged in rambunctious discussion, Bakugo sat in his seat quietly, drilling red, indignant eyes into the green-haired boy he'd known since childhood.

First he defies me by applying to U.A, then he has the gall to one-up me in the Entrance Exam!? Bakugo stewed in his anger, trying to wrap his mind around how Deku of all people scored higher than him. Sure, it was only by a single point, but a loss was still a loss in Bakugo's mind. A loss by one point might as well have been a loss by a hundred points. He had to forcibly resist the urge to walk over to the boy and throttle him, demanding answers.

Something's definitely up...there's no way the training he got from that 'Doctor Strange' flunky could've caused him to improve so drastically, right?!

"If you're just here to make friends, then I suggest you go somewhere else," An exhausted voice broke all the students out of their conversations.

Izuku peered through the crowd of students that had crowded around him and felt his jaw drop as his eyes settled on whoever had spoke. In the hall right outside the class laid a yellow sleeping bag with an unkempt face poking out of the top, jumping from student to student with an unimpressed gaze.

W-who the heck is here!? Most of the students collectively thought as the sleeping bag rose and opened up. A rather worn-out and tired-looking man stepped out, sporting a ragged black outfit with a scarf of sorts wrapped around his neck.

"Hmph. It took over eight seconds for you all to get quiet," The unkempt man said. "Time is limited and it doesn't appear that you kids are rational enough. I'm your homeroom teacher, Aizawa Shota."

"Homeroom teacher?"

"So does that mean this man is a Pro Hero, too?"

"But he looks far too tired to be a Pro..."

"This may sound sudden, but I need you all to put these PE uniforms on and assemble out on the field," Aizawa pulled out of his sleeping bag the standard blue and white gym uniform all U.A students wore. As the students passed one by one to the changing rooms with their gym uniforms tucked under their arms, Aizawa cast a wary glance toward Izuku and Kirishima, the red head chattering excitedly as the other boy listened on with a far more quiet demeanor.

Now then, Aizawa thought as he made his way to his desk, opening a drawer to fetch his eye drops. He then reached back into his sleeping bag, pulling out a manila folder that was labeled 'Izuku Midoriya' on the tab. He quickly scanned through its contents, his eyes briefly stopping on the part of the file that listed the boy's Quirk which had seemingly bloomed far later than normal.

It read: 'Izuku Midoriya, Quirk: Energy Reign.'
Time to see if these students have any potential.
Chapter Summary

Faced with the prospect of expulsion on the first day, Izuku struggles to utilize his magical abilities to their fullest in order to impress Aizawa and his fellow classmates. But can he do so and still maintain his cover Quirk?

"A Quirk Assessment Test!?" A chorus of shouts from the 1-A students rang out across the fitness field.

"B-but what about the opening ceremony!?!" Uraraka cried out nervously. "Shouldn't we at least attend the orientation first?"

"You're all here to learn how to become heroes, right?!" Aizawa asked in retort, turning to give his new students a glare of disinterest. "Then you don't have time for such luxuries."

"One of U.A.'s greatest selling points is in the unrestricted nature of the school's traditions," Aizawa continued as a layer of unease settled down over most of the class. "And that unrestricted nature applies to the ways teachers run their classes as well."

Midoriya gulped; he mentally kicked himself in the head for not seeing a test of sorts coming on the first day. This is U.A after all, Izuku thought. All my training with Doctor Strange has been to get me on a more level playing field with my peers since I'm Quirkless, but that doesn't guarantee success in the Hero Course! I'll have to work even harder from this point forward!

"You lot still recognize these tests from junior high, correct?" Aizawa asked dully as he displayed a small screen to the rest of the class. The screen had a series of familiar activities listed on them. "Physical fitness tests that forbade the usage of Quirks. Averages are taken from all over the nation from students not using their Quirks. It isn't rational—the Ministry of Education is only delaying the inevitable."

Physical fitness tests but with the use of our powers? Izuku's mind was racked by possibility...and a teeny bit of worry. No doubt creativity and ingenuity on our part will be crucial...but can I be creative with my magic and get through these tests without blowing my cover? Energy Reign allows me to get away with a lot of my versatile abilities, but still...

"Kirishima," Aizawa spoke, singling out the red-headed boy who nearly jolted in surprise. "You scored the highest on the Entrance Exam practical, correct?"

"Uh, yes sir!" Kirishima responded, straightening himself a little higher as he felt all eyes suddenly fall on him, with a bit of grumbling coming from Bakugo who was standing beside him.

"What was the best result you had for the softball throw during your junior high years?" Aizawa asked.

"My best result, huh?" Kirishima crossed his arms and clenched his eyes shut, as if straining really hard to remember. "I believe it was...58 meters?"

"So try doing it with your Quirk," Aizawa said as he tossed the softball at Kirishima, who caught it
with a surprised grunt. Aizawa pointed at a white circle on the field before them. "Do whatever you want, just don't step outside that circle. And make sure you give it all you've got."

Kirishima, huh? Izuku pondered as the boy made his way to the circle. Izuku thought back to the Entrance Exam and of the tremendous show of power he'd displayed in destroying the 0-pointer with a single, devastating punch. If 58 meters was his best base throw...how much farther would he be able to throw the ball with his Quirk activated?

Kirishima was having very similar thoughts, apparently. He gave the ball a hard stare as he considered his options. No doubt activating his hardening ability on the skin of his arm would add a fair amount of force to the throw, but...

*I've had my Hardening Quirk since I was four!* Kirishima thought. *I've got a good grip on that power. But now? I've got One For All! And I want to give it all! I've got, but a hundred percent will still decimate me! I haven't had enough time to train with it!*

What's he doing? Izuku blinked as he watched Kirishima practice a few pitch throws without actually throwing the ball, looking over his arm after each mock throw. The skin would visibly harden before fading with a second flex of his muscles, as if he was making sure his Quirk was actually working. It's like he's trying to scale down the power his Quirk can emit...is he purposely trying to hold back for the test?

It seemed like it. And it seemed Aizawa noticed it, too. Right as Kirishima settled on his actual throw, rearing back to send the ball flying as far as he could, he felt all the hardening in his skin meld back into smoothness. All that additional force he'd mustered dissipated right before the ball left his hands, flying, bouncing, and rolling to a pitiful, mediocre stop.

W-what just happened!? Izuku blinked in recognition as he caught a glimpse of the yellow goggles dangling from Aizawa's neck, revealed when his scarf raised up to attack Kirishima. Disappearing Quirk? Yellow goggles? Izuku put two and two together instantly. *Our homeroom teacher is the Pro Hero Eraserhead!?*

"I believe I spoke clearly when I told you to give it your all," Aizawa grumbled as he approached his ensnared student. "Or do you have such low confidence in a Quirk you've had nearly all your life?"

"T-that's not what I—" Kirishima stammered.

"Or are you trying to avoid a repeat of the Entrance Exam?" Aizawa asked, and the stunned look on Kirishima's face was all the answer he needed. "A power you've had since childhood, and yet you still cannot control it enough to not inflict such bodily harm on yourself? The exam wasn't rational enough, I see."
"You seem to understand that using your power at its fullest will only incapacitate you, leaving you a burden on the battlefield," Aizawa continued, looking upon Kirishima sternly. "But Heroes also don't hold back. If you intend to continue on without a willingness to master your maximum...then you cannot become a hero, Eijiro Kirishima."

Izuku and the rest of the class looked on contemplatively as Aizawa released Kirishima of his binds. His hair lowered and he once again adopted a visage of aloofness and disinterest as he handed the boy a second ball.

"I've returned your Quirk," Aizawa mumbled, turning away. "I'll give you a second chance to throw the ball. Make it quick."

Man, Mr. Aizawa isn't kidding around, Izuku thought as he watched Kirishima looking equally thoughtful with another ball in hand. Kirishima...what are you going to do?

What am I going to do? Kirishima asked himself that very same question as he gripped the ball. Use my Hardening, and Mr. Aizawa will think I have no potential! Use One For All, and I'll likely break my arm! What do I do?!

Kirishima thought back to the story of One For All that All Might had spoken of before he inherited that power. How two Quirks—a Transference power and a Stockpiling power—joined to become one single Quirk that could be passed on!

"So wait, if One For All was formed from two Quirks, will my Hardening Quirk become a part of it, too? Will it all become one bigger Quirk?" Kirishima remembered asking All Might.

"Hmm..." All Might put his hand to his chin as he thought it over. "It's difficult to say, Young Kirishima! But every single user of One For All cultivates that power as they wield it, leaving a piece of themselves as they pass it on, allowing the Quirk to become stronger and stronger as time passes! So I suppose it could happen!"

I need to stop treating One For All as some separate power from my Hardening! Kirishima resolved as he stepped forward and reared his arm back. All Might entrusted me with this! I can't even be a hero if I keep myself down with doubt, let alone a man! One For All...!

Kirishima was vaguely aware of the red glow emanating from his arm as he launched the ball, the force of his inherited power sending the sphere soaring across the field through a burst of blurred smoke. Izuku and the rest of 1-A stood slack-jawed as the ball had all but vanished from view.

What was that feeling? Kirishima wondered as he became aware of a new sensation, lying just beneath the pain in his now somewhat bruised but unbroken arm. He felt the familiar twinge of his Hardening activating, but his skin wasn't hard in the slightest. Instead his arm looked slightly bulged, slowly shrinking back to its normal size as the red glow faded.

"Mr. Aizawa!" Kirishima yelled to his teacher, flexing his throwing arm. "I can still move...and I didn't hold back this time!

This kid...! Aizawa looked positively pleased as he turned toward the rest of the class, displaying Kirishima's new score: 750 meters.

"Know your maximum first," Aizawa informed his increasingly excited students. "It is the most rational way to form the foundation of a hero."

"750 meters? That's insane!"
"Truly an admirable feat of strength."

"And we can use our Quirks as often as we want for the tests! The Hero Course is awesome!"

"This looks like fun!"

"Looks like fun,' huh?" Aizawa asked dryly, garnering the surprised looks of his students once more. "After three years in the Hero Course, will you kids still have that carefree attitude? Fine then. Whoever comes in last place in all the fitness tests will be deemed as having no potential to be a hero and will be expelled from U.A!"

"What!?" A cry of indignation arose from the students of 1-A, a pallor of dread settling down on their stunned, frightened faces. It was a look that Aizawa seemed to revel in.

_Expulsion for coming in last!?_ Izuku panicked. Even with his current skills with magic, he wasn't entirely confident he could stand on equal footing with the rest of his classmates. They'd had their Quirks for years, after all. _On the first day of school no less! U.A is no joke...!_

"Welcome to the Hero Course!" Aizawa exclaimed as he parted his hair. "Now then...who wants to throw next?"

"Whoa! A score of infinity!?!" Some students yelled out as Aizawa displayed Uraraka's score for the ball throw. Said girl looked incredibly sheepish at her accomplishment and hurriedly skipped back to the class pack.

"I-I hope that alone will be enough to keep me from getting last place!" Uraraka muttered to herself.

"I wouldn't worry too much about coming in last if I were you!" Iida piped up. "You performed admirably!"

"Whoever wants to go next, just step up to the circle," Aizawa spoke up, not interested in classroom banter in the slightest. "Don't make me call names."

"I-I'll go next!" Izuku spoke above the quiet banter of his classmates. All eyes were on him as he strode forward, nervously gulping as he caught the ball Aizawa tossed to him before stepping into the white circle. He wasn't entirely sure why he decided to volunteer at that precise moment. Maybe Uraraka's impressive score was the tipping point that forced him to. Nobody was going to hold back with the threat of expulsion hanging over their heads, so he wouldn't either.

_It's now or ever, _Izuku thought as he whipped up a quick strategy to show off his skill while also nailing what he believed would be a high score. He still had reservations about showing off his magic in front of the rest of his class, but he was just delaying the inevitable. People were going to see his powers if he wanted to become a hero. _Just act like it's just your Quirk..._

"Mr. Aizawa!" Izuku addressed his teacher, who responded with little more than a grunt. "What's the distance between here and New York City?"

What.

_That_ certainly got the attention of the rest of the class. Was this guy really suggesting he could throw the ball all across the globe? Some students were wide-eyed, others gasped, and Bakugo merely snorted in disbelief.

"Over 10,000 kilometers, for sure," Aizawa replied with an arched eyebrow. _Is he going to...?_
"Perfect," Izuku responded before raising his hands in the same posture he'd memorized over a year ago. *Better now than later,* Izuku thought as he circled his fingers nice and slow, speeding up when the space before him erupted with swirling sizzling embers.

The rest of 1-A stood stunned as Izuku's portal whirled to life. On the other side was what appeared to be a dingy, dirty alleyway. It was the only alleyway Izuku could picture in his mind clearly—that being the alley Wong had taken him the night they retrieved the Diacatholicon from Brigand—and the only public location that wouldn't likely have other people present. The warehouse ruins were still clearly visible, as was the Bronx waterfront and the city skyline behind it. Without waiting for any reactions, Izuku promptly tossed the ball through, watching it roll to a halt on the grimy ground.

All hell broke loose after that.

"Are you serious!?!" Ashido cried out incredulously. "Did he really just open a portal from here to New York City!?!"

"It seems I've misjudged that boy by a considerable margin," Iida said, correcting his glasses which had slumped.

"A Quirk that can open portals?" Sato murmured. "What a useful power..."

"He certainly belongs in the Hero Course with that Quirk," Sero commented.

Other students, however, were confused rather than surprised.

"Portals?" Kaminari blinked as he scratched his head. "That's not right. He should have an electricity Quirk of some kind! I saw him use it during the Entrance Exam!"

"So he really wasn't kidding with that whole 'barrier and portals' spiel he talked about during the exam..." Kirishima muttered to himself.

"When I saw him during the Entrance Exam, all he used were barriers of some kind!" Hagakure whispered excitedly to Jiro. "Could he possibly have two Quirks?"

Todoroki, one of the only students present capable of maintaining any sort of stoicism, narrowed his eyes at Izuku.

The only enraged student, however, was Bakugo.

"Electricity? Barriers? Portals?!" Bakugo snarled as he suddenly launched himself at Izuku, palms bursting from explosive power. "That's all bullshit! His weak, stupid Quirk is Flame Whips!"

Izuku flinched as he turned and saw a vindictive Bakugo barreling towards him. Right before he could be grabbed, however, Aizawa's binding cloth flew out and wrapped around Bakugo's arms and head, jerking him to a halt. Bakugo didn't seem to care as he continued to struggle, glaring right at Izuku.

"DEKU!" Bakugo roared, his palms sparking threateningly. "You answer me! What the hell is going on here!? How the fuck can you open portals!?!"

"I-it's all part of my Quirk," Izuku replied quietly.

"Bullshit!" Bakugo roared. "Your Quirk is Flame Whips!"

"Untrue," The relatively lax voice of Aizawa cut into the discussion. Everyone turned toward the
man keeping Bakugo at bay. His hair had raised up again, but his narrowed, red eyes were settled directly on Izuku instead of Bakugo, whose hands continued erupting small explosions. Aizawa's hair soon dropped, though his glare did not. "If you must know, Midoriya's Quirk is listed as 'Energy Reign,' but that is neither here nor there. Save any trivial questions you have for after the test."

_Energy Reign..._ I-A, Bakugo and Todoroki included, collectively thought as Aizawa tugged Izuku's former friend back toward the rest of the class.

"And as for your score, Midoriya..." Aizawa raised his display screen up for the boy to see.

Izuku felt his heart plummet into his gut. Five meters. Aizawa's device had recorded his throw as a measly five meters. How could this possibly be?

"Just five meters...?" Izuku whimpered.

"I suppose you thought that was terribly clever," Aizawa said calmly as he approached Izuku and his portal. "And for all intents and purposes, it was. However, you have to think rationally about what you did, Midoriya."

"Assuming your portal does indeed lead straight to New York, it would allow for a person or object to cross a distance of over 10,000 kilometers," Aizawa explained. "However, look closely: what exactly _is_ the distance between where you stand right now and where the ball landed?"

Izuku grimaced as he realized precisely the point Aizawa was trying to make: his portals essentially shrunk the distance between two points in space, joining them. Musutafu and New York may be well over 10,000 kilometers apart...but the distance between himself and where the ball landed after being so lackadaisically tossed? Five meters. Even if he had thrown the ball as hard as he could, using his portals the way he just did would not have increased his actual throw distance whatsoever.

"Know your maximum first," Aizawa parroted what he said earlier. "That also means to know your limits. And I don't think you truly comprehend what the limits to your abilities are, Midoriya."

Midoriya let his head hang low in defeat. He felt like such a letdown, slipping up and treating his portal as an end-all-be-all for this test. Looking back, Izuku realized that he'd relied on his portal-making power a lot, and that was something he could no longer do now that he was in U.A.

Portals: a useful ability, to be sure, but one that was not limitless. He'd encountered problems and would undoubtedly continue to encounter problems where the use of portals would not serve him well...or where he'd be unable to use them at all.

"I can't say I exactly know what your limits are, either," Aizawa continued. "And that's why I'll allow you a second throw."

"Wait, what?" Izuku asked as another ball was suddenly tossed into his hands.

"Make it quick," Aizawa murmured, shuffling back to where he was previously standing. "And think rationally on what I just told you."

_Think rationally..._ Izuku mused over his predicament as he gripped the softball. Simply opening a portal and tossing the ball through wouldn't suffice as it didn't affect his actual throwing distance. But Izuku also realized Aizawa hadn't outright said he _couldn't_ make use of his portals. He would just have to be smart about it for this particular test.

*My power is so much more than opening portals!_ Izuku told himself as he clenched the ball in his now shimmering hand. _You'll see, Mr. Aizawa!*
Izuku reared back and, to the astonishment of his teacher and classmates, threw the ball in the opposite direction, toward the main building. As the ball soared over his classmates' heads, Izuku swiftly conjured his dazzling whip of flame, shooting it toward and lassoing the softball. With a determined yell, Izuku gave the whip and ball a mighty yank, sending it soaring over the field, but he still wasn't finished yet. Focusing as best he could on the accelerating projectile, Izuku weaved his fingers in a circle once more. A portal opened up in the sky, in the direct path of the now flaming softball. The ball flew through, exiting out even higher than it was before and continuing on until it began to dip and arc back toward the ground, rolling to a smoldering stop far across the field.

"How was that...Mr. Aizawa?" Izuku panted, turning to see his teacher's hair settling on his shoulders. Aizawa's face carried a stern glare, and Izuku only received a curt nod from the man as he displayed the newest score: 700 meters, on the dot.

"Way to go, Midoriya!" Kirishima yelled as many of the other students also joined in with congratulations, clearly impressed by Izuku's power. "That's a manly way to do it!"

"So, Bakugo was right, too," Another voice piped up. "Midoriya can use flame whips as well."

"Seriously!?!" A dejected Kaminari jumped in again. "I'm telling you guys, I swear I saw him use electricity, too!"

"For a refulgent power that blazes radiantly for all to see, his versatile Quirk is shrouded in mystery and intrigue," The bird-headed Tokoyami added.

In spite of all the talk that Izuku's show of power generated, one boy stewed in frustration and confusion. Bakugo was grinding his teeth as he attempted—and failed miserably—to wrap his head around what he just witnessed.

What the actual shit!? Bakugo seethed. Deku never showed off anything other than his stupid flaming whip back in junior high! Just what else is that nerd hiding? Just what kind of training did this 'Doctor Strange' even give him!? 'Energy Reign' my ass! There's something super fishy about this, and you better believe I'll get to the bottom of it, you damn nerd!

"Alright, Midoriya's score is recorded," Aizawa drawled. "Whoever's next, hurry up already."

As Izuku nervously shuffled back into the throng of students which assailed him with questions and compliments, he shivered profusely. He didn't need to turn to tell that Aizawa's eyes were firmly fixated on his back, narrowed and studious.

And so Izuku and the rest of 1-A continued with the remaining fitness tests Aizawa had laid out for them. Once everyone had completed the ball throw, they migrated to the 50-meter dash, which they completed in pairs. Aizawa and a mounted camera stood by to record their times.

We're supposed to use our powers as often and as creatively as we can during these tests, Izuku pondered as he made his way to the track alongside Iida, who seemed calm and focused. For a 50-meter dash, the goal is to get from one end of the track to the other as quickly as possible. In that case...

"Ready! Set! Go!"

Iida took off like a rocket, the engines jutting out of his calves roaring with energy is he blitzed to the end of the track in a matter of seconds. Izuku swirled his hands around, splitting open a portal to the end of the track and running through, right on Iida's heels. When he closed it, he felt both Iida and Aizawa staring at him.
"Ah! I'm sorry Mr. Aizawa!" Izuku yelled, flailing his hands. "I-I can redo it without a portal if you'd like!"

"Relax, Midoriya," Aizawa spoke calmly, but the steeliness in his eyes didn't fade in the slightest. "In the ball throw, your first attempt did nothing to enhance your throwing distance. But all this test requires is to get from one end to the other as quickly—and creatively—as possible. 4.55 seconds, by the way."

"It would have been irrational for you to not use your portal here," Aizawa continued as he dismissed Izuku and motioned for the next pair of students to prepare for the dash.

"You have a versatile power, despite lacking the fortitude and demeanor one might think would be required to be granted entry into the Hero Course," Iida added as he walked alongside Izuku. "For you, as well as the rest of us, it seems we'll have to decide carefully how to best apply our Quirks if we want to avoid expulsion."

"That creativity will be what keeps us in on the first day..." Izuku mumbled in agreement.

The test afterwards was the grip test, one that Izuku, to put it politely, didn't excel at. With the constant use and practice of magic over the last 18 months, Izuku had restored some semblance of usage in his hands. He could hold onto things painlessly and write somewhat legibly again.

But magic hadn't healed his hands. Doctor Strange had made it clear that wouldn't just happen. They were mystics, not prophets after all. The nerve and muscle damage—the scars—were still very much present. Not noticeable until up close, but still present nonetheless.

"You alright?" A gentle voice came from a hulking shadow that Izuku suddenly found himself beneath. He looked up and saw the masked figure of Mezo Shoji towering above him, grip test device in hand, registering a whopping 540 kilograms.

"Yeah, I'm fine," Izuku said unconvincingly. "It's just...I don't think I could've used my Quirk to help very much on this test." He raised his own grip test, registering a pitiful ten kilograms of force. His hands, although improved, were not suited for gripping with strength. He had no magic answer for this particular problem quite yet.

"Your hands..." Shoji whispered, leaning down to get a better look at the scars crisscrossing the back of Izuku's hands.

"Y-yeah, they look terrible," Izuku said, clenching his hands. "I wouldn't blame you for thinking it's silly for a guy with broken hands to even bother trying for the Hero Course."

"On the contrary," Shoji replied, surprising Izuku. "I think it's quite admirable. I have no intention of coming in last and being expelled, but...I wish you luck all the same, Midoriya."

And with that, Shoji meandered off, leaving a rather dumbfounded Izuku behind. It made him happy, in a way: now he knew there'd be classmates who would be supportive of him despite his injuries, yet still determined to do the best they could and avoid expulsion. It was an air of determination and professionalism, an unspoken word that there'd be no hard feelings between everyone in the wake of Aizawa's test.

Well, maybe no hard feelings so long as Kacchan doesn't come in last, Izuku thought as he prepared for the next test: the standing long jump.

Clearing the designated sandbox in a single jump was more difficult than Izuku expected. Aoyama, Bakugo, Iida, and Tsuyu managed to clear the box easily. When it came to be Izuku's turn, he stood
at the edge of the sandbox, contemplating his next move. He figured he could use his portals again...but the sensation of being watched suddenly befell him yet again, and he knew Aizawa had his stern, unflinching eyes set on his back once more.

Izuku determined then and there to not make use of his portals again. He wanted to really show off what he could do during these tests and stretch his creativity to the limit, just like his teacher was expecting of them all! Izuku aimed his open palms to the ground and let them spark, catching Kaminari's eye.

*Bolts of Bedevilment!* Izuku inwardly exclaimed as he shot a torrent of explosive lightning down into the ground right as he jumped, propelling him forward with the force of his blast. With a yell, Izuku arced and fell back to the ground, his feet landing just shy of the sandbox's edge as he tumbled to a halt. *Maybe I should have used a portal after all...*

"See?" Kaminari whispered frantically to those around him. "I told you he could use lightning!"

Bakugo was visibly shaking now, resisting the urge to stomp over and pummel some answers out of Izuku, but Aizawa's mere presence stayed his hands.

To Izuku's dismay, there was little he could think to do to bolster his performance for the remaining tests: repeated side steps, the distance run, sit ups, and the seated toe-touch. His scores were relatively mediocre, but all he needed to do was not place last overall! Right...?

"By the way, I was lying about expelling whoever came in last," Aizawa said drearily as he displayed the final scores, computed from all the tests combined. His face suddenly lit up, a creepy contrast to his otherwise cheerless demeanor. "It was merely a rational deception to draw out your upper limits!"

A chorus of cries rose up from the students yet again, some out of anger, some out of disbelief, and others out of relief—especially that of Mineta, who had come in last. He sank to his hands and knees and wept tears of gratitude as Yaoyorozu looked on pitifully.

"Of course it was a lie..." She muttered.

Izuku had scanned the scores until he found his near the bottom, sandwiched between Aoyama and Sero. Still near the bottom, but not quite ranked last. Izuku felt a jitter of excitement—it signaled that all his training, experiences, and traumas had begun to pay off. He had proven himself worthy of his spot in the Hero Course.

"Class dismissed," Aizawa said with a wave of his hand. "Change out of your uniforms and collect what belongings you left in class. That's enough out of you all for today. Oh, and Kirishima?"

"Yes, Mr. Aizawa?" Kirishima asked, clutching his arm.

"Your bruised arm didn't stop you from taking the rest of the tests, but I still want you to get it checked by the old lady," Aizawa said as he handed Kirishima a nurse's slip. "Make sure your arm is healed and rested for tomorrow. The test I gave you today is just the beginning."

"Hey, impressive work out there today, Midoriya!" Kirishima complimented the boy as he walked past. "See you tomorrow!"

"Uh, yeah, you too!" Izuku replied. "See you tomorrow! And make sure not to break that arm!"

Kirishima responded with a fist pump as he rounded a corner and headed toward the nurse's station.
The students of 1-A slowly trickled back inside, with nearly everyone pausing to converse with one another and discussing today's events as well as what they might expect for tomorrow. Izuku was nearly overwhelmed as most of his new classmates, one by one, approached him to either talk about his power or to introduce themselves properly and wish him luck.

"What a day..." Izuku mumbled, turning toward the main building but stumbling to a halt as a head of white and red flashed into view. Izuku had nearly bumped right against Shoto Todoroki. "Whoa! S-sorry about that!"

Todoroki said nothing in response and instead glowered at Izuku, his heterochromatic eyes eyeing Izuku up and down with suspicion and distrust. Without uttering a word or softening his gaze whatsoever, Todoroki turned on his heel and marched back into the school building, quickly disappearing out of sight.

*What was that all about?* Izuku blinked in confusion at the unexpected silent treatment. *It was brief, but it felt like there was a dark aura surrounding him, almost like...the Fear Eaters from before.* Izuku shook his head. *Maybe I just overreacted. It's probably nothing.*

"Midoriya," Aizawa's dull voice snapped the boy out of his musings on Todoroki. "I'm glad I could catch you before you could leave."

"Uh, sure, Mr. Aizawa!" Izuku responded, a familiar well of dread beginning to pool within his gut. "What do you need to talk about?"

"Nothing much," Aizawa said, pulling out a manila folder that Izuku saw had his name on it. "Just your Quirk."

Gulp.

"Izuku Midoriya, Quirk: Energy Reign," Aizawa read out of the folder. "A Quirk that allows its holder to manipulate pure energy derived from their surroundings. Has been observed as being highly versatile during official Quirk Assessment Testing. Note: late bloomer. Emerged in Izuku Midoriya last April during a villain incident involving All Might."

Izuku stood rigidly still as Aizawa finished reading, closing the folder shut between his fingers.

"I need you to accompany me to Principal Nezu's office, Midoriya," Aizawa said.

"W-why?" Izuku asked as he trembled, paling considerably.

Aizawa pulled out a small vial and leaned back, squeezing a clear fluid into his dry-looking eyes. "Because I want to know why I can't erase your 'Quirk'."
Aizawa, Meet Doctor Strange

Chapter Summary

Aizawa has seen through Izuku's ruse, on the first day no less. With the knowledge that his Erasure Quirk has no effect on Izuku when he uses his 'Energy Reign' power, the man takes the boy to see Principal Nezu in order to find some answers. Only with the Sorcerer Supreme's guidance will Eraserhead gain the answers that he seeks!

"Because I want to know why I can't erase your 'Quirk'."

Izuku froze where he stood. Not a tremble ran through his rigid body, not even through the marred digits of his scarred hands. Wide, green eyes stared, bewildered, into droopy, dried eyes, searching for even the tiniest shred of insincerity in the Pro Hero's face. Of course, there was none to be found. It was the first day of school and the ruse Doctor Strange had crafted for him and his mother had already been seen through. Aizawa already knew he didn't really have a Quirk.

With Eraserhead as his homeroom teacher, however, Izuku reasoned that it was perhaps wishful thinking to believe he could keep his cover from being blown throughout his stay at U.A, let alone the first term of the first year. His powers allowed him to erase the powers of certain Quirks, but the powers of magic that Izuku wielded could not be affected by such an ability. Izuku knew the man before him was incredibly intelligent and calculating. It was only a matter of time before Aizawa would use his Quirk on Izuku and be immediately tipped off that something was askew, and that time seemed to be now rather than later.

"Am I in trouble?" Izuku asked after another gulp. "Am I going to be expelled?" Aizawa's threat of expulsion might have been a ploy during the Quirk Apprehension Test, but his serious demeanor was not. And this was no test either. As his mind panicked from the revelation of being caught, the punishment of expulsion was not immediately discarded from Izuku's mind.

"Not as of now," Aizawa said after a moment of terse silence. "Your punishment—and whether or not you even will be punished—will depend entirely on how you cooperate and answer our questions, Midoriya."

"We're wasting time," Aizawa continued, turning around and motioning with his finger for Izuku to follow him. "We'll head back inside so you can change and collect your effects, and then you and I will go see Principal Nezu."

Izuku silently nodded his head as he followed behind his somewhat slouching teacher, his mind running wild with possibilities. He was already aware that relatively few Pro Heroes were aware of the existence of magic and magical forces and beings that could pose a threat to society and the world at large. All Might was one such hero, as were the Avengers.

But who else knew? Clearly Aizawa was clueless as to the true nature of his student's powers, or else he wouldn't be dragging him to go see the principal. Surely there were U.A teachers besides All Might who did know, right? Izuku wouldn't say Doctor Strange was particularly tightlipped about the issue, but conversation about the topic was certainly sparse, especially when it came to the Avengers. Izuku had been assured by Strange that over time he would become more aware of those who were knowledgeable on the existence of magic and left it at that. 
Baby steps, in other words, just like his actual training. No need to rush to group introductions and arcane socials quite yet. Those things could be left to the Sorcerer Supreme. Izuku, on the other hand, had more school responsibilities to keep up with now. It was understandable why Strange kept his disciple at arm's length when it came to those 'in the know'. He was still a kid, after all. It would not be his concern unless it needed to be. Like right now, for instance.

"Hold it right there, Aizawa!" The booming voice of All Might jerked Izuku out his musings. All Might's imposing physique stepped out from behind a nearby tree, although its trunk was not nearly wide enough to hide the man's full body. All Might approached the two of them, clad in a bright yellow business suit. He was giving Aizawa a look of disapproval in spite of the trademark smile on his face.

*How long was All Might standing there?* Izuku wondered.

"All Might," Aizawa responded dryly. "So you were watching the test after all. Too much time on your hands?"

All Might steeled himself so he wouldn't flinch. Aizawa was cheekily referring to his time limit, which all U.A faculty were now aware of. However, Aizawa didn't know that Izuku knew about it as well, so he had to maintain appearances to avoid anymore additional drama—and prying questions —on Aizawa's part.

"Underhanded testing methods aside," All Might muttered, jabbing right back at Aizawa with his history of widespread expulsion of first-year students, something he was sure to bring up with the man later. "Where are you taking Young Midoriya?"

"To Principal Nezu's office," Aizawa said curtly, not delving into any further explanation.

> *Is that the way you're going to be, Aizawa? You and I really don't get along!* All Might thought before clearing his throat. "And for what reason?" He asked. "You told all your students that your threat of expulsion was just a ruse! You're not taking the young man to Nezu for any punishment, are you?"

"Is it any concern of yours?" Aizawa asked, stopping and giving All Might a tired look mired with irritation.

"As a faculty member of U.A High and a teacher for all students enrolled in the Hero Course, I'm inclined to say it is," All Might retorted. "With teamwork and cooperation we can tackle any issue you may have with the first-year, including Young Midoriya!"

"...Very well, if you *must* know," Aizawa said, raising an unimpressed brow at All Might's declaration. "My Quirk is unable to suppress Midoriya's powers and the issue needs to be discussed between myself, the boy, and Nezu."

All Might had to suppress the sudden urge to deflate and vomit a deluge of blood out of sheer shock. It was only the first day and Aizawa had already seen through the boy's ruse!?

_No, calm down Toshinori_, he told himself. _Stephen and I planned for this in the event Young Midoriya ended up in Aizawa's classroom. It was only a matter of time, after all._

"Is that so?" All Might said, trying his best not to sound *too* surprised. "Perhaps I should be a part of this discussion as well."

"That won't be necessary," Aizawa all but groaned.
"On the contrary, Aizawa my boy," All Might said. "As a soon-to-be instructor of Young Midoriya, I should be made aware of such unorthodox developments if I am to teach him properly along with the other students!

"...Fine," Aizawa relented after several moments of ruminating All Might's justification. He couldn't deny that it was without any merit. All Might would have had to be informed of this development, preferably before official lessons started tomorrow. "You can sit in since you apparently have that much time on your hands."

All Might grit his teeth at having yet another jab thrown his way, but he could roll with the best of them. He merely nodded in response and followed after Aizawa, walking beside Midoriya, who had been quiet throughout the entire exchange.

"Thank you," Izuku said quietly.

"Think nothing of it, Young Midoriya!" All Might said in a hushed tone. "I once told you that I would always be in your corner to support you, didn't I?"

Izuku grinned at that, recalling the discussion they had in the Sanctum the day they met one another. Being reminded that the Symbol of Peace had his back eased him a great deal.

_I hope you're ready, Aizawa_, All Might thought as he turned his attention to his new co-worker walking ahead of them. _Because you have no idea what's about to hit you._

Izuku fidgeted where he sat, clutching his backpack to his lap as he awaited the principal's return from the opening ceremony. Aizawa sat in the chair beside him, arms crossed and back straight as he too waited in silence, staring blankly at the empty desk before them.

Off to the side was a spacious couch, upon which All Might was seated. In any other circumstance it might've seemed comical: the mighty, muscular figure of Japan's Number One Hero practically squatting on a borderline crushed couch cushion. Izuku's mind was focused squarely on the conversation looming before them all. All Might's presence certainly helped—made him feel less outnumbered—but Izuku's mind was still thoroughly enraptured by uncertainty.

That uncertainty was somewhat fueled by Nezu's own office: it was surprisingly...Izuku didn't want to say bare, but it was certainly _standard_. It had the furniture arrangement of a standard office, the stereotypical potted plants of a standard office, and the books and hung frames of a standard office. It lacked any of the ostentatious flare Izuku was sort of expecting from the headmaster of the nation's most prestigious Hero-related school. What was Principal Nezu even like anyway? Izuku was about to find out, but he still found himself wishing he'd attended the opening ceremony after all.

"What a refreshing start to the new school year!" A soft voice spoke as the door creaked open.

Izuku turned his head and nearly jumped out of his seat when an articulately dressed creature of sorts strolled into the room with several tea cups stacked atop his head, balancing precariously. In one paw he held a thick book and the other held a piping hot pitcher of what smelled like tea.

_W-who the heck is that!?_ Izuku yelled internally.

"You are no doubt set off by my odd appearance, Midoriya," The creature spoke as he marched around Izuku and took a seat behind the desk, not dropping any of the tea saucers as he walked. "I do not blame you—am I a rat? A dog? A bear? But allow me to introduce myself before you ask those questions yourself: I am Principal Nezu of U.A High!"
"Let us ease into this discussion, shall we?" Nezu asked as he calmly plucked the teacups off his head one by one, setting them down on his desk. "I find a nice cup of tea to be the perfect remedy in stripping away the duress of any stressful situation. Any takers?"

Droopy eyes, wide eyes, and strained, shadowed eyes all stared back unresponsively. That would be a unanimous no, the principal figured. Regardless, Nezu poured the slightly steaming tea into the five cups he'd carried into his office.

"I'd say the Opening Ceremony was a roaring success!" Nezu exclaimed before taking a quick sip of his tea. "Kan in particular seemed exceptionally pleased by the first-years he was assigned with. The students of 1-B, as well as those of the other departments, all show a lot of promise and potential...but you search for potential through 'alternative means', don't you, Aizawa?"

"Principal Nezu—"

"Although it would seem your search has bore some fruit this time," Nezu interrupted. "This year you bring only a single young man to my office instead of your student roster to argue for the expulsion of your entire class as you have done in previous years."

Izuku dug his fingers into his backpack.

He's expelled entire classrooms of students before!? Does that mean expulsion for me could still be a possibility!?

"I am not here to argue for Midoriya's expulsion," Aizawa replied coolly. "I have brought him here so that we may find answers to a problem that has unexpectedly arisen."

"A problem?" Nezu blinked and set his tea cup down. "And what problem would that be?"

Aizawa shot a glance toward the fidgeting Izuku before facing Nezu again. "Midoriya's Energy Reign Quirk is not affected by my Erasure Quirk."

Nezu swiveled in his chair to face Midoriya, the inviting charm in his beady little eyes suddenly replaced by a curious and calculating look of intrigue. His eyes didn't appear to noticeably move, but Izuku could tell the principal was studying him all over, taking in every inch of his form...like he was a lab rat to record data off of.

"Is that so?" Nezu asked, and Izuku couldn't tell if his voice carried more caution than curiosity. "This is an interesting development indeed. May I see the boy's information?"

Aizawa tossed the manila folder containing Izuku's personal and student information onto Nezu's desk. It slid atop the surface until Nezu stopped it with his oddly shaped paw. The diminutive principal wasted no time in flipping the folder open, combing through Izuku's files and prattling off the information listed in random bits, although he seemed to be talking mostly to himself and it was all info everyone else already knew.

"Energy Reign..." Nezu muttered. "...allows its holder to manipulate pure energy...highly versatile...late bloomer..." Nezu paused and simply stared down at the file for several moments, countless calculations sprinting through his mind.

"Ah, I see," Nezu said rather cheerfully, like an obvious solution had just sprung to mind. "This must mean that you, Midoriya, are Quirkless and rely on the use of magic, correct?"

A silence so thick Lunch Rush could carve a steak out of it immediately collapsed onto the room. Every muscle of Aizawa's and Izuku's was rigid, both of their breaths were held, and their eyes were
widened and drilling into the chimerical principal, astonished by his declaration.

"I beg your pardon?" Aizawa breached the silence.

"How did you know?" A bewildered Izuku asked at the same time as Aizawa, prompting the man to snap toward Izuku with an incredulous stare.

"Of course, I would like a clear, concise answer on this matter from you yourself, Midoriya," Nezu said, not acknowledging their bafflement aside from a humorous glance toward All Might, who looked incredibly strained but otherwise stayed silent from where he sat.

Izuku turned toward All Might, his eyes large and imploring, as if silently asking the man if what he was about to do was the right thing. All Might sighed through his smile and gave the boy a solemn nod.

"You are...correct, sir," Izuku said, lowering his head. "I do rely on magic for my powers, and I am indeed Quirkless."

"As I thought," Nezu responded.

"I'm sorry, but what?" Aizawa said all too indignantly, standing up and glancing between Nezu, Izuku, and All Might accusingly. "Izuku cannot possibly be Quirkless, I and the rest of his class clearly saw him manipulating energy."

"Aizawa—"

"And Nezu—magic?" Aizawa asked in disbelief. "What is this nonsense I'm hearing? You of all people should know better than to—"

"The principal's telling the truth, and so am I!" Izuku interjected, his fingers slipping into his backpack for a familiar card.

"And you," Aizawa towered over Izuku, his bleary eyes now blazing with agitation. "I told you that I had no intention of suggesting any punishment to you so long as you cooperated, and that includes answering honestly. Now answer me truthfully: why is Energy Reign unaffected by my Erasure?"

"You've been given the truth, Aizawa," A gentlemanly voice familiar to all but the 1-A teacher echoed throughout the room. A fiery light manifested in Aizawa's periphery, prompting the man to turn towards it as it twisted and opened into a portal—just like Izuku's. An older man that screamed 'occult' in Aizawa's mind stepped through, bearing a blue tunic of sorts and cloaked in red. "You merely require some guidance in recognizing it as such."

Aizawa studied the man carefully: his well trimmed appearance starkly contrasted his unkemptness, his robes and tunic seemed scholarly, and the white streaks on his temples enhanced his already sagacious appearance. The top of his tunic was slightly splayed open, revealing...fresh bandages wrapped around his abdomen? Had the man been wounded recently?

The gentleman scanned Nezu's office as the portal closed on its own, sizzling out and returning the room back to its normal levels of luminescence. "I assume what we planned for has come to pass?" The man asked aloud, seemingly addressing everyone in the room except for Aizawa. Upon receiving nods from both All Might and Nezu he continued: "A bit sooner than I anticipated, but this is not an unwelcome turn of events."

"I suppose it's better to get this over with before the lessons officially begin, after all," All Might said sheepishly.
"Quite right, Toshinori," The newcomer said, giving All Might a polite grin and nod of acknowledgement before turning to the principal. "Principal Nezu, you're as professional and shrewd as I remember."

"Excuse me," Aizawa side-stepped, standing in the way of this newcomer and the principal and his student. "Who are you?"

"My name is Doctor Stephen Strange," The robed man introduced himself. "Shota Aizawa...we finally meet."

"Sensei, I'm so sorry for bringing you here," Izuku apologized. "I-I swear I tried to make it look like a Quirk as much as I could—"

"I'm not upset, Izuku," Strange said, patting his hand atop the green curls of Midoriya's head. "Quite the opposite."

If Aizawa wasn't confused moments before he was assuredly baffled by this point. A man with powers seemingly identical to Izuku's suddenly shows up, seems to know both Nezu and All Might, as well as Midoriya. He even addressed Midoriya by his first given name, meaning they must have been very familiar with each other. Family, perhaps? It made sense—their propensity for portals seemed eerily identical, though the man's name was off to Aizawa. Stephen Strange was not a Japanese name. Izuku also bore little resemblance to the doctor in terms of facial features. On top of that, the doctor knew Aizawa's identity, something he'd gone to great lengths to conceal over the years as a Pro Hero. He wasn't a particularly public Pro like, say, All Might was.

"You and Midoriya know each other?" Aizawa jumped straight into questioning. He wanted answers, after all, now more than ever. "There isn't a 'Stephen Strange' listed in his file; only Hisashi Midoriya and Inko Midoriya are listed as his legal guardians. So what is your relationship with my student? He called you 'sensei' so I take it you are a mentor of sorts?"

"Correct," Strange affirmed. "I had taken it upon myself to train and prepare Izuku here for U.A for the last 20 or so months. This was all to get him on a more equal footing with his peers who have years of familiarity with their Quirks."

"So you are the one who trained him to use his...Energy Reign after it developed so late?"

"Yes, I am the one who taught him how to wield magic," Strange responded with a wry smirk. "This again?" Aizawa could feel his temper building up by the second, made increasingly turbulent by the ridiculous answers he was repeatedly being given. "Stop...using that word," Aizawa reigned in his temper, lest he lash out at the doctor. "If Midoriya is truly Quirkless, then it would be far more feasible to claim his feats would be caused by hidden support tech rather than something as archaic and illogical as magic."

"You insult me with such circumvention," Strange scoffed, a suppressive chill suddenly manifesting within the room as the humor slowly drained from his face. "But more than that, you insult our student with such an insinuation."

"What's insulting is the continued insistence of describing Midoriya's power as 'magic','" Aizawa shot back.

"My, my, Aizawa," Strange said, giving Izuku's new teacher a scrutinizing look. "Are you telling me you don't believe in magic?"

"Of course not," Aizawa scoffed. "Magic is little more than parlor tricks and card gimmicks, sleights
of hand and childish trickery, cheap illusions that exist only within the context of a talent show.
Seeing is believing, and what I see isn't magic, but a powerful Quirk that is somehow immune to my own."

"Quite right?" Strange asked cheekily. "We'll see about that." Strange slapped a hand onto Aizawa's shoulder, and before the ragged man could brush it off or push him away the two of them promptly vanished with little more than a 'whoosh'.

Izuku and All Might shot out of their respective seats, but Nezu remained behind his desk, sipping on his tea and staring at Aizawa's chair with marked amusement.

"W-where did they go?" Izuku stammered, although a voice in the back of his head already knew the answer...and he didn't like it.

*Stephen, my hardheaded friend!* All Might thought frantically. *Did you do what I think you just did!?*

"It would seem that Doctor Strange took Eraserhead on a trip through the Multiverse," Nezu said matter-of-factly.

"He did what!?" Izuku shouted, recalling vividly how Strange had sent him hurtling through various dimensions and realms the day he offered to teach him magic. Izuku felt a spike of fear for his homeroom teacher. How would Aizawa, a man who stood against all that was deemed 'illogical', fare when suddenly thrust into the middle of it?

*I can see how the humility you've gained throughout the years at Kamar-Taj have not totally softened the edge of your stubborn temperament, Stephen! All Might grimaced. I shudder to imagine how unyielding you must've been back when you were a surgeon!*

"I would not be concerned," Nezu said again, his eyes firmly locked onto the chair Aizawa had been seated in. "If my calculations are correct, then they should be returning in five, four, three..."

Aizawa suddenly materialized directly above his seat not three seconds later and came crashing down on it, tumbling off the cushion and landing on the floor with a distinctly hard 'thud'. Doctor Strange appeared soon after, red cloak splayed open and keeping him levitated off the ground.

"Have you ever seen that in a talent show before?" Strange asked smugly.

"Uh, Aizawa, my boy," All Might addressed his fellow teacher. "You're, uh...spilling the tea all over yourself."

"Yes," Aizawa emotionlessly replied. He had the teacup raised to his lips, but none of the liquid ever touched his tongue. His hands were simply trembling far too much. Every drop that was jostled out of the cup splashed onto either Nezu's desk, Aizawa's clothes, or onto the floor.

"Does that answer all your questions, Aizawa?" Strange asked, crossing his arms as he slowly levitated down to the ground.
Aizawa shakily nodded his head as he struggled with the tea.

"...Please don't permanently scar my homeroom teacher for life, sensei," Izuku squeaked.

"Ahem," Nezu cleared his throat, and all eyes were back on the principal. "Now that I believe the most dramatic events of the day are behind us, let us now see this situation to its rightful conclusion, shall we?"

"This confluence was planned ahead of time due to the necessity of introducing Eraserhead to the concepts of magic, as well as reaffirming Midoriya's placement in our institution's Hero Course in spite of his Quirkless nature," Nezu continued. "This was all to serve Midoriya's interests, who would've surely required a homeroom teacher who was aware of the existence of magic in order to be taught properly alongside his peers. In the same vein, this will serve Aizawa's interests as well, allowing him to better guide Midoriya on his path to becoming a hero now that he is—and will be kept—aware of what his student is capable of."

"So I'm not getting booted out of the Hero Course...?" Izuku asked, rubbing the tears out of his eyes.

"Of course not, young man!" Nezu exclaimed rather cheerfully. "You've trained hard on becoming a sorcerer, now you must train to apply those skills into becoming a hero befitting society! Everyone here will be sworn to uphold your secret, as well as that of your cover Quirk as you progress through U.A...right, Eraserhead?"

"Yes, sir," Aizawa responded with another shaky nod, although the color in his face was slowly returning.

"Worry not, Nezu, my friend," Strange spoke up. "Just as my disciple will be learning from your establishment what it means to become a hero, so too will Aizawa be instructed on my establishment about the existence and dangers of magical forces in our world."

"And I will play my part as well!" All Might jovially added. "I will catch Young Aizawa up to speed in no time!"

"Myself, All Might, Recovery Girl, Power Loader, and now Aizawa," Nezu said, staring into his own now empty teacup. "We are the only faculty members here at U.A that are aware of magic. For the time being, we are the only ones that need to know."

"We need to be prepared to bring all of the other faculty 'into the fold', as it were, if we have to," Nezu continued, looking back up at Strange and All Might. "This will most certainly not be the last conversation we'll have on this subject matter, but...I feel as if a great deal of progress has been made for the first day."

"You have my thanks, Nezu," Strange said with a calm, cordial bow.

"And you have MY thanks, sensei!" Izuku cried out as he exited Principal Nezu's office with the sorcerer and All Might in tow. "I-I nearly panicked when Aizawa figured something was wrong! I was worried I'd actually be expelled..."

"Worry not, Young Midoriya!" All Might chuckled. "Aizawa may have something of a bad rep among past and prospective students regarding his history of expulsions, but believe me when I say the man has a strong eye for spotting those with potential and is undoubtedly committed to those he deems worthy of learning here at U.A. I may not approve of his methods, but Aizawa is as devoted to raising the next generation of heroes as I now am!"
"Just give him some time to adjust, Izuku," Strange said, placing his hands on his disciple's shoulders encouragingly. "I'd already had my eye on Aizawa for a while now, and your enrollment into U.A was merely the perfect opportunity to introduce myself to him."

"Aizawa is a quick study, and he certainly won't begrudge you for what's happened here today," Strange continued, conjuring up a portal that lead directly into Izuku's bedroom. "Trust in your new teachers just as you have placed your trust in me, and they will doubtless return it. Now off you go, your lessons start tomorrow!"

"Y-yes sir!" Izuku sprinted through the portal, turning to give his teachers one final wave before it closed for good.

"Aizawa is not the only one who's a quick study," All Might said, rubbing his chin as he stared into the space Izuku was just standing in. "It's only been 20 or so months and the boy has already ascended to the rank of Disciple? He's become quite skilled in your Mystic Arts!"

"But will it be enough, I wonder?" Strange asked, his tone turner sour and dismal. "Will our apprentices be ready for what's surely coming? Will they have enough time to be prepared?"

"I will be instructing the Hero Course students with Battle Trials tomorrow," All Might spoke, cutting through the tension with his trademark smile. "It will be a solid next step for Young Midoriya and Young Kirishima both."

"Young Kirishima..." Strange said mirthfully. "Aside from what I've heard from the Entrance Exam and your sporadic e-mails, I don't know much about the boy you've chosen as your successor."

"You're more than welcome to join in for the Battle Trials tomorrow," All Might offered. "I'm sure I'll be able to scrounge up a passable excuse for your presence."

"A kind offer, Toshinori, but my schedule will remain packed these next several days despite the lack of training I have for Izuku," Strange sighed. "I have to continue following up on any potential leads..."

"On the zealot known as Ikiji and the stolen tomes, I presume?" All Might asked.

"The situation is...more complex than even I anticipated," Strange replied, extending his palm upward as a blue mist began swirling around it. "Ikiji is no longer the only opponent we must play against."

A gaunt image of a figure sprouted out of the mists, his eyes narrow and malicious and his hair messy and blue, mostly shrouded by a blackened hoodie.

"Is that...?" All Might began.

"The image of the true perpetrator behind the recent incursion on the Sanctum. Wong procured it from the villain known as Brigand when he invaded the thief's mind," Strange confirmed. "We know his name: Shigaraki Tomura. Are you, by any chance, familiar with this young man?"

All Might shook his head. "I am familiar with villains far and wide, from Japan to the States," All Might said. "But this is a new one to me. How disappointing to see a man as young as him descend into wretched villainy!"

"All the more reason for concern," Strange elaborated. "One cannot simply 'break into' any of the three Sanctums without the help of those who are at least somewhat familiar with those structures. Even scoundrels like Brigand, who possess only a rudimentary level of knowledge when it comes to
magic, would be hard-pressed to weasel their way inside."

"I see where you're going with this, Stephen," All Might said. "You believe that the zealot Ikiji must have supplied the necessary information to this Tomura."

"It's the conclusion I drew, yes, but it's all still too simple of an explanation," Strange grit his teeth as he willed the image of Tomura away. "Ikiji...Tomura...these foes are but two threads in a quagmire that is becoming increasingly entangled in what I suspect to be the strings of a darkness familiar to us both."

Strange looked All Might squarely in the eye. "We must be prepared to deal with the possibility that All For One is involved somehow."

"No," All Might replied a bit forcefully. "It's been six years, and—"

"Evil never dies, Toshinori," Strange cut his friend off. "It merely evolves. And no one is better at evolving—at persevering—than that fiend."

"Regardless, we haven't enough evidence to jump to such a conclusion," All Might said after gulping. "Give it time, and you will see that you are simply mistaken."

"I pray that I am mistaken," Strange conceded. "But I do not believe I am."

The office door into Nezu's office suddenly swung open and a far more composed Aizawa stormed out, his eyes settling accusingly on All Might's form.

"You," Aizawa said as he marched over to the imposing man, brushing Strange aside as he jabbed a finger against All Might's chest. "You knew of Midoriya's 'magic powers' all along, didn't you?"

"U-uh, Aizawa, my boy—"

"If you had done the logical thing and said something sooner, preferably before I took the boy to go see Nezu, that entire scene could've been avoided!"

"Mmm, to be fair, I was still planning on sending you hurtling through the multiverse," Strange interjected.

"I feel like an ass for putting Midoriya through that," Aizawa whirled on Strange.

"Trust me, Aizawa, it's better for you to just embrace it," Strange responded flippantly as he conjured another portal, this one leading back to his Sanctum. "Now let's go, we have a lot to go over."

"I apologize for not informing you right when you deduced something was afoot, Aizawa," All Might spoke earnestly. "But it truly wasn't my place to do so. Such decisions are left to our Sorcerer Supreme for a reason!"

"Yes, yes, balance and whatnot," Aizawa groaned, reiterating the same spiel Nezu had told him privately just moments before. "The sooner I get this over with the sooner I can crawl back into my sleeping bag and try to forget this day ever happened."

"That's the spirit, Aizawa!" All Might gave a hearty slap on the clearly exhausted and equally unenthusiastic man's back. "And if you require any assistance on the matter, feel free to come to me for help or advice!"

Aizawa paused and gave All Might a stare of unmitigated scorn, only stepping through Strange's
portal when being prompted to do so. The portal closed, leaving All Might alone in the hallway. The Symbol of Peace chuckled loudly to himself—he had been on the receiving end of countless flak and dry snark from Aizawa over the last several weeks, mainly stemming from the man disapproving of Nezu's decision to bring him on board as a new faculty member.

And All Might had to admit, turning the tables on a man like Shota Aizawa felt pretty damn good.
Battle Trials

Chapter Summary

The first day of official classes have begun for the students of 1-A, and All Might has something special planned to kickoff the first lesson of Basic Hero Training: Battle Trials! While Izuku stresses over the continued difficulties of maintaining his cover among his classmates, Bakugo looks forward to establishing himself to the rest of the class as the strongest student. If only there wasn't a certain recommended student to get in the way of his plans...

"I am...coming through the door like a normal person!" All Might proclaimed with the loud, dramatic flair one would expect from the Symbol of Peace. He sported the bright red costume that people mainly affiliated with his 'Silver Age' of heroics, something he wore commonly over 15 years ago. Naturally, after a day of tedious normal class subjects, every face in the room brightened up at the prospect of being taught Heroics by the Number One Hero himself!

"All Might's really a teacher here at U.A!" Kaminari exclaimed as All Might marched to the class podium.

"I am pumped and rearing to go!" Kirishima yelled, exuding an air of excitement that dwarfed most of the other students.

"It's almost surreal..." Jiro muttered, twirling her earphone jacks with her fingers.

"Isn't that his Silver Age costume?" Tsuyu wondered aloud, looking over the amalgamation of red, blue, and gold adorning All Might. "I don't think he's worn that outfit since he helped found the Avengers and defeated the villain Ultron all those years ago."

"An air of agreeable nostalgia has swept into the room..." Tokoyami added with a small grin.

All Might's Silver Age costume...! Izuku was practically shaking with adoration. I actually get to see it in person...!

"Greetings, fledglings!" All Might boisterously addressed 1-A. "And welcome to your first class of Hero Basic Training! Throughout your stay in the Hero Course you'll train in various ways to learn the basics of becoming a hero!"

"So let's jump right into it!" All Might continued, adopting a dramatic pose. "Our first lesson: combat training!"

There were different reactions to All Might's declaration: some students tried to remain stoic and serious, others seemed excited, and others still appeared nervous and unsure. Midoriya was one such student.

"Combat training right at the beginning of the school year? Izuku thought. I guess I'm going to learn real quick whether my magic can stand up to my classmates' Quirks..."

"And what better to go with combat training than these!?" All Might aimed a dial at the wall and pressed a button. Four vertical compartments slowly emerged from the wall, each labeled...
numerically. "Costumes based on your Quirk registrations and the requests you sent in when you applied for the Hero Course!"

"Let's grab our costumes one row at a time, shall we?" All Might continued, prompting each row of students to rise and grab the costumes, starting with Aoyama. The class was abuzz with mystique and discussion as the students, one by one, took hold of their costumes. They'd only sent in rudimentary designs and drawings along with their requests, so who knew what the costume designers had actually created for them?

The final row of students, spanning from Hagakure to Yaoyorozu, all stood up to claim their costumes. All except for Midoriya, who'd simply reached under his desk and retrieved his unusually large backpack, plopping it down on his desk.

"Midoriya, there's no costume in your slot!" Hagakure said, her U.A uniform turning with her invisible head as she looked back and forth between Izuku and his empty No. 18 slot. "Did you not include a costume request when you applied to U.A?"

'Well, actually—"

"Midoriya! Such forgetfulness should be unacceptable for someone who is part of the Hero Course!" Iida chastised the boy, who suddenly felt acutely aware of every eye in the room falling on him. "How could you neglect to send in a costume request!?"

"N-no, you've got it all wrong!" Izuku waved his hands defensively. "I do have a costume, it's just in my backpack! I didn't send in a costume request because I...I already had mine custom-made before classes began!"

The excuse, while hastily concocted, seemed reasonable enough to calm Iida down. It also wasn't technically a lie—his sorcerer outfit had been magically custom-made before he began attending U.A, they just didn't need to know the full truth.

"I see," Iida fixed his glasses and corrected his stance. "I apologize for jumping to conclusions like that!"

"Custom-made costume? Bakugo thought derisively. That reeks of bullshit. What, is that 'Doctor Strange' fellow also sponsoring your weak, nerdy ass, too?"

Izuku unzipped his backpack and let out a startled yell as a blur of green shot out of its dark confines. His green Cloak of Levitation zipped around the classroom haphazardly, bumping against the ceiling and multiple desks, and causing more than a few students to scramble out of its way.

"Duck!"

"Watch out!"

"What is that thing!?"

The seemingly sentient green fabric came to a halt before Midoriya, unfurling completely and stretching itself thin as if it were stretching human limbs. It then suddenly and briefly turned aggressive, curling one of its bottom tips into a makeshift fist and thumping Izuku over the head—it clearly did not enjoy being kept folded and crammed in his backpack all day.

"O-ouch!" Izuku rubbed his head where the cloak had hit him.

"What the heck?" Sato asked aloud. "Is that a flying cloak?"
"I've never seen a cloak that could levitate before," Tsuyu added.

"That's so cool!" Uraraka said. "It's so interesting and unique!"

"But will it be as glamorous as the cloak I requested?" Aoyama piped up.

"You said your costume was custom-made?" Kirishima asked as he stepped forward. "Where the heck did you get something like that!?"

"Oh, u-um..." Izuku was really straining his mind now for another feasible excuse. "This part of my costume is...something brand new from an old teacher of mine! It's highly experimental tech that he allowed me to use!"

"A sponsor of sorts? Experimental tech?" Iida pondered aloud as he rubbed his chin, studying the cloak as it floated simply before Midoriya. "You continue to surprise me, Midoriya."

Izuku's on-the-fly excuse seemed to satisfy most of the class as they ceased asking questions, but a few continued to fawn over the green cloak.

"Bullshit, bullshit, bullshit! Bakugo was practically exploding mentally. Experimental tech!? No way that flunky hero I'd never even heard of could afford to make something so ridiculous! Jet packs are one thing, but flying capes!?

"Ahem!" All Might coughed loudly to draw all attention in the classroom back to himself. He looked as if he were struggling to decide whether to pinch the bridge of his nose or outright facepalm. "With our questions for Young Midoriya aside, once you have changed into your costumes, we'll gather over in Ground Beta!"

"Yes sir!"

"Well, they do say the clothes make the hero, ladies and gentlemen!" All Might proclaimed proudly as the heroes-in-training of 1-A emerged from the exit tunnel leading into the Ground Beta cityscape, sporting their respective costumes.

"Nice duds, dude!" Kirishima lightly punched Midoriya on the shoulder as they walked out of the tunnel. Kirishima's outfit was a bit more 'exposed' like Yaoyorozu's, foregoing a shirt and sticking with black pants and boots, a wired guard on his face, and gear-shaped shoulder pads.

Izuku stammered out a quick 'thank you' before being flanked by Uraraka from the other side, startling him with her close proximity.

"I agree, your costume is so unique and cool!" She complimented him. "I think it goes well with your Quirk—really gives you a mystic vibe, you know?"

Well, that much was given. Midoriya definitely had the idea to give off a 'mystic flair' with his costume. It comprised of the standard blue tunic and leggings he'd been gifted with the night of Brigand's defeat, held together with a thick brown belt around his waist. He'd switched his normal red shoes for taupe green-colored boots. He wore dark, fingerless gloves that extended up his forearms and beneath the arms of his tunic. The gloves would cover his noticeable scars without impeding on the intricate finger movements that were sometimes necessary when conjuring and shaping his magic. Additionally, Izuku had bright, vermillion cloth strands wrapped around both his forearms, creating what appeared to be cloth vambraces extending from his wrists to just below his elbows. In his hands was his green Cloak of Levitation, which had calmed down from its hissy fit earlier. As he exited the tunnel to join his classmates, Izuku threw the cloak over his shoulders with
an elegant 'swoosh', allowing it to clasp onto his backside naturally.

"You all look like cool, proper heroes-in-training now!" All Might excitedly exclaimed. "Now let us commence with your first combat training exercise!"

"Excuse me, sir!" Iida stepped forward and raised his hand to grab All Might's attention. "Will we be simulating outdoor urban battles like the Entrance Exam?"

"On the contrary!" All Might replied. "We'll be jumping ahead two steps and focus on indoor urban confrontations instead! On the whole, battles with villains occur more frequently outside. However, statistically speaking, you're going to encounter the truly atrocious villains during indoor clashes more often!"

"Hostage situations, house arrests, backroom deals...the truly intelligent villains that all heroes must watch out for will always be hiding in the shadows!" All Might continued. "For this assignment, you'll be split into hero and villain groups and engage in 2-on-2 indoor battles!"

"Indoor battles without basic training first?" Tsuyu questioned.

"Only in a real battle can one truly understand the basics!" All Might responded. "However, the trick with these bouts is that you're going up against other real people, and not the simple robots that were used during the Entrance Exam!"

The class erupted into questions.

"How will you determine who wins and who loses?"

"Can we still go all out?"

"You won't threaten us with expulsion, will you?"

"How do you intend on splitting up the class?"

"Whose cloak looks prettier: mine or Midoriya's?"

S-so many questions...! All Might nearly wilted under the bombardment of questions, his lack in teaching skills becoming readily apparent. He pulled out a teaching script as discreetly as he could and addressed all the relevant questions thrown his way.

"Here is our scenario: the villain groups have to protect a nuclear weapon hidden in their designated lairs, while the heroes are trying to relinquish the weapon from their grasps!" All Might explained. "For the heroes to win, they must either capture both villains or touch the nuclear weapon in the allotted time. The villains must either defend the weapon the whole time or capture both heroes!"

"And the teams will be decided be this!" All Might continued, holding up a box for all of 1-A to see. "Drawing lots!"

"Drawing lots?" Iida questioned. "Is it wise to determine team compositions so haphazardly?"

"Pro Heroes don't always have the luxury of determining who they team up with before a battle," Midoriya explained to him. "Makeshift teams are often created on the spot between heroes of different agencies."

"So we must be prepared to look ahead that far when we become Pros, huh?" Iida mused. "I see! Truly, there is much for me to learn here!"
"Well said, Young Midoriya!" All Might praised the boy as he dug his hands into the box. "Let's get this show on the road, shall we!?"

Team A: Katsuki Bakugo and Shoto Todoroki.

Team B: Eijiro Kirishima and Fumikage Tokoyami.

Team C: Denki Kaminari and Ochako Uraraka.

Team D: Minoru Mineta and Toru Hagakure.

Team E: Kyoka Jiro and Momo Yaoyorozu.

Team F: Izuku Midoriya and Yuga Aoyama.

Team G: Rikido Sato and Hanta Sero.

Team H: Mezo Shoji and Tsuyu Asui.

Team I: Mina Ashido and Koji Koda.

Team J: Mashirao Ojiro and Tenya Iida.

"All the girls in the class, and I get paired with the invisible one..." Mineta quietly lamented, although a swift boot to the head proved Hagakure was still close enough to hear him.

"You're not even gonna be subtle about it, huh, Mineta!?!" She chided.

"And the first teams to fight will be..." All Might rummaged through boxes labeled 'heroes' and 'villains'. "These guys!"

All Might raised two balls for all of 1-A to see: Team A and Team C.

"Team C will be the dastardly villains, and Team A will be the intrepid heroes!" All Might proclaimed.

"Us? The villains?" Kaminari asked himself worriedly. "I guess it doesn't matter if I was assigned to be one of the heroes or one of the villains since I'd still be fighting the two strongest students in the class!"

"Woo-hoo! Let's give it our all, partner!" Uraraka cheerfully slapped Kaminari on the shoulder, though it did little to assuage his fear of facing Bakugo and Todoroki in battle. Those two were downright scary to him!

Todoroki maintained his typical dark, stoic face as All Might announced he would be up first. He gave no notable reaction to his teammate or opponents, and he merely stood at attention, awaiting further orders from his teacher.

Bakugo was far more expressive—and upset. He gnashed his teeth together, frustrated that he wouldn't get to pound Deku into the ground and make him remember his place. To make matters worse, he was paired with Todoroki, a guy who screamed 'condescending' to him. And Katsuki Bakugo loathed condescension. He couldn't stand to be looked down upon by anyone!

Whatever, Bakugo mentally scoffed. I'll just fly in, beat those two buffoons, and be done with it as quickly as possible.
"Everyone else should head toward the monitor room while I lead our first two teams to their designated battle areas!" All Might declared.

Izuku hurriedly joined his other classmates in walking toward the monitor room, leaving behind an irate Bakugo, an emotionless Todoroki, an eager Uraraka, and a disquieted Kaminari.

"Villain teams will go in first and set up!" All Might informed the four students gathered outside their designated building. "After five minutes, the hero team will enter and the battle trial will commence!"

All Might handed Bakugo and Todoroki basic schematics of the building for them to peruse while he led Uraraka and Kaminari to a door leading inside.

"Young Uraraka, Young Kaminari, I encourage you to try and view this assignment from the perspective of villains!" All Might advised. "This will be pretty close to a real battle, after all, so don't feel like you can't or shouldn't go all out either! Should anything go too far, I'll stop the battle immediately!"

"Understood, sir!" Both Uraraka and Kaminari exclaimed, although the latter did so with much less pep in his voice.

"Oh man, what are we supposed to do?" Kaminari addressed Uraraka as they ascended the building to the floor All Might informed them the 'weapon' was located. "You saw Bakugo and Todoroki's Quirks during Mr. Aizawa's test, didn't you!? They're powerhouses! And scary ones at that!"

"I won't lie, I'm intimidated, too," Uraraka confided. "Of Bakugo especially. He helped me during the Entrance Exam, but when I approached him to thank him yesterday, he snapped at me instead and told me he didn't know what I was talking about!"

"Yeah, that guy...doesn't seem very sociable in the slightest," Kaminari muttered, rubbing a hand through his hair.

"But even with the odds stacked against us, we shouldn't just roll over for them!" Uraraka said determinedly. "I'm sure if we use our five minutes wisely, we can come up with a strategy of some kind to eke out a victory!"

"What do you suggest?" Kaminari asked, his worry slightly elevated by Uraraka's determination.

"Well, for starters, we should definitely avoid a direct confrontation with them as much as possible," Uraraka explained. "Let's forget about trying to capture them and focus entirely on keeping the bomb out of their hands!"

"I can help create and gather debris!" Kaminari added. "And you can use your Quirk on it all to obstruct them, as well floating the bomb up to keep it out of their hands!"

"Now you're talking! Let's show those heavy hitters that we're not to be messed with!"

Bakugo grit his teeth and audibly grumbled to himself as he studied the floor plans, taking in as much information as he could before their five minutes of prep was up. Even though he was angry—hell, when couldn't he find a reason to be upset—Bakugo wasn't about to hold back on his first assignment for Basic Hero Training. He was the first one up essentially, and this was the perfect moment to show off his skill to the rest of the class. He would show them just how far above the mark he was compared to them, and how they were just extras compared to him.
"Especially Deku."

"You gonna sit there looking all emo and shit, or are you actually going to look over these plans with me, you damn half-and-half bastard!" Bakugo angrily snapped at Todoroki, who was sitting quietly off to the side. Aside from the fact that he hadn't said a single word, he also hadn't taken a look at the floor plans All Might had given them. Bakugo was more than okay with Todoroki staying the hell out of his way, but he'd be damned if he lost the trial because his battle partner wouldn't prepare because he didn't care.

"I don't need to look them over," Todoroki replied coolly without even bothering to cast even a simple glance toward Bakugo.

"Oh, I get it," Bakugo seethed, crumpling up the plans in his hands and igniting them with an impulsive explosion. "You think you're too good to even bother planning ahead? Are you looking down on this assignment? Are you looking down on me!" Bakugo was really steamed now. Hell, he'd even take Deku as his battle partner over half-and-half—at least Deku was responsive, and he could derogate the loser all the while, too. This guy, on the other hand...was just infuriating!

Todoroki didn't reply this time, merely crossing his arms and keeping his eyes firmly fixated on the front door into their designated building. Bakugo swore he could hear the guy muttering quietly under his breath...which was uncomfortably reminiscent of Deku. He unclenched his fists and let the smoldering embers that were once the floor plans drift to the ground. Half-and-half better not be muttering about him.

"The five minutes are up!" All Might's voice reverberated throughout the area and their communication pieces. "Heroes: begin your assault! Villains: prepare your defenses!"

"Finally!" Bakugo punched his fists together, raring to go all out right at the start and demonstrate his superiority for all his classmates to see. "I'll end it before those losers even know what hit them!"

Bakugo blasted the door right off its hinges, pausing with satisfaction as its metallic report echoed through the whole building. It was as if it signaled the villains' inevitable defeat. Bakugo roared and prepared to propel himself forward with his explosions, only to find the chilly hand of Shoto Todoroki stop him dead in his tracks.

"Stay back," Todoroki spoke almost dismissively. "I'll end this."

"What the fuck do you think you're doing!?" Bakugo roared, moving to slap Todoroki's hand away, but it was already lowered. "Stop looking down on me! I don't care what you do, just stay out of my way, damn it!"

But Todoroki had already put his own plan for a swift victory into action. His ice crept over his right side from his already covered left side as he slammed his foot down on the ground. Glacial sheets erupted from where his foot impacted, encasing the entire building in an instant, coating concrete and steel alike under frigid bluish-white. A sudden rumbling noise emanated from upstairs.

A moment of crackling static later, and All Might's voice echoed loud and clearly: "The villains are incapacitated and have surrendered! The weapon remains undamaged! Victory goes to Team A, the heroes!"

Bakugo looked on, his visage twisted by horror, shock, and outrage as the quick, triumphant win he played out in his head was snatched away by Todoroki. This wasn't a team victory. This wasn't Bakugo's victory. This was Todoroki's victory.
Katsuki Bakugo couldn't do a damn thing. And all the other students of Class 1-A had witnessed it plain as day.
All Might and the rest of 1-A review the aftermath of the first battle trial between Teams A and C. Bakugo struggles with a budding inferiority complex, Kaminari struggles with unusually high levels of guilt, and Izuku struggles to understand Aoyama! Teams B and F are poised to do battle next—how will Doctor Strange's protege fair against All Might's?

"The five minutes are up!" All Might's voice reverberated throughout the building speakers and their communication pieces. "Heroes: begin your assault! Villains: prepare your defenses!"

Kaminari locked eyes with Uraraka just as he'd finished bringing the latest bit of rubble and spare junk—broken off pipes, busted pieces of concrete, etc.—for her to make weightless. He glanced up at the papier-mâché bomb they were tasked to protect, floating off the ground and resting against the ceiling, out of reach by conventional means. So long as they themselves didn't compromise its outer shell, anything pretty much went in terms of preparation, and All Might allowed it.

A loud boom rippled through the whole floor, the vibrations violent enough to nearly make Kaminari and Uraraka sway where they stood. They didn't need to ask to know what it was: one of the Team A members—probably Bakugo—had just blown the first floor door right off its reinforced hinges.

"We've got to make this quick—" Kaminari began saying, turning toward the only door leading onto the third floor. Todoroki, however, hadn't even given him enough time to finish.

A flash of blue and white suddenly filled Kaminari and Uraraka's view as sheets of ice burst into the room, crawling along the floor and creeping up the walls and ceiling like frigid vines in a wintry garden. The ice had ensnared them in its glacial grasp in an instant, rooting their feet firmly where they stood...but that wasn't the worst of it.

"Kaminari!" Uraraka yelled, slapping her hands on the boy's shoulders in an apparent effort to make him weightless and float above Todoroki's onslaught.

But the sudden attack and subsequent entrapment had caught Kaminari completely off guard, startling him horribly. He hadn't done it on purpose. He hadn't done it while registering Uraraka's hands on his shoulders. Nevertheless, Kaminari activated his Electrification out of a pure, defensive reflex. Sparks and shards flew into the room's walls before the surge died down within a couple seconds. It hadn't done much—their feet were still firmly trapped in the ice.

The faintest of a whimper reached Kaminari's ears, and he felt the sensation of soft, petite hands slipping down his body. Uraraka, still frozen where she stood, had slumped against Kaminari's backside, utterly unconscious from the power of his Quirk.

"Uraraka?" Kaminari trembled. No response beyond a pained whimper. "Uraraka!"

"All Might, we surrender!" Kaminari all but screamed into his ear piece. "We surrender!"

A moment of crackling static later, and All Might's voice echoed loud and clearly: "The villains are
incapacitated and have surrendered! The weapon remains undamaged! Victory goes to Team A, the heroes!"

"U-Uraraka's hurt!" Kaminari exclaimed to All Might. "Please! Send some medical help or something!"

"Worry not, Young Kaminari, we have robotic medical personnel on standby to cart any wounded students to Recovery Girl if needed!" All Might replied. "We'll have her out of there in a jiffy, don't you worry!"

"No, no, no, shit!" The angry voice of Bakugo reached Kaminari's ears, along with the trudging stomps of his heavy footsteps through the ice. Bakugo burst into the room, a maddened gleam in his eyes as he glanced around the room. He glared daggers at the incapacitated Kaminari and downed Uraraka for but a moment before looking up toward the ceiling.

There, cocooned in a thin layer of ice, was the fake bomb, completely undamaged even by Todoroki's merciless ice. It must've required an immense amount of control to wield such power so masterfully. It was a kind of control Kaminari was sorely wishing he had a few moments ago.

Todoroki soon entered in behind Bakugo, casually and nonchalantly observing the quick carnage he'd wrought on the room and its occupants. Lazy eyes fell upon the still frozen figures of Team C.

"Hold still," He instructed Kaminari as he approached him. Todoroki placed his left hand near Kaminari and Uraraka's bodies and began emitting a heat intense enough to instantly begin melting the icy confinement off their bodies.

As Todoroki freed Team C, Bakugo swore under his breath and stomped right back out of the room, not even casting another glance toward Kaminari or Todoroki. Kaminari thought he looked angry enough to collapse from a coronary.

How dare that half-and-half bastard get in my way! Bakugo thought bitterly as he stormed out of the building and toward the monitor room. How dare he steal my win from me! He made me look like a weak, worthless fool on camera, in front of all those extras in our class!

In his petulant rage, Bakugo made sure to kick every stray pebble and rock that dared lay in his path. The thought of being seen as weak in the eyes of the rest of his class was made all the more worse when he remembered Deku was sure to have watched it all go down as well.

Deku... Bakugo mentally hissed. As if he needed that loser to have another reason to continue looking down on him. Damn him! And that Todoroki! He would grind them both up and remind them of their place eventually!

And so Bakugo kept marching on, plans for one-upping Todoroki already forming in his head. He didn't even pay any heed to the procession of diminutive, wheeled robots rolling toward the building he was stomping away from.

Back inside the building used by Teams A and C, Kaminari wriggled uncomfortably and impatiently as Todoroki's heat ate through the ice gluing him and Uraraka to the floor. He was becoming increasingly worried now. Uraraka had still not regained consciousness and remained slumped against his back. Todoroki's eerie silence did nothing to relieve the tension, either.

Finally, Kaminari felt Uraraka's body weight begin to slip. Forcing himself through what little ice remained, he twisted his body and caught Uraraka before she could fall limply onto the still frosty floor.
"Uraraka...?" Kaminari pressed a hand against her neck. A pulse could be felt, not weakened in the slightest. She was also inhaling and exhaling just fine—another great sign. "Oh, thank goodness..."

"Oh! I guess I should thank you too, huh?" Kaminari looked up at the coldly passive face of Todoroki before standing up. "Thanks for freeing us, now we can get Uraraka the help she needs!"

Kaminari landed a friendly pat on Todoroki's shoulder, only to be beset upon by a string of oppressive thoughts and whispers. They were thick on his ears, flowing like honey yet dripping like acid as they prickled at his very psyche.

The help she needs is distance from you... The voiceless words intruded in his mind. You caused this...you hurt her...some hero you are!

You hurt her! The words repeated without end, bombarding Kaminari's mind relentlessly. You hurt her!

Todoroki slapped Kaminari's hand away from his shoulder, giving the blonde boy a look of marked disinterest. He turned away and withdrew from the room just as the robotic personnel entered, beeping amongst each other and drawing out a stretcher to carry Uraraka out on. Right as Todoroki exited the room, Kaminari collapsed onto his knees. The malicious, taunting voices had ceased jabbing into his brain and ears, but there was no respite in sight for him. In lieu of the wraithlike voices, an indomitable maelstrom of fear, despair, and guilt descended on him, weighing his thoughts down with ceaseless amounts of self-blame.

"My fault..." Kaminari muttered, forcing himself onto his feet as he shambled after the robots carrying Uraraka out. "This was my fault..."

The monitor room where All Might and the rest of 1-A would be watching the battle trials unfold from was abuzz with various chatter here and there during the five minutes of prep for Teams A and C, with Iida vainly attempting to rein everyone else in. However, a heavy silence quickly filled the room as they witnessed Todoroki launch his ruthless wave of ice, ending the match pretty much right as it began.

All Might pressed a hand to the communication device lodged in his ear before announcing Team A's victory. He then pressed a button, ostensibly signaling for the robot personnel he'd assured Kaminari were on the way.

"While we await the remaining members of Teams A and C to return to the monitoring room, let's review the battle trial we just witnessed, shall we?" All Might addressed the other students.

"Uh, sir?" Ojiro raised his hand to speak. "Does that really count as a battle trial? I mean, it was pretty much over in an instant..."

"Such confrontations are not uncommon in the real world of Pro Heroes!" All Might responded. "Forget the flashy videos and juicy sound bites that the media likes to eat up and plaster everywhere! The best heroes must always anticipate and strive for battles that will be resolved quickly. The quicker a battle, the less likely damage will be inflicted on your surroundings, nearby innocents, and even yourselves!"

Anticipating the unpredictability of makeshift teams, making quick judgment calls, and using our
foresight as properly as possible... Iida pondered grimly as he caught sight of Uraraka being wheeled out of the building and down the road to Recovery Girl's care. Truly, the Hero Course will push us to our absolute limits, starting from day one!

"Let's start with our unsuccessful villains, Team C, shall we?" All Might continued on with the lesson. "Who among you spotted the pros and cons behind their preparations and execution?"

"W-well," Izuku raised his hand. "They made good use of their Quirks during prep time. They avoided damaging the bomb, which would've resulted in an instant forfeit."

"Astute observations, Young Midoriya!" All Might praised the boy. "And what about cons?"

"They failed to properly plan for Todoroki's ranged attacks," Yaoyorozu spoke up next. "Their preparations for rubble obstruction may have fended off Bakugo for a little bit, but they failed to factor in any way to effectively keep Todoroki at bay."

"Excellent! My thoughts exactly!" All Might said. "When facing off against two opponents with differing Quirks and combat styles, it's better to factor in both opponents at least a little bit instead of focusing on just one, which may allow you to get completely blindsided by the other."

"And what about our intrepid victors of Team A?" All Might asked. "What pros and cons did any of you notice about them?"

"Aside from winning instantly?" Asui asked, tilting her head. "Well, Bakugo went out of his way to study the floor plans meticulously, while Todoroki went out of his way to not injure Team C too badly, while also securing the bomb without destroying it."

"But they definitely lacked teamwork and cohesiveness!" Iida added. "Bakugo was unreasonably hostile while Todoroki was unreasonably reticent!"

"Given all these observations, who would you say was the MVP of the first battle trial?" All Might asked.

"...I'd have to say Uraraka," Izuku spoke up again. "She remained the most productive during the prep time out of all four combatants, making the most out of her Quirk before and during the trial. It seemed she even tried to use her Quirk on Kaminari right as Todoroki attacked, but she just wasn't quick enough. If she had managed to pull it off and float Kaminari above the ice, they may have still had a chance to fend off the heroes!"

"You make a strong case, Young Midoriya, and I'm inclined to agree!" All Might said with a nod. "Keep in mind that the MVP of a match does not necessarily have to belong to the winning team!"

The door into the monitoring room swung open at that moment, the two members of Team A and the sole, remaining member of Team C entering. Well, Bakugo stormed in, muttering furiously to himself and keeping his eyes locked squarely on the ground. Todoroki merely strolled in with an air of his usual indifference, and Kaminari appeared downright distraught, fidgeting with his fingers nervously.

Izuku was watching Bakugo sympathetically; he knew that a swift victory like that would never go over well for someone like him, especially when delivered at the hands of another. Kacchan would just never accept a victory that he himself did not earn through merit and skill alone. Putting the hostility aside, Izuku could understand Bakugo's base frustration—the battle trials were combat-oriented, and he didn't get a chance to show off what he was made of to the rest of the class, and All Might, no less.
"The hell you looking at, nerd!?" Bakugo caught sight of Midoriya staring at him, forcing the boy to stammer out an awkward apology. Bakugo huffed and put a fair bit of distance between himself and the rest of the class, brooding in a corner with his arms crossed.

"Young Kaminari!" All Might addressed the blonde boy. "While not brought up in the review of your battle trial, I must commend the care you exhibited for your fellow teammate! Even though you were put into the perspective of a villain for this assignment, that did not stop you from taking your partner's injuries into account both before and after I ended the trial. Well done!"

"T-thanks," Kaminari weakly replied.

"And if you're worried about Young Uraraka's condition, don't be!" All Might continued. "I just received word from Recovery Girl: your teammate is conscious and her injuries were not nearly as severe as you may have initially thought!"

Kaminari responded with a barely visible grin and nod of his head before retreating toward the back of the class, standing off mostly by himself and avoiding all inquiries from his peers. As he walked around the crowd of classmates, he moved right by Midoriya, who was staring intently at him as he passed by.

Something's...not right, Izuku thought, eyes darting from Bakugo to Kaminari to Todoroki. Each were standing some distance away from the rest of the class. Each were wrapped in their own world, their own thoughts. Each seemed...off in their own way. The aggressive aura surrounding Kacchan was by far the easiest to explain (though would likely be the hardest to resolve given his nature). The aura surrounding Todoroki and Kaminari, however, was far more enigmatic, despite the parallels he'd drawn yesterday when he almost bumped into the former.

It's difficult to put into words, Izuku mused to himself as All Might continued on with the lesson, fetching the villain and hero boxes to draw the next teams out of. It seems almost phantasmal? But not just on Todoroki anymore. Kaminari has a similar ambiance to him, too. Was he like that yesterday? Was he like that earlier today?

"Let us determine which teams will clash next!" All Might announced, forcibly drawing Izuku's attention back to the lesson at hand. Izuku shook his head to clear his thoughts...maybe he really was just reading too much into it. Still, he would at least check up on Kaminari after class ended.

"And the next teams are—!

Team F? Izuku's eyes widened. That's me and—

"Bonjour, Sir Midoriya!" The gallantly dressed Aoyama suddenly appeared at Izuku's side, causing him to jump slightly. Izuku took note of his partner's costume: his chestplate, boots, and bracelets were adorned with violet and gold details, with a glittering cape and a red, winged visor covering his eyes. "With your cloak and my far superior cape, we truly make an avant-garde pair! Let us win the day in the name of our newly christened Team Fabulous!"

"I—Team Fabulous?" Izuku blinked.

"Oui, does it not sound appropriate?" Aoyama said, directing his vain, closed smile at Izuku. He brushed the fringe of blonde hair curving down near his eye. "By what other name would the heroes of Team F be called? What a stroke of luck it is for you, Midoriya, to be paired with the sparkling hero that puts the 'Fabulous' in Team Fabulous!"
"Wait, if you're the 'Fabulous', then what about me?" Izuku asked.

"Why, you put the 'Team' in Team Fabulous, bien entendu!" Aoyama gave another brush of his hair and let his cape billow slightly. "It'd be no team if I were sparkling all by my lonesome!"

"R-right," Izuku said. He didn't really know how to respond. This may have been his first ever interaction with Aoyama, but Izuku simply couldn't get a good read on the guy. He wouldn't complain, though—he certainly could have had a worse partner (Izuku stole a quick glance over at Kacchan). Vanity aside, Aoyama also seemed peppy and friendly enough for Izuku to feel confident about their potential teamwork and coordination. They would need it if they wished to stand a chance against their opponents.

Speaking of our opponents... Izuku mused as his eyes wandered around the room, searching for the familiar spiky red hair from the Entrance Exam. When he found Kirishima's face, Izuku saw that the members of Team B were silently staring right back at him. Kirishima sported an excited grin that belied an anxiousness of sorts, while Tokoyami remained nearly as stoic as Todoroki, studying the members of Team Fabulous like a hawk.

They were all sizing each other up for the coming clash—well, Izuku was the only one from Team Fabulous doing any 'sizing up'. Aoyama had yet to stop pontificating about his sparkling wardrobe, blissfully unaware that Izuku had stopped listening to him.

"Alright! Follow me, sinister villains and aspiring heroes!" All Might exclaimed. "I will lead you to the next designated building since the first is no longer fit for today's testing!"

Team Fabulous were the first to depart the monitor room, with Izuku wearily letting his partner drone on and on about his costume, Quirk, and his French heritage. All Might was about to follow behind, but Team B caught him at the door.

"All Might, sir," Tokoyami spoke respectfully. "Before we depart for our fated battleground, might we stall you for but a moment?"

"Now, now, no asking for tips, Team B!" All Might gently chided. "As your teacher, I have to grade and judge all my students fairly without playing favorites!" Especially given your status, Young Kirishima...!

"Oh no, we're not gonna ask for tips!" Kirishima corrected. "We just wanted to quickly run something we came up with by you before you lead us to our battle site!"

Kirishima motioned for All Might to lean down. He did so, and Tokoyami whispered something indiscernible in the man's ear before stepping back.

"Our despicable, villainous strategy still remains within the boundaries of your rules, I believe?" Tokoyami asked.

"Following the letter of the law, but not the spirit, are we?" All Might said, stroking his chin contemplatively. "You are correct, Young Tokoyami! Assuming you two prepare properly during your five minutes, you won't forfeit the match! Nevertheless, I'll be monitoring your prep carefully, and I won't hesitate to declare Team F the winners should you make a critical mistake!"

Kirishima and Tokoyami gave their thanks and were promptly lead out by All Might, toward the building where their match against Team Fabulous would be staged. Bakugo had watched them all depart with thinly veiled interest.

Alright, Deku, Bakugo seethed mockingly. Let's see just how good your training with that flunky
Moments later, All Might had Teams B and F at their appropriate station: a building schematically similar to the previously used one. It was a boon of Ground Beta that many of the buildings were modeled so similarly, to allow for multiple testing areas in the event some structures became unusable during Hero Training lessons.

As per the rules, Kirishima and Tokoyami—the villains—entered first to begin their preparations. All Might handed Midoriya and Aoyama floor plans of the new building and promptly departed back to the monitor room. Izuku wasted no time in pouring over the plans, mentally scribining as many doors, windows, and stairwells before the trial began. Aoyama also leaned over to get a look, though it didn't seem he was paying nearly as much attention.

"So how shall we go about this, my confere?" Aoyama asked, twirling his cape. "Shall we go the flashy route and make use of your portals? Or shall we go the flashier route and use my Navel Laser to sparkle our way in?"

"Neither will be great ideas," Izuku responded. "My portals aren't really usable until we get inside, and your laser would be impractical."

"Quoi? What do you mean?" Aoyama questioned.

"To put it simply, I can't create a portal just anywhere," Izuku explained. "I need a clear, accurate mental image of where I want to go. And I can't do that when I can't visualize what the building's interior looks like. These schematics don't give a clear enough picture, either."

"Worry not, mon amie!" Aoyama flashed a closed smile and posed dramatically. "I shall blast our way to victory! With panache!"

"H-hold up, Aoyama! We don't want to risk destroying the bomb, especially since we don't know what floor it's on! We could cause ourselves to forfeit—!

Izuku's protests were interrupted by an enormous blast emanating from the top of the very building they were poised to infiltrate. The rumbling subsided as thick plumes of dust and smoke billowed up into the sky.

"Your five minutes are up!" All Might exclaimed through the ear pieces. "Heroes: begin your assault! Villains: prepare your defenses!"

Letting his Cloak of Levitation unfurl, Izuku slowly levitated up to the building's second floor, floating from window to window until he found one unlocked. He gave Aoyama a thumbs up and flew back down, wrapping his arms around his partner's waist in order to lift him up. Izuku let out a grunt as the cloak strained to carry the both of them to the window—apparently they were pushing the cloak's weight limit.

"How déclassé," Aoyama muttered as he slid the window open as silently as possible, swinging himself into the dimly lit hallway feet first.

Izuku floated in right behind him, eyes darting up and down the hall suspiciously. Izuku grimaced; both ends of the hall made sharp 90-degree turns, further limiting Izuku's potential use for long- to medium-range portals.

"Alright, we're in! Now our next step should be to—look out!" Izuku yelled, shoving Aoyama out of the way as he raised a hasty barrier against a blur of red and black that rounded the corner in front of
them like a guided bullet.

Kirishima's hardened fist collided with Izuku's barrier, shattering it instantly. The force sent Izuku rolling and sprawling down the hall, gasping for breath as he struggled to his feet. The recoil also knocked Kirishima back against the wall. However, he quickly recovered, and his dark, crimson form came barreling down the hall toward Izuku once more.

Aoyama was nowhere to be seen.

"Sorry, Midoriya!" Kirishima yelled. "All Might told us villains to prepare our defenses, but I've always thought that a great offense makes for an even greater defense!"

Meanwhile, back in the monitor room, All Might and the rest of 1-A silently observed the first clash between Team B and Team Fabulous.

Young Midoriya...Young Kirishima...! What will you both do now? All Might silently mused. How will the successor of the Sorcerer Supreme and the successor of the Symbol of Peace fare against one another in combat!?
Kirishima has always looked up to the hero Crimson Riot, inspired both by his supposed fearlessness and his similar Hardening-type Quirk. But does he truly understand the meaning behind the hero's words on what a manly spirit is? And how will this affect his struggles with indecision in regard to whether he'll apply for U.A or not?

First of two flashback chapters regarding Kirishima and how he acquires One For All. Enjoy!

"So long as you've got a manly spirit, it doesn't matter what your Quirk is!"

No sentence or phrase had ever inspired Eijiro Kirishima as greatly as those spoken by the Chivalrous Hero: Crimson Riot. With such a stellar reputation for being as fearless as he was reckless—with a similar Hardening-type Quirk to boot—how could Kirishima not look up to the man? How could Kirishima not aspire to become a hero like he had, running headlong into danger to fight and rescue without a shred of fear gripping his heart and mind?

But those same words that sowed seeds of hope and a deep-seated desire for heroism also brought with it clouds of doubt to cluster around his mind whenever he looked inward. They were words he had tried time and time again to embrace over the years, especially as the time to decide on a high school, and therefore his future, drew ever nearer.

Did Kirishima really believe in Crimson Riot's words? Did they truly resonate with his heart...or was it all merely a facade, a mask to cover what he really wanted, much like how he considered his bravado and easygoing nature to be a mask for his real, cowardly self?

Did Quirks really not matter in an age where flashiness and popularity were of paramount importance for Pro Heroes? Could he, with his history of dullness, ever hope to rise to the ranks of those heroes he'd held in such high regard, like Crimson Riot and All Might? Or would he be doomed to a fate of dull mediocrity, a mediocre hero with a dull, simple, bland Hardening Quirk?

And even if his Quirk did not matter in the grand scheme of things, surely his ever-present fear, which seemed to run through his veins as thickly as his blood, did? The 'manly spirit'. Fear and regret. They seemed so...contradictory. Mutually exclusive, even. Kirishima had asked himself for many a night while in bed if one could have a so-called manly spirit and still possess feelings of fear. It wasn't until a certain incident that he'd finally reached a conclusion: no.

Ashido's friends had been in danger. Kirishima could vividly recall the girls, backs against the wall, cowering and trembling as that bulky, cloaked man towered over them with his demands. He recalled their stunned silence, and the man's subsequent offense. He recalled the man's anger, lashing out at the building before him, grinding brick and granite to dust in his palm as if it were brittle to the
Most strikingly damning of all, however, was the sensation of stiffness in his legs, arms, mouth, entire body! That terror seized every muscle in his being, rendering him still, unable to help or move in the slightest. If Ashido hadn't come along when she did, ending the confrontation with her misdirection...Kirishima didn't want to think about what might've happened.

But he did anyway. And the thoughts of what could've happened were as startlingly vivid as the memories of what had actually occurred.

Tch. Forget the dullness of his Quirk. Kirishima supposed he could learn to tolerate being a bland, bottom-rung hero if he thought he'd be satisfied living as such. No, dullness was the least of his concerns. A person could still become a legal Pro Hero even if they were dull, or at least they could even if they were perceived as being dull by the rest of the populace.

But could a person become a Pro Hero even if they were a coward? Could a coward like him become a Pro Hero?

"Kirishima?" Ashido's voice pierced through his melancholic ruminations. "Are you alright?"

Kirishima blinked, and he suddenly found himself staring into the green metal face of his locker. How long had he been standing there with his bag and books in hand, staring off into space like someone who was catatonic? He turned his head and saw Ashido standing to his side, gazing at him with concern in her eyes.

Her eyes. Blazingly bright yellow irises boring into him, made all the more intense by the pitch black sclera they resided in. They didn't just seem concerned; they seemed aware. As much as Kirishima used to think he could get lost in those deep, deep eyes for hours on end, they carried an intensity that proved too much for him to be caught staring at for more than a second. It was an intensity that he wished he had in his own eyes, in his own spirit.

"I'm fine," Kirishima lied through his sharpened teeth as he forcibly turned away.

"That emo look on your face says otherwise," Ashido said, placing her hands on her hips. "You still mulling over your aspiration report? They're due at the end of the week, and I know you're one of the only ones left who hasn't turned it in."

"What? No!" Kirishima objected. "I've already decided!"

"Oh yeah? Where were you thinking?" Ashido said with a grin. "Are you planning on coming to U.A with me?"

"Uh...no, no, I was thinking Doroido Technical with my other friends," Kirishima chuckled and lied through his teeth yet again, the crumpled up aspiration report suddenly feeling inexplicably heavy in his pocket.

"Aw, that's a shame," Ashido said. "A non-emo Kirishima would be right at home at U.A, I'm sure of it!"

"If you say so," Kirishima forced a grin and turned to leave, but a pink hand landed on his shoulder, causing him to halt and shudder.

"Kirishima, really," Ashido said, almost pleadingly. "Are you sure you're alright? You can always
"I am fine!" Kirishima exclaimed, stepping away briskly to separate his shoulder from her slender hand. "I just... don't want to be late for class!"

Her intense eyes on his dull backside. Her smooth, delicate hand on his hard, sharp shoulder. He feels so ecstatic when he encounters these sensations, yet simultaneously wishes Ashido wouldn't waste such interactions on him.

He likes her. He really, really likes her. Yet he couldn't possibly hold a candle to her, let alone be within her league. She is dazzling and interesting. He is dull and boring. She is smooth and delicate. He is unappealing and rough. She is heroic. He is cowardly.

He likes her. But, deep down, he can admit that he is also jealous of her to some degree. In his mind, Mina Ashido is truly everything he isn't.

And then he finds the hologram projector.

In a fit of rage and self-loathing, he had thrown a book at his bookshelf, knocking the projector onto the floor, and causing it to activate. There, he witnessed the very recorded interview with Crimson Riot that made him a fan of the man play out in its entirety.

This time, the words Crimson Riot said and the things he spoke of gave Kirishima reason to pause. They made him think more carefully than he had when he was merely a child looking for a hero, and they made him doubt.

He didn't doubt himself, however; he began to doubt his own doubt in himself.

"What is a 'manly spirit'? It's the attitude one carries within their very souls!" Kirishima recalled Crimson Riot's lofty words. "It has nothing to do with being confident or fearless! I throw myself into danger to save people because I chose to become a hero! I made that decision, so I have to follow through with it no matter what! No regrets! That's the manly spirit: a life led without regrets!"

As his heart surged with encouragement, Kirishima yanked out his crumpled up aspiration report, flattening it out on his desk with his palm. He rewrote U.A on the form, but instantly paused afterward.

Was he being too hasty?

He now possessed a greater understanding of Crimson Riot's words, sure, but did that mean those words could still be applied to himself? To have a manly spirit meant being capable of living life without regrets... and Kirishima definitely still had more than a few hanging over his head like gnats that wouldn't disperse no matter how many times you swatted them away. He now knew what the manly spirit was. He knew how to attain it. But what he didn't know was if he was capable of attaining it.

Crimson Riot could force himself to do what Kirishima could not: move to help those in need when the time came. Kirishima was quickly reminded of Ashido's friends, and how his body didn't move for them when it needed to.
"This is all too much to think about!" Kirishima shouted and stood up, kicking his desk. He stormed out of his house without another word, leaving his wrinkled aspiration report behind on his desk, withered and worn. "I can't make up my own mind!"

A walk and some air are exactly what I need right now, Kirishima thought as he walked aimlessly down the sidewalk. He dug his hands into his pockets and kept his eyes firmly locked on the ground, not looking far ahead to see where he was walking, and not particularly caring, either.

He just couldn't get the meaning of those words out of his head. Crimson Riot seemed to accept his own fear—embrace it even—but would a hero with a manly spirit tolerate Kirishima's perceived cowardice?

It's not about confidence. It's not about fearlessness, Kirishima thought as he strolled despondently down the street. It's about being decisive...sticking to your decisions, and not living in regret of those choices, right? But how can I get past the regrets I have now so I can live without regrets in the future?!

His answer came in the form a strained cry for help coming from around the next corner. Jolted from his musings, Kirishima hurriedly rounded the corner to search for the scream's source.

Nothing.

Another yell—louder this time—emanated from an alleyway halfway down the block. The yell was quickly reduced to little more than muffled whimpers as Kirishima sprinted toward the alleyway and peeked around the corner.

Toward the end of the alley was a young girl, her back pressed against a grimy old dumpster as three miscreants surrounded her, obviously up to no good.

The girl—who looked no older than Kirishima—was sobbing as her bags were violently yanked out of her grasp. The thugs tore them apart and shifted through what appeared to be fresh groceries and other personal effects, stuffing what seemed most interesting and valuable into their pockets while everything else was discarded and dropped to the ground.

"Hey, it didn't have to be this way, girl!" The man directly in front of her—large and broad-shouldered, wearing a grungy vest and equally dirty pants—cooed. "But I don't appreciate being blown off by a cute little thing that don't know any better! So consider this a rudeness tax for your transgressions!"

"Yeah! Rudeness tax!" His underlings parroted.

"So how about you talk to me like a civilized human being?" The man leaned in and sneered. "Or do I have to take even more from you?"

Kirishima shuddered as he peeked around the corner, witnessing this blatant robbery go down. Recent memories flashed in his eyes, and suddenly he was watching Ashido's two friends cowering before the towering brute, his monstrous strength demonstrated on the nearest brick wall as he threatened escalation if they did not comply with his demands. A true crisis had been diverted because of Ashido's timely and heroic intervention.

But Mina Ashido was nowhere near the vicinity of this scene. There was no one around but Eijiro Kirishima to intervene on this girl's behalf to prevent a robbery from descending into something undeniably worse.

I have to do something...! Kirishima screamed to himself as he tried to step forward, shout, draw their
attention away from the girl, anything! *Am I going to be a coward yet again...and stand by and do nothing!?*

"*I save people because I'm a hero!*" Crimson Riot's words echoed in his head. "*It's because of that decision that I rush to help people no matter how afraid I might be! The manly spirit dictates that I always follow through with my decisions, no matter what!*"

*Is this where you found yourself when you decided to become a hero, Crimson Riot?* Kirishima thought as he shakily raised a foot up. *Forcing yourself through indecision, knowing full well that even though there were people you failed to save, giving in would surely mean more losses?*

Kirishima planted his foot down, his first true step forward.

*I don't feel confident in the slightest...I'm completely wracked by fear...!* Kirishima took another step. *But none of that matters, right?! The manly spirit in my soul just needs me to make a decision...and to follow through with it no matter what! Just like you said!*

"And I've decided," Kirishima whispered aloud, scooping up a pebble into his hand, "that I do want to become a hero!"

The lead thug leaned in to grab the girl, but paused as a pebble bounced off his thick skull. He and his companions turned around and faced the black-haired boy, blinking with confusion as the boy appeared to be confronting them.

"The hell do you want, brat?" The thug asked disdainfully.

"I-I'm here to stop you!" Kirishima yelled back, raising his fist. "So get away from her!"

The thugs were quiet for a moment, registering Kirishima's heroic declaration before bawling with laughter.

"That's a funny one, kid!" The thug laughed derisively. "Alright, since you made me laugh, I'll let you off with just a warning! Now scram!"

The thug was met with another pebble, hitting him squarely in the jaw. Any amusement he found in Kirishima's antics quickly drained away as he began stomping over to the boy, who stood his ground.

"A wise guy, huh?" The thug asked, towering over Kirishima. The boy was standing his ground, but the fear in his eyes and body language was more than a little tangible. "Yeah, you act tough, but I can see you shaking in your shoes, brat! I gave you a chance to walk away quietly, but I can see you're a little rough around the edges when it comes to smarts!"

The imposing man swung his fist, smacking Kirishima across the chest and sending the boy sprawling. The man winced ever-so slightly from the impact and inspected his hand after the blow.

"Yeesh, you're literally rough around the edges," The man muttered as he flexed his hand. "You got a Hardening-type Quirk like me, huh? Too bad you got stuck with a *dull* kind of Hardening, though."

Kirishima struggled to catch his breath from the blow, but he slowly picked himself back to his feet, much to the thug's surprise. He had activated his Hardening across his torso, absorbing much of the force behind the man's swat. Still, it had packed quite a wallop for a simple swipe.

"I said...I'm going to stop you!" Kirishima declared again, taking another step toward his opponent.
"So give her back the stuff you stole, and get lost!"

He was met with a far harder blow across the face, sending him crashing to the ground with a groan. The thug had swung both of his fists this time, and he seemed unaffected by the roughness of the activated Hardening of his skin.

"You got some nerve, kid!" The thug taunted. "Do yourself a favor, and stay down!"

"Do yourself a favor!" Kirishima roared as he forced himself up on his feet once more, again stepping toward the thug with every intention of stopping him. He had made his decision, and now he had to follow through with it. It was the only way to see if he could truly have a manly spirit. "And give up!"

Again, the man crashed his gargantuan fists against Kirishima's body, pounding him into the ground as the two lackeys and their victim watched one, the former rooting and cheering their ringleader on, while the trapped latter sobbed from the brutality of it all.

And so Kirishima and the thug became trapped in this brutal song-and-dance, with the man thrashing the boy in spite of his Hardening, and the boy relentlessly getting back on his feet to rush the villain, swinging his fists vainly before greeting the ground once more. With each swing and subsequent blow, Kirishima found it increasingly difficult to physically pick himself back up. However, each sprawl to the ground made it easier than the last for him to stick with his decision, to see this through to the end no matter what—no regrets. After so many punches and swings, Kirishima didn't even need to think about it anymore.

"Brats these days, thinking they can become heroes so damn easily!" The thug snarled, his patience now hitting rock bottom. "You have the lamest form of Hardening imaginable! Let me show you just how outclassed you are, boy!"

The bulky man pressed his hands against one of the building's walls that constituted half of the alleyway. With a grunt, he began absorbing the very bricks that made up the building, enlarging his already ape-sized hands into giant, brick appendages.

"Uh-oh! The boss is using his Quirk!" One of the lackeys yelled.

"Let us get out of the way first, boss!" The other one added as they both scampered past Kirishima to safety.

"How do you like my Quirk: Brick Body!?" The thug asked a visibly fearful Kirishima. "I can assimilate bricks into part of my body that I desire! It's a Quirk perfectly suited for beating up snot-nosed brats who think they can play 'Hero'! Have a taste of a real Hardening Quirk!"

Kirishima had nary a moment to utter anything in comeback before a bricked fist slammed against his chin in an uppercut. The other fist, enlarged and seemingly pulsing from burgundy-colored stone, grabbed Kirishima by the head and threw him down the alley. The girl that had been tormented shrieked and ducked just as Kirishima impacted against the dumpster, his hardened body piercing through the steel like a spear. He spat out a thick globule of blood as he pulled himself out, turning to see the man raise and clamp both fists together, forming a large brick-like mallet.

*If he attacks me with that, he'll crush this girl, too...!* Kirishima swiftly realized, stepping in front of the crying girl to shield her without a moment's hesitation. *The only hope I have is to repel this with everything I've got...*

Kirishima willed his Hardening to respond, sharpening his abdomen and both arms. He crossed his
arms across his face and chest just as his foe brought both bricked fists down on them. He was terrified, undeniably terrified, as he realized he could very well die here.

No regrets! The shadow of the fists soon dominated Kirishima’s vision. No regrets...!

Right before he expected the impact, Kirishima clenched his eyes shut. A huge gust of wind suddenly blew through the alley from behind him, and the assuredly fatal hit never landed. Kirishima cracked an eye open as the dust settled, widening them in full blown shock immediately after.

A large, muscular figure stood above Kirishima, garbed in a red, white, blue, and gold that was recognizable to anyone in the world. A single palm was outstretched, catching the gargantuan brick fists with improbable ease. The newcomer was tall and imposing, but his presence was only intimidating to an evildoer such as the attacking thug. To Kirishima and the girl he’d protected, his presence and smile brought wave after wave of relief.

All Might had arrived.
Chapter Summary

All Might's Successor

All Might's unexpected arrival quickly turns the tide against the Brick Body thug tormenting Kirishima and an innocent girl. In the aftermath of the event, Kirishima and All Might become formally acquainted, with the latter ultimately deciding that Kirishima is a perfect candidate to inherit his power.

Back in the present, Kirishima's clash with Team F's Midoriya continues. Midoriya surprises the successor with a few new tricks up his tunic, exciting Kirishima for the fight to come! This Battle Trial match is nearing its conclusion!

A palm.

A single outstretched palm was all the Symbol of Peace required to halt the crashing advance of the villain's brick fists. A single palm, with no obvious force put into it, had done in a simple movement what Kirishima believed all of his Hardening could not.

"Have no fear!" All Might announced, his smile glinting brilliantly even in the shadows of the alley. "For I am here!"

"All Might!?" Everyone else present exclaimed simultaneously.

"W-we're saved!" The girl Kirishima had been trying to defend cried, falling to her knees in disbelief.

"What rotten luck!" The thug groaned as he tried to push against All Might's hand, to no avail; his palm didn't budge in the slightest. "What the hell is he doing here!?"

"What is he doing here!? Kirishima thought in amazement. Last I heard, he was in Musutafu just a week ago, and now he's here in Chiba!"

"You seem surprised to see me, villain!" All Might addressed the thug. "The Justice of the Symbol of Peace is not confined to any one city on this good Earth!"

"You thought you could terrorize an innocent young girl and admonish the righteous heroism of a young lad and get away with it?" All Might continued, drawing his other fist back. "Then how's this for righteousness: Detroit...Smash!"

All Might's fist became a blur as it blasted through the villain's brick-coated hands. The shatter and spray of debris was all that Kirishima's eyes registered as the villain before them was suddenly sent flying out of the alley. He barreled through his slack-jawed lackeys, and all three of them were soon rolling down the street from All Might's admittedly low-effort punch. They rolled to a stop a ways away, reduced to little more than a groaning pile of would-be villainy.

"They learned a lesson on righteousness they won't soon forget!" All Might said before turning to the teens he'd just saved. "The authorities will be here shortly. Are you two alright?"

"All Might!" The girl cried and threw herself at the hero, who caught her without a moment's
hesitation, holding and consoling her as she cried joyfully.

"You're a brave young woman for powering through that horrendous ordeal," All Might spoke softly, though his voice retained all the power one might expect from the Number One Hero. "Although I apologize for being too late to salvage the rightful belongings they snatched from you."

_"Unbelievable...All Might just saved us, and he's apologizing for not arriving sooner? Kirishima thought, glancing around at all the groceries that the thugs had left scattered all around them. Gosh, that's the Number One Hero for you! Crimson Riot might say All Might's got the manliest spirit of them all!"

The girl reassured both All Might and Kirishima that the lost goods were fine; she was just grateful to have been rescued! As All Might escorted them out of the alley, it appeared a few police cruisers had already arrived, apprehending the bruised and unconscious thugs that laid sprawled out on the street. Both the girl and Kirishima were checked by the police, and gave them their statements before being allowed to leave. Kirishima received the typical verbal warning regarding Quirk usage in public, but was let off due to All Might's backing and the fact the girl was relatively unharmed.

Kirishima watched the scene of bustling police, curious onlookers, aggressive reporters, and escorted criminals with a determined stare. This was but a peek into the world of the authorities and Pro Heroes alike, and he got to be right in the middle of it, if only for a moment. A moment that could turn into many if he so chose.

_That was a moment of manliness, Kirishima reflected on his actions. But could one moment override many moments of—gah! Snap out of it, dude! Why is this such a struggle for you!? I have to follow through with my decisions always, or else...! Damn it, I want to become a hero now more than ever, but why does this have to be so hard!?"

"W-well met, young man!" The dignified voice of All Might broke Kirishima out of his inner struggling. Kirishima had begun wandering away from the police and the crowds, but it appeared All Might had stopped him for a brief moment. "Don't think I could let you escape into the evening without first commending your heroic actions earlier!"

"T-thank you, All Might!" Kirishima said, his doubts briefly replaced with sheer awe for the man standing before him. Sure, his idol and reason for adoring heroics was Crimson Riot, but how could he not have a nearly equal amount of respect for the Symbol of Peace, too? Getting complimented for heroic actions by All Might of all people...what a day!

"You displayed exactly the kind of heroism this world needs to see from the next generation!" All Might said. "It inspires me to see heroic acts from one such as yourself! Are you a Junior High student, by any chance?"

Kirishima nodded.

"Ever thought about applying to U.A High?" All Might asked. "The world could use a hero like you in the future, young man! What say you?"

"I, uh, I am considering it!" Kirishima replied, remembering he'd left U.A scratched on his aspiration report. "Now more than ever!"

_This kid...could he be worthy to inherit my power? _All Might pondered, giving the boy a solid look-over. _Should he pass the Entrance Exam, he may very well be in consideration. _All Might suddenly stiffened ever-so slightly. _Crap...did I mismanage my time again today!?_
"I see! Well then, I hope that you will participate in the Entrance Exam next February," All Might gave a quick laugh and turned to depart with his standard mighty leap. "I hope you will take my words into consideration!"

A thought quickly entered Kirishima's mind as All Might turned away: today he'd been struggling over Crimson Riot's words on what a manly spirit means, and how that meaning could impact his decision to enter a Hero Course, preferably at U.A. If not Crimson Riot, then who else would be better to gain insight from than the Symbol of Peace himself? There were many burdens burgeoning from Kirishima's heart and mind, questions that needed answering, conflicts requiring resolution, and it was nearly too late because All Might was about to leap away!

And so Kirishima, in his haste, did the only thing he could think of in that moment: he latched himself onto All Might's right arm as he took off.

"Whoa! What the heck, young man?!" All Might yelled in midair, the sudden weight of Kirishima throwing off his leap ever-so slightly. The boy had activated his Hardening Quirk in his fright; rough, sharpened fingers dug into All Might's bicep, but caused no real damage or pain to the man.

This is déjà vu all over again...! All Might thought as he redirected his fall toward the tallest nearby rooftop. He slid to a halt as he landed, with Kirishima releasing his grip and rolling to an uncomfortable stop. The boy was up to his feet before All Might could even inquire about any possible injuries from the tumble.

"That was incredibly reckless, my boy!" All Might said, admonishing the boy for latching onto him just as Midoriya had not even a week ago.

"I'm sorry, All Might!" Kirishima wheezed, trying to catch his breath. "You were about to leave, and I just...couldn't let this opportunity go to waste!" Kirishima shuddered, wondering which questions he wanted to ask All Might first. "I have things I need to ask you!"

This really is déjà vu! All Might thought, stiffening up as he struggled to maintain his buff form for as long as possible. He couldn't possibly ask more than a single question in his condition!

"Alright, but we must make this quick, my lad!" All Might conceded a little stiffly. "I can answer a single question before I have to return to my duties!"

A single question, huh? Kirishima's mind was racing with what he should prioritize. I have so many, but if I have to pick only one...!

"Just answer me this, All Might!" Kirishima pleaded. "Can a coward...become a hero!?"

All Might instantly heaved a deluge of blood and deflated in a puff of smoke.

Toshinori had managed to successfully keep the truth regarding One For All to himself and an extremely small cadre of allies and friends for decades. Hell, far more people knew about the existence of magic than knew of the truth behind All Might! And yet, Toshinori was beginning to suspect that just as his Quirk's power output began a steady decline since his and Doctor Strange's climactic battle against the dreaded All For One, so too was he losing the ability to properly keep a secret.

He promptly dropped his shirt, putting the horribly crippling scars that he'd received from that fateful day back under concealment. He'd told the same story that Young Midoriya had heard—powerful villain, six years ago, not reported by the media—to Young Kirishima, as the boy had introduced himself formally.
The boy looked frankly stunned, and not necessarily in the same way Midoriya had been when he learned the truth. Would this young man's perception of him change with this newfound knowledge...?

"All Might..." Kirishima murmured. "That's...so incredibly manly!"

It would seem not, Toshinori breathed a huge sigh of relief. That would make ensuring his secret being kept safe much less of a hassle.

"Uh, Young Kirishima," Toshinori said, trying to calm the youth. "You promise to keep this revelation about me a secret, correct?"

"Huh?" Kirishima paused his fist-pumping and blinked for a moment before nodding furiously. "You bet, All Might! A real man always keeps his secrets! Just like a real man powers on through insurmountable odds to continue his heroics like you do! You have the manliest spirit of them all!"

"That's a relief," Toshinori muttered, sweatdropping at Kirishima's emphasis on manliness. "Now, about your question: why would you ask if a coward could be a hero?"

The exuberance exuded by the young man instantly withered away, replaced by a virtual maelstrom of emotions, chief of which seemed to be regret, guilt, and doubt. Without warning, the boy seemed to break down, spilling to Toshinori an intriguing story of perceived cowardice and dullness. Kirishima had spared no detail: he spoke of the bullies that thought him too dull to even take the incident with the villain terrorizing Ashido's friends and him unable to assist whatsoever, and his years of admiration of the hero Crimson Riot and his creed of the manly spirit.

Ah... Toshinori thought as everything soon clocked together for him. The boy was assuredly referring to himself...

"All Might, I can't tell you how much I want to become a hero," Kirishima said, concluding his tale of struggle. "But even after all the thought I've put into Crimson Riot's words, and even after what I did today, I just can't seem to know if it'll ever be enough to wash away my past gutlessness! So I need to know, after telling you everything, is it too late for me? Or can I still become a hero in spite of the things I've done, or rather, not done?"

"Crimson Riot, eh?" Toshinori spoke after several moments of terse silence. "That explains your earlier talk of manliness. You picked a fine man to look up to, Young Kirishima. Crimson Riot is indeed as noble as he portrays himself as. He is a man filled with—but not hindered by—fear, as am I."

Kirishima blinked in surprise. All Might, filled with fear? "There's no way...!" Kirishima jumped a little as he realized he spoke that last bit out loud.

Toshinori chuckled at that. "Tell me, Young Kirishima: why do you think All Might is always smiling, whether it's while saving people, fighting villains, or just posing for a crowd?"

"Why are you always smiling...?" Kirishima crossed his arms, thinking about it long and hard. He thought about, first and foremost, the relief he and the girl felt when All Might first arrived to save them from that thug. Just seeing that infectious smile that All Might always bore made victory and safety seem like a guarantee. "You smile...to help put the people's hearts and minds at ease, right?"

Again, Toshinori chuckled. "You are half-right," He said. "But another important reason behind my smiling is this: I smile to trick the fear inside of myself."

Kirishima stammered aloud, flabbergasted. So All Might wasn't exaggerating when he admitted to
harboring feelings of fear after all? It suddenly clicked to him: All Might's smile was essentially his way of displaying his manly spirit. It was All Might's method of following through with his own decision to be the Symbol of Peace that he believed society needed. His smile helped fuel his heroic persona and deeds just as Crimson Riot's reckless and headstrong nature helped fuel his.

"And what I fear now is that you are being far too harsh on yourself, Young Kirishima," All Might pointed at the boy. "When you asked if a coward could be a hero, you were really asking if you could become one; yet the actions I witnessed of you earlier today do not paint the portrait of what you claim to be."

"But that was literally the first time in a long while, especially since the incident I told you about!" Kirishima rebuked. "It's just been a constant struggle, and now I wonder if I'll be able to dredge up that kind of resolve the next time I need to, or if I'll freeze like before! How can I prove myself worthy of becoming a hero if I can't get over this single, simple struggle?"

"And since when is it bad to struggle, Young Kirishima?" All Might said, standing up and dusting off his pants. "To struggle is one of the most important essences of being a hero. It is proof that you still have something to learn, that you can continue to grow. The struggle you refer to may be simple, but it is by no means insignificant: it is something all heroes deal with, myself included, in one manner or another."

"What was it Crimson Riot said about the manly spirit?" All Might continued. "Making a decision and following through with it no matter what? Young Kirishima, when you make the decision to become a hero, you also make the decision to engage in the very struggle you believe needs to be completely resolved every day of your life. It is that continued struggle—not its resolution—that will define you as a hero, and also a man."

Toshinori paused to see how Kirishima was reacting to his words. He smiled—the young lad's confusion seemed to wither as he reflected on what was said. Toshinori knew then that his words were ringing true. The boy was truly something special after all, someone worth cultivating even. That just left one more thing...

"Young Kirishima," Toshinori spoke up, catching the young man's attention. "Tell me: what exactly were you thinking when you stepped forward to defend that girl?"

"What was I thinking?" Again Kirishima paused to try and remember. "During the very beginning, I remember sort of yelling at myself to get through the indecision. But after that, I just went...blank? I guess I wasn't thinking at all; I just kept rushing the villain to try and protect that girl he was tormenting. Not very smart of me I guess—"

"Good."

"Huh?" Kirishima glanced up and saw a very pleased grin on the hero's face. "Good? Me just running in without thinking?"

"Indeed," Toshinori nodded. "I told you that the struggle you mentioned was an important essence of being a hero, but another grander and nobler essence is self-sacrifice! To risk one's life for the lives of others! To move without thinking in order to save those in need! Such is the mark of a true hero-in-the-making! And with your answer...I've now decided."

"Decided what?" Kirishima asked.

Toshinori approached Kirishima with a steady stride, eyes sunken but brimming with purpose. He stopped directly before the boy, who was now looking up at him expectantly. He raised his hands
and placed them firmly on the young man's shoulders.

"Young Kirishima...to answer your initial question: no, I do not believe cowards can be heroes. But I
more than believe you can be one. And I also believe you are more than worthy to inherit my power
and become my successor!" All Might proclaimed to his stunned candidate.

"...What?" Kirishima asked in what was barely a whisper, though Toshinori seemed to hear it all the
same. "Inherit? Successor?"

"Of course, this is entirely your decision, my boy," All Might continued.

"I...I accept! Holy crap, yes, I accept!" Kirishima cried out, shaking in disbelief.

"Good, good!" Toshinori replied. "Now allow me to tell you a little about my power: One For All...

That's right...I've been training my ass off these past eleven months, trying to make myself as worthy
as All Might believes I am! Kirishima thought as he recovered from the recoil of his first punch
against Midoriya's shield. The impact had sent them both flying, though he seemed quicker on the
recovery. He wasted no time in rushing right back towards Midoriya; he wouldn't give him any time
to weave that weird energy Quirk of his around if he had anything to say about it! Midoriya! You've
got a manly spirit, I can tell! And I've decided that defeating you will be the next big step in further
cultivating my own manly spirit!

"Sorry, Midoriya!" Kirishima yelled. "All Might told us to prepare our defenses, but I've always
thought that a great offense makes for an even greater defense!"

Kirishima drew his fist back, sharply hardening it as he prepared to deliver a devastating Red
Counter after tanking whatever attack Midoriya had up his tunic. Well, that was the plan he had in
mind, had Midoriya not been suddenly jerked into the air, narrowly passing over his attack and
allowing him to careen into the wall like a simpleminded bull.

"I know from watching you up close at the Entrance Exam, Midoriya! You showed off your
impressive manliness back then!" Kirishima exclaimed as he yanked his arm out of the wall. He
turned to see Midoriya levitating down toward the floor, green cloak fluttering all the while. "I hope
that display wasn't a one-off!"

Midoriya had opened a portal leading directly to the other end of the hall they were fighting in,
causing Kirishima to ram into the surface with his quick thinking. But Kirishima knew his opponent
couldn't sustain that kind of strategy in this environment; closed quarters was a weakness he'd
guessed, much like how Tokoyami possessed little physical strength himself beyond Dark Shadow's
power.

Midoriya should be at a disadvantage...but he showed no indication that he intended to flee or fall
back to the central, more open rooms of the building, waiting for Kirishima to make the first move.
His face showed no sign of frustration, exhaustion, or resignation.

"You know, this Battle Trial is almost like a battle between men!" Kirishima said, readying for
another charge. "Do you intend to run and find Aoyama or stay and fight me?"
Letting loose an emboldened yell, Kirishima kicked off from where he stood, adding small leaps into his rush in order to anticipate another portal, though it seemed Midoriya had more surprises to show him.

Midoriya matched Kirishima with a sprint of his own, except when he kicked off the ground, he stayed off the ground: glowing footholds seemed to emanate from beneath his taupe green boots, sustaining him in midair as he leaped forward. They appeared functionally similar to the giant barrier Kirishima had used as a foothold back during the Entrance Exam as a launching point against the 0-pointer, only much smaller.

One of Midoriya's soles landed right above Kirishima's arm as they passed each other. The dazzling and intricate foothold sizzled away as the bottom of the boot lifted off, coating his hardened arm in a shower of fading embers, and leaving a residue of ethereal warmth in its wake. Midoriya landed and slid to a halt just as Kirishima did; both were once again facing each other from opposite ends of the hall.

"Our intention was to originally stick together," Midoriya spoke, referring to himself and Aoyama, who had vanished when Kirishima threw his first punch. "Just as we thought you would stick with Tokoyami, since your physical prowess complemented what he lacks, though I guess we were mistaken."

"So what are you gonna do?" Kirishima asked with a knowing grin.

"I've already decided!" Midoriya exclaimed as the vermilion wrappings constituting his vambraces seemed to inexplicably unravel. The ends of the reddened bands seemed to hover and undulate off Midoriya's arms, like textile snakes rearing to strike out. Kirishima thought they looked similar to Aizawa-sensei's capturing weapon, and yet...whatever Midoriya was now using seemed to be unique and distinct in ways he couldn't quite pinpoint yet. "You may not understand, Kirishima, but I feel like I have a lot to prove now that I'm here! Not just to you, All Might, and the rest of the class, but also to myself! So that's why I've decided, I'll prove myself not simply by fighting, but by winning this match, too!"

_Nah, Midoriya, I understand completely...!_ Kirishima thought, grinning ear to ear at his opponent's declaration. _And I'm only getting more and more pumped up! Let's decide this match, man to man!_
Izuku kept a vigilant gaze on Kirishima as the vermilion bindings constituting his vambraces unraveled. Izuku, like Kirishima, initially thought they bore a resemblance that was similar—too similar, in fact—to Aizawa's capturing weapon. That was before his sensei ran him through the finer points of one of his newest relics he'd been ordered to focus on before U.A classes officially began. Izuku recalled clearly the hasty summons he'd received from Strange so soon after the Brigand incident, and his rise to the rank of Disciple...

"Sensei?" Izuku called out for his teacher as he stepped through a portal leading into the Sanctum foyer. His voice contained a strong hint of panic and worry; why was he called here only a few days after the battle with Brigand? Was his sensei's health regressing? "You called?"

"I did indeed, Izuku," Strange responded to his student as he descended the grand staircase with slow, careful steps. His tunic was slightly unraveled, and the clean bandages covering his torso where the bullets hit were clearly visible.

"It's only been a few days; don't feel like you have to get out of bed, sensei!" Izuku worriedly chided his teacher.

"Wong said the same thing," Strange chuckled. "Unfortunately, neither of us have the luxury of time on our side in light of recent events. With my wounds, and your ascension to Disciple, we need to square away the issue of your remaining training in the few weeks between now and when you begin classes at U.A."

"Oh..." Izuku hadn't foreseen this conversation. But how could he have? Just a few days ago, both their lives were in dire jeopardy from the wily Brigand. He'd been too ecstatic over his master's survival to ponder the consequences of becoming a Disciple.

"Oh! Are you going to teach me extra-dimensional magic spells!?" Izuku exclaimed excitedly. He recalled Strange saying that such spells—like his Crimson Bands of Cyttorak—would only be taught to him once he became a Disciple under his tutelage. Was the time finally here...?

"No," Strange said simply, causing Izuku to falter in disappointment. "My presence will be necessary for your beginning forays into drawing power from extra-dimensional entities, and as you can see, I am no condition to supervise such strenuous activities. Until I have fully recovered, such lessons will be put on hiatus."

"Then...what kind of training do you have in mind for me?" Izuku asked curiously. Sure, he was still disappointed that he wouldn't learn the Crimson Bands yet, but he still knew his sensei had alternative lessons planned in advance.

"These," Strange said with a wave of his hands. Two clouds of smoke materialized above his hands, dispersing to reveal two peculiar objects: a pair of taupe-colored boots and a red fabric of sorts,
unraveled and spun into a wild heap. "Additional relics that will complement your hero costume quite nicely."

"Additional...relics?" Izuku asked, approaching Strange so as to get a better look. "Should I not focus on ironing out my coordination with my cloak first?"

"Ah, ah, ah," Strange said with a wag of his finger. "Remember what I told you, Izuku: a jack of all trades—a master of none—"

"Is a far better deal than a master of one," Izuku finished the quote with a sigh; it was something Strange had said so many times he’d had it memorized for months.

Strange smiled, seemingly happy his disciple was on the same page. "The purpose of these relics are to bolster you in areas you are weak in, Izuku."

The topic of weaknesses and areas of lacking were more than enough to cause Izuku's ears to perk. Flaws and shortcomings were things he was good at factoring in when analyzing Quirks, and he'd engaged in introspection on more than one occasion. Izuku was interested to know what his sensei's observations on the matter were, and how these relics could improve his performance.

"Your two biggest weaknesses are problems that many a sorcerer have trouble circumventing: mobility and multitasking," Strange explained. "I'm sure you've noticed throughout your training and battles that performing more than one spell at a time is difficult—if not usually impossible—for someone of your level. When sorcerers have a large array of spells at their disposal, it can sometimes be a daunting task to decide which spell to cast at any given moment. Precious amounts of time can be lost when committing to a spell, then deciding mid-cast to switch to another more suitable one, if you have time to switch spells at all."

Izuku crossed his arms as he mused over his sensei's words. This was indeed a problem he'd noticed before. In fact, he'd encountered it during the Entrance Exam: he'd committed to using a barrier against the 0-pointer, and in doing so prevented himself from utilizing a portal to get the trapped practitioners out from behind the rubble. If that Kirishima guy hadn't been there...

"You have also surely recognized the lack of mobility you display when weaving spells as well?" Strange continued. "Casting spells—barriers, portals, bindings, bolts, etc.—is difficult to do while constantly on the move. Your Cloak of Levitation removes this burden somewhat, allowing you to employ limited flight while you focus on using your hands."

"And these two new relics will help minimize these problems?" Izuku asked.

"Indeed. The ones I've selected—the Vaulting Boots of Valtorr and the Vermilion Vambraces of Vexation—will mitigate your current deficiencies and grant you additional possibilities in combat."

Izuku suppressed a chortle; it seemed few relics in Strange's possession carried mundane names on par with the Cloak of Levitation.

"Your training between now and the beginning of classes will be to learn the basics behind these two relics," Strange continued. "Remember, we employ relics to take the strain of energies our bodies could otherwise not. In combat, their role is similar: by wielding relics properly you grant yourself greater versatility in the heat of battle, freeing your hands to cast more pertinent spells while having your items perform more mundane functions."

"I'll begin immediately, but I have a request, sensei!" Izuku said.

"Oh?" Strange asked, raising an eyebrow. "And what request would that be?"
"You see, there's a certain book I've wanted to study for quite awhile..."

"Pull out all the tricks you want, Midoriya! I'll smash through them all!" Kirishima yelled as he charged forward, fist geared for a powerful haymaker.

He didn't get very far when the red bindings that had unraveled from Midoriya's arm shot forward, latching onto his wrists and forearms. Kirishima slid to a halt and tried yanking the fabric off his arms, but found they had adhered firmly to his body, and no amount of tugging and pulling was budging them.

_W-what the hell!?_ Kirishima thought as he tried ripping the fabric off through sheer force. _It's sticking to my arm! Is it using an adhesive like Sero's tape?_

A hard tugging motion snapped Kirishima out of his thoughts, and he soon found himself being swung back and forth between the walls repeatedly. His head and shoulders were banging against concrete none too gently, disorienting him until he planted his unbound, hardened feet on the floor to halt Midoriya's attack. He caught a glimpse of Midoriya's arms, shocked that his opponent's hands were free—the bindings were adhered to his forearms, too.

_I don't know how you're using this cloth, Midoriya, but you don't use your hands like Aizawa-sensei does for his capturing weapon!_ Kirishima thought as he resisted further tugging. _Just what kind of support tech are you using!?_

As Izuku had discovered through his final weeks of pre-U.A training, the Vermilion Vambraces and the Vaulting Boots of Valtorr made for quite a potential combo. The vambraces weren't entirely controlled and manually directed like Aizawa-sensei's binding cloth; as Izuku learned, the vermilion bindings would instead instantly latch onto the nearest source of energy outside the user's own body that was within its range.

And, thanks to the Vaulting Boots, the greatest immediate source of energy other than Izuku was now Kirishima's own body. The boots projected footholds made of energy beneath his soles, similar in structure to his barriers. And when he leaped over Kirishima's body using the boots, the energy dissipated thereafter, raining down on Kirishima's arms and marking them as the nearest targets for his vambraces.

And the best thing about this relic combo? It left his hands completely free to cast whatever spell at his disposal that he so desired, something that he would make sure to take advantage of.

Izuku brought his fingertips together and slowly pulled them apart, bright, sizzling threads of energy sparking between them. Tugging Kirishima to a still, Izuku shot his newly conjured eldritch whips toward his legs, further restricting him. Izuku almost looked like a puppeteer of sorts, with red bindings spanning from his arms to Kirishima's and glowing string-like energies emerging from his fingertips to ensnare his opponent further. He gave another yank, trying to bring Kirishima to the floor; if he accomplished that, he could get to work fully incapacitating his foe, thus removing him from the match entirely.

Once Kirishima had his feet planted, however, Izuku realized the folly of his plan.

Kirishima loudly groaned through gritted teeth as he resisted the incessant tugging of the bindings. Even with the fiery threads wrapped around his knees, he refused to give in, hardening his legs to keep himself anchored where he stood.

Deciding that struggling against the bindings would be useless for now, Kirishima instead
determined to use them to his advantage. He quickly secured the red cloth against his arm by rotating his arms around them before grabbing hold of the fabric with his hands. Once his arms stiffened with hardening, Kirishima gave Izuku a yank of his own, his superior physical strength becoming readily apparent as the green-haired boy came flying forward.

"Red...Counter!" Kirishima yelled as he crashed his hardened fist straight into a thoroughly stunned Izuku's abdomen, knocking both the wind and saliva out of his mouth. The strings entangling his legs instantly dissipated, allowing Kirishima to follow up with a vicious knee to the gut.

*I have to do my best not to use One For All against either him or Aoyama directly,* Kirishima thought. *A one hundred percent attack could kill either of them!*

The vambraces suddenly tightened as Kirishima tried to raise his fists into the air. Their adhesiveness didn't fade like the other threads, keeping the two of them locked together in close quarter grappling. Kirishima's physical strength far surpassed Midoriya's, but that cloak of his seemed to be adding some kind of propellant force that kept him from being completely overpowered. Kirishima elbowed and kneed Midoriya whenever he could, and Midoriya returned his own blows, but they remained bound together by those crafty vermilion bindings.

"N-not bad, Kirishima," Izuku coughed out as both of them were lifted haphazardly into the air by his green Cloak of Levitation, wobbling back and forth from the extra weight. "But don't think I'm out of this just yet!"

The cloak began fluttering and both boys went flying as they traded opportunistic blows. Izuku directed their wild, erratic fight-and-flight toward the nearest wall, taking advantage of Kirishima's Hardening Quirk to crash right through wood, plaster, and insulation, allowing their struggling to continue all throughout the second floor of the building.

Appearsances were important to Aoyama. In fact, other than his costume design, Aoyama spent more time working on poses, fashion accessories, and his accent than any other activity in preparation for U.A. His closed smile, vain demeanor, and his prince-like face were all necessary, in his mind, for his studies at U.A. He *had* to show his new classmates that someone like him belonged in the Hero Course. He *needed* them to see his faux attitude and believe that he belonged there.

Because if they believed it...maybe he would, too. Maybe, for once, he could see himself as what he hoped others would seem him as: normal, for want of becoming a hero with a seemingly powerful Quirk, or perhaps even better than normal.

But when Midoriya's barrier shattered from the force of Kirishima's punch, all of Aoyama's vanity and bravado shattered with it. His teammate's warning had given him only barely enough time to react as shards of dissolving energy rained down on his armor and cape, briefly blinding his visor. Aoyama dropped to the floor just in the nick of time: Midoriya went sailing over him, toward the end of the hall. Kirishima experienced a similar knockback and sailed backwards.

Fight-or-flight alarms were instantly ringing in Aoyama's mind, and he chose flight without a second thought. He swiftly scurried away on his hands and knees around the corner just past where Izuku had landed before either of them could fully recover. Once he was out of their sights, Aoyama picked himself up and ran mindlessly on autopilot through twisting, dimly lit halls and past stairwells leading above and below.

Aoyama paused before a random stairwell to catch his breath before getting spooked by a series of low rumbles echoing through the halls, causing him to sprint up the stairs to the third floor, which was quiet and still compared to the conflict raging below. His thoughts returned to him as his panic
subsided and his gait slowed to a halt.

_Aright, we should probably try to stay together as much as possible_, Aoyama recalled the rudimentary plan Midoriya had outlined before they became hung up on the specifics of their infiltration. _Tokoyami possesses a strong, versatile Quirk in Dark Shadow, but is notably lacking physically. Kirishima, on the other hand, is far more physically durable than any of us. I think he'll stay close by Tokoyami, so they can best play off each other's strengths. We should do the same. Your Navel Laser against Dark Shadow and my, er, Energy Reign against Kirishima should give us the edge we need to capture them or reach the bomb!_

Guilt briefly pricked at Aoyama's mind at how quickly his facade was dropped in favor of running away the moment Kirishima got the drop on them. Another rumble from the floor below, stronger and louder, jolted Aoyama, this time out of his legitimate doubt and back into the farce that was his vanity.

_Je suis désolé, Midoriya!_ Aoyama thought as he ascended the stairwell once more, approaching all the way to the fifth, top floor. _Judging by all that rumbling below, I'm assuming you are right that Kirishima and Tokoyami are indeed fighting together, hoping to end the match quickly through brute force!_

And _if that's the case, the bomb should be unguarded as far from the fighting as it can possibly be!_ Aoyama continued with his logic as he traipsed down the dark halls of the fifth floor, guided only by the slightest glimmers of light peaking through shuttered windows. _While you valiantly hold them off, I shall secure an easy, sparkling victory for Team Fabulous!_

Aoyama followed the flitting specks of light leaking through the covered windows, going down the hall until he emerged into a spaciously open room. A large wall of rubble and debris encircled the room's interior, keeping the areas closest to the walls cloaked in shadow. There, in the room's illuminated center, stood the towering form of the bomb Team Fabulous had to secure. The ceiling above it had been completely blown apart, allowing sunlight to flood into the area surrounded by rubble. Aoyama briefly remembered the large explosion he and Midoriya had witnessed coming from the top of the building before All Might began their Trial. It seemed Kirishima and Tokoyami blew the ceiling open and lined the resulting debris to form a ring around the bomb, but for what purpose?

Aoyama stood by contemplatively for but a moment before tossing all caution to the wind, intending on seizing an immediate victory with a simple touch of the bomb. He gallivanted toward the illuminated object when a frighteningly familiar mass of writhing and simmering shadow snaked its way through a gap in the rubble, crashing its claws toward Aoyama. Only be quickly stumbling back did Aoyama avoid a direct hit.

"Ah...so you've come after all, Dazzling Hero of the Light," Tokoyami's hauntingly derisive voice echoed from somewhere behind the wall of rubble. Dark Shadow lifted itself into the air, flexing its intimidating claws before a trembling Aoyama. "Welcome...to your tomb."

The Team Fabulous 'leader' had been dead wrong. Tokoyami and Kirishima hadn't remained together as he was hoping. Any chance of a quick and easy victory, without fighting, had been dashed upon the very rocks surrounding Aoyama.

Shaking in fear, Aoyama instinctively raised his arms behind his head and fired a laser toward Dark Shadow. The beast, however, ducked and retreated, slithering back into the gaps of the hastily constructed barrier and into the protective darkness behind it. The laser zoomed upward, narrowly missing the tip of the bomb as it soared harmlessly into the open sky, dissipating a fair distance away.
Aoyama gulped at the folly of his actions: he'd just very nearly cost his team victory by destroying the bomb they were supposed to secure, something Tokoyami and Dark Shadow were clearly trying to goad him into doing. Quickly deciding on retreat once again, Aoyama turned tail to flee the room, but a sizable chunk of ceiling soon crashed down in front of the doorway, blocking his exit.

Nothing another blast of Navel Laser could fix, or so Aoyama thought: just as he prepared to fire a straight shot through his newest obstacle, he became keenly aware of a darkening shadow directly over his head. Whipping back around and glancing up, Aoyama saw Dark Shadow above him, carrying a gargantuan pile of rubble with both its claws.

Aoyama bucked his hips and fired another laser, this time striking Dark Shadow’s wrists. The shadow beast cried out before retreating back behind the wall of debris, where Tokoyami was surely and safely watching everything unfold from. The laser, much to Aoyama's dismay, also forced Dark Shadow to release the bundle of rocks it was clutching, causing it to rain rubble all around where he stood, further restricting the openness of the encircled space.

"Surely you realize how unmatched you are, hero?" Tokoyami called out as Aoyama scurried behind one of the rocks that had fallen nearby. The sound of shuffling rubble echoed from multiple points behind the barrier Tokoyami and Kirishima constructed from the ceiling debris, muffling his footsteps. "Us villains of Team B made sure to take your irksome illumination powers into deep consideration. As per our teacher's instructions, we had to be extra careful when erecting our defenses: any damage to the bomb, and we would've been instantly disqualified. But our preparations have paid off, and our buffer of rubbish—shielding myself and keeping Dark Shadow on a veritable leash with the central sunlight—will make for a fine hero’s sepulcher. Which of these rocks will make for your tombstone, I wonder?"

Tokoyami was clearly hamming up a villain performance for his role in the Battle Trial, but it was more than enough to unnerv Aoyama deeply. He stayed crouched behind a large enough piece of detritus to remain hidden, legs brought to his chest and hands held over his head as he cowered, silent and still. He nearly jolted out of hiding as Dark Shadow rushed by in a whooshing motion, clawing its way through a nearby boulder as it hunted for him.

What could he do now? His Quirk—something he had no great love for—had been used against himself twice now, by an opponent he was supposed to have an inherent advantage over, no less! Jump out from his hiding spot, and he'll expose himself to Dark Shadow. Fire a laser through the rubble, and he'll expose himself to Dark Shadow! Sit still and do nothing...well, Dark Shadow would still find him eventually. The more he ran his options, the more stacked the desk seemed against him.

Merde! Aoyama swore to himself, his frustration bleeding through his prideful face for once. Even when put up against something I should be superior to, me and my Quirk are still just...defective! Useless! The sparkling Aoyama proves to be lackluster once again...

Normal. Better than normal. Better than defective. That was all Aoyama desired, deep down. And what could be more normal than a boy with a powerful and highly destructive Quirk training and aiming to become a Pro Hero? Wouldn't that be enough to make people look at him like a normal person and not a walking time bomb? Wouldn't that be enough to get people to be friends with him for once? Wouldn't that be enough to make his family beam with pride instead of frown with worry?

Papa? Mama? Why am I...so different from everyone else? He recalled his painful childhood pleas. Why does this hurt so much? Why can't I be normal?

What can I do in this situation, with a Quirk like mine? Aoyama thought, clutching his head. What can I do!?
Aoyama's answer came in the form of Midoriya and Kirishima suddenly crashing through the floor with a yell, bobbing and weaving in midair much to his shock and Dark Shadow's. With a pained groan, Kirishima finally managed to wrest his forearms off of the vermilion bindings that had kept them locked together for far longer than he was comfortable with.

As the bindings rewrapped around Midoriya's arms—reforming his cloth vambraces—he unclasped his green cloak and sent it hurtling at Kirishima, who was still in midair from their separation. Kirishima let out a muffled yell as the cloak wrapped itself around his head and upper torso, leaving him an incapacitated and flailing mass of hardened limbs that tried desperately to pry the surprisingly sturdy cloak off his head.

Izuku landed on his feet and stumbled to a knee right as Tokoyami leaped out from behind the rubble wall, presumably to aid Kirishima from his new predicament.

"Dark Shadow!" Tokoyami exclaimed, directing Dark Shadow toward Midoriya as he landed beside the flailing Kirishima.

"Come forth, Whips of Vastha!" Izuku muttered as he connected and drew apart his fingertips once more, conjuring fiery whips from each of his fingers. He lashed his newly constructed weapons forward, striking Dark Shadow directly on its shadowy beak. The light of the whips was enough to halt the sentient Quirk's advance, but was insufficient in weakening it significantly. Dark Shadow pounded its fists into the floor, kicking up clouds of dust as it shook off the pain of Izuku's attack.

"Dark Shadow! Return to me!" Tokoyami called to his partner as Izuku leaped backward into the cloud of dust for concealment and reprieve.

"Protect the bomb!" Tokoyami further instructed as he attempted to tug Kirishima out of the cloak's constrictive grip. As Tokoyami attended to his ally, Dark Shadow dutifully but carefully wrapped itself around the papier-mâché bomb, keeping a lookout for Midoriya or Aoyama.

Izuku peeked from behind the large chunk of ceiling he'd ducked behind, biting his lip. With Dark Shadow coiled around the bomb, victory would not be as easy as merely opening a portal to it. And even if he tried opening a portal between himself and the bomb, doing so would only give Dark Shadow and Tokoyami another avenue of attack. Not only that, but Dark Shadow's speed is surely greater than the speed of his currently available incantations.

Tokoyami and Kirishima had taken both his and Aoyama's abilities into account and planned accordingly, it seemed. He was as much impressed as he was unnerved.

Speaking of Aoyama, where the heck was he? They were together at the very beginning until Kirishima attacked, and—

Izuku suddenly bumped into another hunched figure crouching beside him, and the both of them nearly jumped up in fright. Wait—was that...?

"Aoyama?" Izuku blinked rapidly to get the dust out of his eyes so he could see clearly. Fancily combed hair? Closed smile? Gallant costume and sparkling cape? Yep! Aoyama!

"I was wondering where you were! I was worried!" Izuku said under bated breath. "But now I see you just came straight for the bomb to end the match as quickly as possible! Good thinking! Sorry I couldn't keep Kirishima restrained or weaken Dark Shadow in any meaningful way. But now that we're together again, I'm sure we can come up with a finishing plan!"

Aoyama parted his lips, slightly breaking his strained, closed grin as he stared at Midoriya.
dumbfounded. He offered no reply at first, causing his teammate to fidget uncomfortably. He actually couldn't even believe what he was hearing: Midoriya had mistaken his sudden cowardice for quick thinking and was giving him praise for what essentially amounted to him abandoning a fellow teammate?

"Non," Aoyama softly rebuked after taking a nervous gulp. "You are mistaken, Midoriya."

"Huh?" Izuku blinked in surprise.

"I...didn't split off from you because I wanted to get to the bomb as quickly as possible. Not at first, anyway," Aoyama explained. "I panicked and ran away, leaving you to face Kirishima on your own."

Izuku gave Aoyama a look of bewilderment. He ran away? The one student of 1-A other than Kacchan who was openly prideful of themselves was admitting to running away?

"Tell me, Midoriya," Aoyama spoke softly. "Are you really a late bloomer in regards to your Quirk?"

If Izuku wasn't caught off guard before, he most certainly was now. "How do you...know that?" He asked. A fair enough question—it wasn't information he'd openly divulged to his classmates, with only Kacchan being privy to some details and Aizawa-sensei being privy to all of them.

"I overheard your conversation with Aizawa-sensei after his Quirk Test," Aoyama answered. "Or rather...I was eavesdropping out of curiosity."

Izuku stiffened. "What else did you hear?" He asked cautiously.

"That was all; I left right after hearing you first activated your Quirk last April," Aoyama said. "I...couldn't bear to hear anything past that."

"Why's that?"

"Because I became instantly jealous of you," Aoyama said, leaving Midoriya floored. "I was envious of the prowess you showed during the Quirk Test. You've only had your Quirk for a year, and yet you have so much more versatility and control over your power than I do my own. Compared to a defect like me...you're a prodigy, Midoriya."

"This defective power of mine, I've had it since childhood," Aoyama continued. "I couldn't control my navel lasers, and frequent blasts meant frequent stomachaches and recurring pain. And my belt doesn't control my power so much as it simply stops it from leaking out at random."

"This is why I'm here," Aoyama forced himself to look at Midoriya. "If I become a hero, I'll become something other than 'defective'. People will think I'm useful instead of a ticking menace! But our entire class will see me as useless now that I've cost Team Fabulous the match—"

"No," Izuku said.

"W-what?" Aoyama asked, blinking.

"You're wrong, Aoyama," Izuku said, placing his hands on Aoyama's shoulders. "You're not a defect, and I certainly don't consider myself a prodigy. I wish I could explain myself to you fully, but I completely understand what you're feeling."

Izuku slowly peeled off his fingerless gloves, letting Aoyama see his deeply etched scars in all their
glory, startling his partner in the process. "I know exactly what it's like to consider oneself a defect for years on end. But right now you have to trust me, as I trust you. Don't sparkle alone, Aoyama—trust the 'Team' in Team Fabulous!"

Aoyama's face twisted into a cross between bewilderment and weepiness. He hastily scrubbed away any tears that peeked out before placing his hands on Midoriya's.

"Alright! For Team Fabulous!" Aoyama said resolutely. "What's the plan, then?"

With one last mighty tug and grunt of irritation, Tokoyami finally managed to wrestle Midoriya's green levitating cloak off of Kirishima, who thanked him profusely. Tokoyami noted the cloak's durability—it withstood tearing even from Kirishima's Hardening—and somehow remained actively aggressive and noncompliant, even as he scrunched it up into a more manageable ball. It was a curious artifact, and he wondered how it was made, and from whom Midoriya acquired it from. Questions for later.

"D-did you have Dark Shadow locate Midoriya and Aoyama?" Kirishima asked as he caught his breath and bearings.

"Alas, I did not," Tokoyami said with a shake of his head. "I prioritized protecting the bomb with Dark Shadow while I personally assisted you, taking into account Midoriya's troublesome use of portals."

"Good thinking," Kirishima said. "Time should almost be up, so I'm not sure if we should remain on the defensive or not. All I know is they'll definitely try to separate us, so——"

Kirishima suddenly yelled as he lost his foothold, falling through a portal that sprang up right beneath his feet.

The yell simultaneously reached Tokoyami's ears from above and behind him. He whirled around and saw Kirishima slipping through the other end of the portal, out of one of the few remaining ceiling surfaces left. Tokoyami narrowed his eyes as the bright, flashing light of a Navel Laser struck Kirishima's hardened chest, blasting him through the ceiling and out of sight.

Several more laser blasts flew into the ceiling corners of the room in quick succession, reducing what remained of the roof to even more dust and debris. Tokoyami's eyes widened as sunlight poured into the fifth floor completely, eliminating all remaining shadows as rubble now littered his previously clear and protected safe zone.

Tokoyami's cover was now blasted asunder, leaving him stuck out in the open with both Aoyama and Midoriya. There were no more shadows for him to utilize for protection of his own body, and with the ceiling above the bomb already removed by Team B, there was no chance that such a maneuver by Team F would've resulted in an instant disqualification.

Team B's rubble-barrier plan had now backfired spectacularly.

"I was going to suggest staying defensive, but to hell with that now!" Kirishima yelled as he jumped back onto the fifth floor after being blasted outside of the building. "Let's settle this for good, Team F!"
Kirishima narrowed his focus on Midoriya, leaping toward him with both fists reared back to deliver crushing blows.

Izuku gave a low whistle, and his cloak promptly flew toward Kirishima, intercepting him and clasping onto his backside and shoulders instead of its owner's. The cloak threw Kirishima off course, flying in dizzying circles and ramming him through the debris wall they'd constructed as he tried fruitlessly to once again pull it off him.

"What the hell—urk!—kind of cloak is this!?” Kirishima exasperatedly yelled.

Tokoyami watched the chaos unfold as their carefully laid preparations came undone before his very eyes. He remained in a defensive posture, with Dark Shadow only slightly loosened from his coil around the bomb. He could send Dark Shadow after Kirishima to aid him, but that would leave the bomb undefended. Likewise, he could keep Dark Shadow firmly coiled around the bomb, but that would leave him utterly defenseless as he was already exposed in the open, with no more shadows to conceal himself with.

_Ultimately, the real threat is Midoriya_, Tokoyami reasoned. _I have to take him down as quickly as possible so he can't utilize anymore portals...!

"Dark Shadow!" Tokoyami called his sentient Quirk back to him, directing its glowing eyes toward its newest target: an isolated Midoriya. "Incapacitate that troublesome hero!" Dark Shadow reared back its head before twisting and slithering toward Midoriya with outstretched claws.

"Aoyama! Now!" Izuku shouted, unfazed by Dark Shadow's rapid approach.

"Tres bien!" Aoyama shouted as he placed his hands behind his head and angled his hips—straight at Izuku. He fired his shimmering laser directly at Izuku as Dark Shadow drew nearer.

_What!?_ Tokoyami thought, stunned. _He fired his laser at Midoriya! For what purpose!?

By the time Midoriya had his hands raised and rotating in a familiar motion, it was far too late for Tokoyami to shout any command to halt, slow, or redirect Dark Shadow's movement. The portal's entrance and exit opened right before Aoyama's laser struck Midoriya. The entrance appeared in front of Midoriya, and the exit...appeared directly above Dark Shadow's head. Aoyama's blinding Navel Laser drilled into its head, propelling it down into the floor as it screeched in agony. Tokoyami groaned as Dark Shadow's exhaustion crept into his own body, noticing that the laser wasn't short and brief like previous ones, but longer and sustained, pinning Dark Shadow's writhing head to the floor. Tokoyami dropped to his hands and knees, rendered powerless by the teamwork of Team Fabulous.

"A-Aoyama!" Izuku panted, raising his hands again as he put his full weight on Kirishima's backside. "Catch your breath and get ready! Tokoyami is down for the count, and I'm keeping Kirishima pinned! Once my final portal is open, dash through and touch the bomb!"

_The hell you will!_ Kirishima groaned to himself. _Midoriya! Just as you decided with your manly spirit that you would win, I decided the exact same thing with mine!_ Kirishima directed his fist at the floor and raised it, the raw power of One For All coursing through his hardened appendage. _I can't attack you with my full power directly, but that doesn't mean I can't use this power to win!_
"Tokoyami!" Kirishima yelled, snapping his partner out of his pained respite. "Dig deep and get ready!"

Tokoyami settled his gaze on the red glow of Kirishima's arm. He seemed to understand instantly and braced himself while Midoriya and Aoyama seemed confused.

This is my One For All: Red Counter! Kirishima mentally screamed as he unleashed his inherited power through the floor beneath him, instantly causing it to shatter and open up like a fissure.

Team Fabulous were caught completely off guard by Kirishima's sudden display of power. Aoyama hung onto the edge of the widening maw while Izuku was violently thrown off of Kirishima's backside and sent plummeting into the rift in the floor. The cloak removed itself from Kirishima as he also slipped through the widening hole, soaring to Izuku's aid.

As the cracks rapidly spread near the bomb, causing it to teeter, Tokoyami embraced Kirishima's words and dug deep within, drawing upon the last remnants of Dark Shadow's remaining stamina. Tiredly, Dark Shadow emerged from Tokoyami's torso and latched one gentle claw around the bomb, digging its other into the nearest wall, right as the rest of the floor gave way.

Tokoyami grimly surveyed the damage from Kirishima's attack as he and Dark Shadow helplessly dangled with the bomb. The damage was not restricted to just the fifth floor; Kirishima had punched through all five floors, leaving a sizeable crater impact on the first that was visible even through the cloud of kicked up dust.

What monstrous power... Tokoyami thought.

"Aoyama!"

The sparkling hero shot his eyes open as Midoriya's voice reached him. He was hanging onto one of the last edges of floor debris for dear life. He shakily peered down, seeing Midoriya trying to soar through the raining cloud of dust, dodging chunks of concrete flooring as he slowly ascended.

No such luck—a particularly hefty piece of flooring fell onto Midoriya's shoulders and backside, knocking him down until he disappeared into the dust.

"Midoriya...you saw fit to believe in me even after my display of cowardice! Aoyama thought as he let go from where he hung, quickly placing his hands above his head as he began falling. You never saw me as defective. You trusted me...so I'll trust myself, too! Because if I don't, how will I ever truly sparkle!?"

Aoyama twisted his body in midair, aiming his backside directly at Dark Shadow as he let loose one final laser blast. Aoyama was gritting painfully behind his closed smile; he could feel blood trickling from underneath his support belt, no doubt from his earlier sustained beam against Dark Shadow.
Tokoyami watched helplessly as Aoyama's body soared across the gaping pit from the knockback of his Navel Laser, directly into the arm Dark Shadow was using to hold onto the bomb. Aoyama reached out to grab the bomb with both hands as his backside slid down the length of Dark Shadow’s arm. Tokoyami sighed, resigning himself for defeat.

"Victory goes to the heroes of Team F, with only seconds to spare!" All Might's voice reverberated through their ear pieces. "Good thing too, I was almost ready to intervene...

"I've...reclaimed my sparkle, Midoriya..." Aoyama muttered weakly as exhaustion seized his body and mind fully now. His grip on the fake bomb loosened and he plummeted toward the ground as an alarmed Tokoyami failed to grab hold of him. Aoyama's eyes fluttered shut as a flash of green zipped past his face, gripping onto his shoulders and slowing his free fall to a halt.

When Aoyama wakes up he has to squint his eyes from what he thinks is brightness. When they finally adjust, he realizes it's just the whiteness of Recovery Girl's office. His body registers the comfy sensations of his pillow and mattress, and there is a peculiar tingling around his navel area.

As he sat up, he notices the diminutive form of Recovery Girl by his side. He parted his lips to speak, but she slips a lollipop into his mouth before any words can be uttered.

"I swear, men and their inability to show any sort of reasonable restraint..." Recovery Girl muttered. "At least now that you're awake, I can stop telling your friends to keep it down."

"Friends?" Aoyama blinked and looked over to his right. In the bed next to his laid Kirishima, his arm in a thickly wrapped cast and several gauzes plastered on his cheeks and forehead. In the next bed over laid Midoriya, who was less bandaged but still looked somewhat banged up. He was conversing idly with Tokoyami, who was seated stoically between him and Kirishima.

"You are awake," Tokoyami said plainly, without even turning toward Aoyama.

"Huh!?" Kirishima and Midoriya exclaimed together, tossing wild glances over at Aoyama's bed before erupting in grins. "Aoyama! You're awake!"

"On second thought, maybe I do have to shush you boys up again!" Recovery Girl sternly warned from her desk with a wave of her cane.

"Sorry, sorry...

"Excusez-moi," Aoyama groaned as his body languished under the tiring side-effects of Recovery Girl's Quirk. "What happened with the Battle Trials?"

"The last one just ended a little while ago," Midoriya said. "We just found out ourselves."

"Yeah, and Tokoyami and I lost royally at the last second," Kirishima said with a sigh. "You really pulled through in the end, Aoyama. You've got yourself a manly spirit, too!"

"I must admit, a pall of dread washed over my heart and mind as I witnessed our precautions dashed to ruins before my very eyes," Tokoyami said. "Still, there is no shame in admitting that Team Fabulous more than earned their victory today."

"And you all stuck around?" Aoyama asked. "Midoriya, you and Tokoyami look relatively patched up compared to Kirishima and I."

"Well, we thought it appropriate to wait for you to wake up!" Midoriya said sheepishly. "Wouldn't
have felt right to just leave you behind, you know?"

"Indeed," Tokoyami said, nodding solemnly. "Uraraka asked us to accompany her back to the classroom, but we declined—you had not yet regained consciousness."

"No way I'd leave you all by your lonesome after trading blows with you like that!" Kirishima said emphatically. "Fighting man-to-man on the battlefield like that, we're practically friends, dude!"

Aoyama stared at his three classmates incredulously. Friends? They...consider me their friend?

"Aoyama..." Midoriya said softly, his eyes and lips taut with a strained seriousness. "Do you...feel differently now that the Battle Trial is over?"

Aoyama's closed smile soon flipped into a closed frown as he looked down toward his sheets. Midoriya was assuredly referring to his belief that he was a 'defect' compared to nearly everyone else around him.

"I don't know," Aoyama answered. "Back there, fighting alongside you and actually trusting myself just as you did, was the first time in a long while where I felt I could be something other than a defect. It's been a constant struggle of mine for so many years, I don't know if one time could possibly be enough—"

"It's not bad to struggle, Aoyama," Kirishima suddenly spoke up. "That's what someone once told me, anyway. They told me that struggling is one of the most important essences to being a hero. It's proof that you can continue to learn and grow."

"I concur," Tokoyami added, turning his head toward Aoyama. "And I, too, can empathize with the thought that you are somehow inherently 'lesser' for possessing a less than enjoyable Quirk. Like you, I have struggled to coexist with my Quirk since my childhood years, and the possibility of losing control and harming myself or those around me weighs heavily on my mind, as it does for yours as well, I imagine."

"My desire for normality soon transformed into a desire to prove everyone's doubts—even my own—wrong: to become a hero, a defender of light who is perpetually cloaked in iniquitous shadow," Tokoyami continued. "The intensely radiant light that is our society's sense of Justice will deepen the shadow I dwell in, empowering me further to defend the world's light. Such is my struggle."

Midoriya looked as if he wanted to join in with his own anecdote, but held back with a small frown. Aoyama stared at Midoriya curiously; was something causing him to hold back?

Aoyama recalled the brief words shared to him before they launched into the climax of their Battle Trial: "I wish I could explain myself to you fully, but I completely understand what you're feeling."

Aoyama wished to hear how Midoriya could understand his feelings so well, but he settled with the knowledge that his teammate had been telling the truth, regardless of his story. It fascinated Aoyama, the bonds of struggle that allowed the four of them to relate with and understand one another so easily.

Is this what having friends is like? Aoyama wondered.

"If I may, I would like to make a proposal and a toast," Aoyama announced, holding his lollipop into the air. This caught the others' attention. Midoriya grinned and slid out of bed to retrieve several more lollipops from Recovery Girl, who had been sitting quietly by her desk, listening intently to the boys' talk of struggle. Midoriya offered one each to both Tokoyami and Kirishima, who accepted them readily, even though the former seemed skeptical.
"Should all involved parties be willing, I would like to induct our former opponents of Team B into Team Fabulous," Aoyama said. "And I further propose rebranding Team Fabulous into...Team Defect."

"Team Defect, huh?" Kirishima said with a wily grin. "A team of strugglers, perhaps?"

"A team of people bonded by their struggles," Midoriya added.

"...This is silly," Tokoyami muttered quietly.

"C'mon, Tokoyami, you're smiling!" Kirishima said, pointing at Tokoyami's beak with his unwrapped hand. True enough, the corners of his typically stoic frown were pointed up instead of down. "You're embracing the camaraderie!"

"Indeed I am. And I hate it."

"So we're all in accord then?" Midoriya said with a grin, raising his lollipop alongside Aoyama's. "To Team Defect!"

"May our unmanly enemies forever underestimate us!" Kirishima joined in.

"May our unremitting struggles not be in vain," Tokoyami added.

"And may we continue to sparkle, regardless of how others perceive our shine," Aoyama finished, popping the candy into his mouth.

The other three followed suit, sucking on the hard candy for but a moment before throwing glances at each other and erupting into a fit of laughter. Tokoyami was right—Aoyama's proposal was truly silly, but that didn't make it any less significant in any of their eyes.
In the day following 1-A’s Battle Trials, the hero class decides on a class rep to lead them. Shocked by the level of trust he appears to have accumulated since the Entrance Exam, Izuku rises to the occasion, determined to show he’s earned said trust during a crisis that unfolds during lunch. A trip to the school's Development Studio afterwards brings Izuku in contact with Mei Hatsume once more, just as unforeseen tensions between the girl and her teacher unexpectedly flare up...

Chapter Notes

I do not remember if I ever mentioned it on any of the chapters I've posted on here (as I have on FF.net), but the ending of this chapter will act as the set-up for a prequel to this story that I've been working on for several weeks now. The first chapter will be posted within the next few days.

No sooner had the members of the newly dubbed 'Team Defect' ceased their laughter and turned their attention to their individual lollipops, content to enjoy their newfound companionship in relative silence, did Recovery Girl make her presence known to the boys again.

"I am pleased to see you young men making friends with each other so easily, but the nurse's office is no place for idle dawdling and socializing!" She said with another wave of her cane.

The four boys stopped and shared glances among each other. Midoriya's classification as Quirkless for much of his life meant he was practically friendless after losing Kacchan and before going to Kamar-Taj. Kirishima, though he had past acquaintances, found friends hard to come by with a self-doubting attitude that plagued his junior high years. Aoyama and Tokoyami both developed strange Quirks as children that made others view them as dangerously unpredictable for years.

Although none of the heroes-in-training knew each other's full stories yet, the unintended irony of Recovery Girl's statement was not lost on them: making friends was not something that came easily to any of them.

Perhaps that's why it was so easy for them to befriend each other.

"Midoriya, Aoyama, you two are cleared. Although I'll need you both to return tomorrow morning for a final look-over as well as to remove your bandages," Recovery Girl informed them. "Change back into your school uniforms before you leave."

Aoyama slowly rose out of bed, inspecting the bandages wrapped around his waist and his support belt. Midoriya soon followed, carefully stretching his arms and legs. Kirishima pouted from the bed he remained confined to.
"Don't give me that look!" Recovery Girl chastised Kirishima as Aoyama and Midoriya hobbled into separate changing booths. "You have only yourself and your reckless drive to blame for the state you're in!"

"I didn't give my all any more than the others did, you know!" Kirishima protested petulantly.

"Nobody else ended up with a broken limb," Recovery Girl sternly corrected him, turning her sharp gaze to Aoyama and Midoriya as they emerged fully changed. "Which is a miracle given the reports I received of how your Battle Trial was conducted! Honestly, recklessness seems to be a shared trait among all of you aside from the level-headed Tokoyami!"

"You flatter me, ma'am," Tokoyami said with a humble bow.

"To be fair, Madame, we would not have chosen Team Defect as our name if we did not share some flaw in common," Aoyama said with his closed smile.

"Out, out!" Recovery Girl lambasted the cleared members of Team Defect, her patience well for further antics running quite dry.

Midoriya, Tokoyami, and Aoyama did not get very far; the door to the nurse's office had hardly opened before a large, imposing shadow crowded over the exit, blocking the three students' path.

"Worry not, Young Kirishima, for I am here!" All Might loudly proclaimed as he strode into the room, nearly barreling into three very surprised 1-A students. "Ah, the rest of Teams B and F are here as well! Sharing in camaraderie after a fierce battle, are we? Splendid!"

"A-All Might!" Izuku cried out as Recovery Girl looked to be on the verge of face-palming.

"Will the loud intrusions never end...?" She muttered in defeat.

"I must congratulate you all on a hard fought performance!" All Might continued, oblivious to his elderly friend's plight. "I must say, you inspired the teams that came after you to truly go Plus Ultra! The rest of your classmates have opted to stay after class to study over the results, so you may join them if you wish to learn of the critiques before we do so officially tomorrow!"

"I must profess some interest in our results," Tokoyami said calmly, giving All Might a courteous bow before stepping past to depart back to class.

"Wait for me, Le Merle Noir!" Aoyama called out to Tokoyami, trotting to catch up.

Izuku seemed torn, looking between Kirishima, All Might, and his newly departed friends. "Why couldn't we hear your critiques of us while we were all here?" He asked.

"W-well, you see, with Young Kirishima here the only one seriously injured, I thought it best to speak with him privately while everyone else convenes in class," All Might said shakily. "This isn't to show bias, or anything, though! Young Kirishima will be cleared in a little while, so rejoin the others if you wish, Young Midoriya! And fine job today!"

Izuku frowned despite the smile and thumbs up All Might was giving him. He was noticeably shaking. Did he want to have his conversation with Kirishima as quickly as possible before his Quirk form gave out? Izuku had never forgotten the secret behind All Might's true form, after all. Not wanting to waste anymore of his time, Izuku gave a quick nod and departed the nurse's office posthaste.

All Might needed to talk to Kirishima privately since he was the only student seriously injured during
Izuku paused right as he caught up with his other new friends. Tokoyami and Aoyama paused in turn, giving Izuku curious looks.

Kirishima's arm glowed for but a second before he punched the floor, and the power he unleashed was devastating, Izuku pondered. His Hardening Quirk contains far more power than he lets on.

Izuku briefly snapped out of his thoughts to reassure to his friends he was fine. Together, they began walking again toward the 1-A classroom.

Has that kind of power caught All Might's eye? Izuku wondered. Is All Might considering Kirishima to become the successor of One For All?

The 1-A classroom hadn't even slid open all the way before Izuku, Aoyama, and Tokoyami were swarmed by the inquisitive and smiling faces of their new peers. The students each introduced themselves, and Izuku was soon acquainted with classmates such as the pink, outgoing Ashido, the plain yet excited Sero, and the mellow yet still sociable Jiro. Others that approached he already recognized, like the bubbly Hagakure, diminutive Mineta, and brawny Sato.

Izuku tried to remain composed despite all the attention and questions being thrown his way by curious companions. Aoyama seemed to relish the attention, however, and Tokoyami stoically slipped through the crowd, taking a seat on top of his desk as he observed the antics of 1-A.

"Ah! Midoriya! Aoyama!" Iida addressed them, raising his voice over all the chattering going on. "I'm glad you were cleared in time to join our class study session! We're currently going over all the results of our—Tokoyami!"

Tokoyami barely registered Iida with a turn of his head as the overly stern boy raced over to him. "Get off that desk this instant! It's incredibly inconsiderate!"

So they were all discussing the results of the Battle Trials. Izuku knew as much, but he was curious about the results of other three trials.

"In case you're wondering, Team D beat Team J, Team E beat Team H, and Team I beat Team G, ribbit," A frog-looking girl suddenly spoke from beside Izuku, causing him to jump. "Team E was the only villain team to actually win."

"W-whoa!" Izuku said. "Uh, thanks! I was pretty curious to know how everyone else did!"

"I'm Tsuyu Asui, by the way," Asui introduced herself. "I tend to be straightforward and say whatever's on my mind."

"Oh, is that so...?" Izuku said ambivalently. Only a couple sentences in, and Asui was already reminiscent to how he initially viewed Aoyama as an enigma.

"Yep, ribbit," Asui croaked. "Midoriya, your Quirk is unlike any Quirk I've ever seen in my life."

Izuku tensed. Was that a blunt compliment or was she being blunt with her suspicions? "Ah? T-thanks, I think!"

"Don't mention it," Asui said, not dwelling on the topic any further. "We were just discussing the Team D and Team J matchup."
"Team D won against Team J, right?" Izuku asked. "Wait...wasn't Iida on Team J? Iida and his partner lost?" Izuku sounded surprised; Iida carried himself confidently, and his Engine Quirk was nothing to sneeze at.

"Yep," Asui said. "He and Ojiro did their best to stay with the bomb, but Mineta's Pop-Off Quirk was stickier than any of us expected. He actually incapacitated Iida's feet and Hagakure snuck a win by touching the bomb while Ojiro was preoccupied with Mineta."

Izu hummed thoughtfully; Quirk matchups were often unpredictable. One seemingly unimpressive Quirk may actually be somewhat effective against presumably stronger Quirks, or could have a wider range of application than expected. Pop-Off was one such Quirk, it seemed; Izuku would have to brainstorm it in his Quirk notebook when he got home.

"Iida is taking the loss seriously, so he's being very overbearing over this study session," Asui said, watching Iida continue fussing at Tokoyami, who didn't seem nonplussed about the berating in the slightest.

"Iida's not so bad," Izuku quietly said with a smile. "He's just an overly eager individual."

"If you say so," Asui said, turning her full attention to Izuku. "Seems you like to say what's on your mind, too."

"I try not to come across as too blunt, though!" Izuku quickly backpedaled. He then gave the class a quick scan; there was a distinct lack of brashness and explosions that should've belonged solely to 1-A.

"Kacchan's not here..." Izuku murmured to himself as his eyes honed in on his old friend's empty desk.

"If you're referring to Bakugo, he departed a few minutes before you arrived back in class," Asui said. "He was pretty quiet. Not at all loud and rude like he normally is."

Izuku turned and sprinted out of the classroom, leaving a seemingly unfazed Asui behind. Running toward the nearest glass window, Izuku peered down and saw the form of Bakugo sulking toward the U.A exit.

_He was quiet? Not at all rude? That's not like Kacchan at all..._ Izuku thought. _Izuku knew from his demeanor after the first trial that Bakugo was not at all pleased by the victory of Team A. Was he really that upset at not being able to do anything? Had Todoroki's power unsettled him that badly?_

Izuku turned to run outside and hopefully catch Bakugo before he was off the school grounds and out of sight, but he suddenly paused where he stood. For as long as he could recall, from his early childhood years before Bakugo even received his Explosion Quirk to his Junior High years leading up to his accident in the ravine and introduction to Doctor Strange, Izuku had been chasing after Bakugo. He had been chasing and following him dutifully, even in spite of what he now recognized as years of horrendous bullying, all because Bakugo seemed to embody a virtue of victory that he didn't see in anyone else besides All Might. Bakugo strove towards victory, and so he'd followed, hoping to walk that same path right behind his former friend as they became heroes.

However, it became clear to Izuku that he no longer walked the same path as Bakugo still did. His path had diverged ever since his hands became scarred. His introduction to magic set him on a wildly different path toward becoming a hero. The destination was the same, but his route was one that, at best, could only parallel Bakugo's.
Standing in the window, Izuku watched as Bakugo soon disappeared from view. Their paths were now distinct, and he was determined to embrace that divergence. No longer would he follow in Bakugo's footsteps, hoping to one day catch up with him. No...his was an untried path of heroics and sorcery that he needed to blaze through and forge without relying entirely on the footsteps of another.

Back in the classroom for 1-A, most of the remaining students were grouped together in teams of two to four people, each discussing the critiques given by All Might and each other. Most students were, anyway. Two notable exceptions to this were one Shoto Todoroki, who instead appeared to be impassively reading over notes he'd scribed from the suggestions and criticisms given in the wake of his performance, and one Denki Kaminari, who was more or less staring sullenly at his own two hands instead of his own notes.

"Kaminari?" A soft voice gently pierced through the dread clouding his mind, allowing him to think with some clarity for the first time since his trial ended. A slender hand glided down to his desk. He glanced up, a small smile gracing his lips—it was Uraraka, appearing completely restored thanks to Recovery Girl's Quirk and efforts. Her hair was no longer frizzled, and her round and admittedly cute cheeks seemed unblemished from the discharge he'd accidentally struck her with.

"Uraraka, I barely noticed you'd returned to class!" Kaminari said with as much pep as he could muster. "I can't tell you how relieved I am to see that you're okay. I-I hope you know I didn't mean to—"

"All Might and the others filled me in on what happened," Uraraka replied with a beaming smile, rubbing the back of her head sheepishly. "You were caught off guard, Kaminari. I know it was an accident. It happens to the best of us. These things sometimes happen in the Hero Course!"

Kaminari could hardly believe his eyes and ears as he watched Uraraka acting so diffident over what he'd done. Could she really be this forgiving and trusting after he'd hurt her so carelessly?

"Hey, Uraraka," Kaminari said, trying to muster some confidence together. "You want to grab a bite—er, what kind of food do you—"

Kaminari groaned as whatever self-assurance he'd hobbled together quickly seemed to drain away, the cloud of dread and perversive whispers surging through his mind with a vengeance. He didn't want to turn around to confirm, but he felt as if Todoroki's eyes were glued to the back of his blonde head.

"Kaminari," Uraraka's voice once again banished the dark haze to a smaller corner in his mind. He dared to look back up at her, her cheerful and sincere disposition glowing brightly against his morose demeanor. "I happen to like mochi a lot, if you want to grab a bite sometime!"

"Sorry for bringing this up so late, but today I have a different activity for you all to complete," Aizawa informed Class 1-A the next day after going through his own observations regarding the Battle Trials. "You all need to decide on a class representative."

*It's a normal classroom activity!* Nearly all of 1-A thought as the room burst with excitement and chitchat, with various students each raising their hands or outright standing up to stake their claim on the coveted title of Class Rep. Some students, like Midoriya, Todoroki, and Tokoyami, remained far more taciturn in the wake of the others' excitement.

"Everyone, calm yourselves!" Iida spoke authoritatively and stood up, garnering the attention of everyone in the room. "Think carefully about the position Aizawa-sensei is speaking of! The position
of Class Representative is not one that should be carelessly appointed to any one of us! It is a position befitting only those who demonstrate clear leadership qualities! It is a role requiring the trust of your peers, and should be granted to whoever holds the greatest amount of trust among us!"

The greatest amount of trust, huh...? A number of 1-A students thought to themselves as they pondered Iida's words, lowering their hands and sitting back down in their seats.

"Therefore, I suggest we hold an election process to determine our representative!" Iida recommended. Everyone else discussed the idea among themselves more quietly.

"But we haven't had much time to get to know each other that well yet," Asui spoke up. "If we focus entirely on trust as a factor, then won't we just all end up voting for ourselves?"

"Precisely why we should have elections!" Iida retorted. "Wouldn't it be indicative that whoever actually received multiple votes would be the most deserving of the position? Aizawa-sensei, what do you think?"

"I don't care what you do," Aizawa said dryly as he slipped into his yellow sleeping bag. "Just pick a class rep before the homeroom period ends."

"Elections it is then!"

Iida's unwavering imperiousness quickly dissolved into unmitigated disappointment and shame as the admittedly shocking election results were fully tallied. The top two contenders made their way to the front of the class, one stunned beyond belief and shaking where he stood, the other watching her class rep with a curious, doubtful eye. The other students of 1-A cast curious glances between those who had a single vote—those who had presumably voted for themselves—and those who had no votes whatsoever.

Eight votes. Izuku Midoriya had won eight whole votes from his classmates, including one from himself. Momo Yaoyorozu, his now vice rep, only had two votes. It was a distant second; it wasn't even close.

"Bullshit!" Bakugo exclaimed, slamming his palms against the top of his desk. "There's no way that damn pipsqueak got seven votes from you other extras! Who voted for him!"

His eyes scanned the list of names on the board, registering which ones had zero votes before honing in on one that stood out in particular. He whirled around and snarled at Todoroki. "Did you vote for him, Half-and-Half!?"

"Who I voted for is no one's concern but my own," Todoroki replied coolly, stoking the fires of Bakugo's rage.

Iida appeared especially frustrated, but did not appear outwardly hostile as Bakugo was. Asui gave him a sympathetic look.

So you voted for yourself as I thought most of us would, huh, Iida? She thought. You must've recommended elections to convince the class to vote for you...

Among the sea of surprised faces, Uraraka and Kaminari's stood out as they located their names on the board. They weren't among the group of zeroes as they'd been expecting. The both had one vote each.

But I didn't vote for myself! Kaminari and Uraraka thought simultaneously. Who voted for me!?
"So it's decided then," Aizawa rose from his sleeping bag, glancing at the nervous wreck that was his class's rep and his doubtful vice. "Midoriya will be the 1-A Class Representative."

Iizuku stared down at his rice and veggies, mindlessly thumbing through it as all the cafeteria conversations around him buzzed away into simple background noise. His mind was singularly focused on his newly appointed role as the representative for his entire class. He couldn't believe anyone other than himself had actually cast their vote for him, let alone seven others!

Iida said it best: it's a role requiring the trust of your peers, Izuku pondered as he rummaged through his food. But have I really earned that trust so soon in the school year?

"Mind if we join you, class rep?" Kirishima asked loudly as he took a seat next to Izuku, slamming his food tray down with aplomb. Aoyama and Tokoyami followed thereafter, taking seats opposite of them.

"Kirishima!" Izuku said in surprise. "Aoyama! Tokoyami!"

"I take it you are still ruminating over the results of our venture into democracy?" Tokoyami asked, referring to the election.

"Yeah, I guess you could say I'm still reeling from it all," Izuku answered with a nod. "I just wasn't expecting to win, especially by the margin I did. Seven people voted for me besides myself..."

"I voted for ya," Kirishima said plainly as he bit into a piece of meat.

"Oui, as did I," Aoyama added.

"It appears Team Defect's first decision was a unanimous one," Tokoyami also joined in. "I voted for you, too, Midoriya."

"You guys...!" Izuku was blown away. "Didn't you hear Iida? It's a job requiring the absolute trust —"

"Listen, man," Kirishima interrupted. "I think the others here will back me up when I say you're the most trustworthy guy in the whole class as of now."

"You gave me trust during the Battle Trial, so I will repay you in kind!" Aoyama said with a wink.

"And I made my judgment separate from the possibly corruptible influence of others," Tokoyami said. "Though I must concur with Kirishima on this topic."

"We agree, too!"

Team Defect turned their heads toward whoever was addressing them. It was Hagakure, though she wasn't alone: walking alongside her on their way to their respective tables were Sato, Koda, and Mineta.

"We all voted for you, Midoriya!"

"I was going to vote for myself, but when Iida brought up his whole point about trust, I admit, I thought about you instantly, Midoriya," Mineta said with a sideways glance.

"Yeah, you and Kirishima both saved our butts during the Entrance Exam!" Sato added. "During the discussions, Kirishima told us in private you were way more fit for the role."
Koda nodded eagerly but stayed quiet, shy and reticent as he was.

Izuku looked over at Kirishima, who merely shrugged and continued munching on his lunch. "It's true," He spoke through a mouthful of food.

"As the class has decreed, it is indeed true!" Iida's authoritative voice captured their attention. "The class has made its choice, so we must honor it and trust Midoriya will see through his duties as Class Representative as dutifully as he can!"

"Iida..." Izuku whispered, amazed by all the support being shown to him so freely by his peers.

"Despite my earlier reservations about you and my own desire to be placed into such a position, I will support you any way I can!" Iida proclaimed. "Starting with some advice: whatever you do as our representative, just make sure that you remain concise, clear, and bold! Not only are you at U.A now, but you've been chosen to be a leader within this student body on top of that. As one of the best of the best, make sure you act accordingly."

Izuku was about to offer his sincere thanks when an alarm blared throughout the entire cafeteria, catching all the students off guard.

"This is a Level Three security breach! All students should evacuate outdoors promptly!"

A wave of panic and confusion instantly arose among the student body present in the cafeteria. Chairs and tables not secured to the floor were hastily pushed aside or overturned entirely as the panicked throngs began pushing their way toward the cafeteria exit.

Izuku and his new friends were not spared, either: Iida barely had any time to stop a third year student for questioning before he was swept away into the crowd, and Team Defect were absorbed into the chaotic mass as soon as they arose from their respective seats. Hagakure, Mineta, and the others had all but vanished, too, amalgamated into a sea of U.A faces and uniforms.

What a panic! Everyone reacted so quickly that a stampede has formed instead of an evacuation! Izuku thought as he tumbled through the crowd, a barrage of shoulders and elbows bumping and crashing into him as students pushed against one another on their way out. What even caused all of this!? Who intruded into U.A, of all places!?

Izuku soon found his answer as he was suddenly pinned against the glass window by some larger students trying unsuccessfully to force their way through. Gazing through a stand of trees and shrubs, Izuku spotted a crowd moving toward one of the U.A buildings, their hefty cameras and long microphone devices cluing him in on their identities rather quickly.

It's the media who trespassed? So it's not a villain attack after all? Izuku thought, glancing around where he could to see if anyone else had noticed. Iida, too, was pinned against the window and was watching the trespassing media goons, though he was in no better position than Izuku to do anything about it. Does no one else realize it's just a false alarm? Someone has to put a stop to this before someone gets trampled...!

If he had his Cloak of Levitation equipped, he could probably zoom to the front of the pack in no time at all. Heck, a portal would suffice as well, but Izuku had no room to circle his hand to conjure one. He squirmed his way back into the farce that was this evacuation, his brain racing a mile a minute.

I seem to be one of the only ones who realizes the media caused this! I-if anyone's going to stop this, it might as well be me! Izuku thought, his mind replaying all the voices of support that landed him in
Izuku spotted the pointed hair of Tokoyami bobbing and weaving through the crowd, and Izuku was immediately struck with inspiration.

"Tokoyami!" Izuku called out to his friend, squirming through a swarm of shuddering shoulders and erratic elbows in order to get closer to him.

"Midoriya?" Tokoyami's head swiveled until they locked eyes. Grimacing, Tokoyami tried unsuccessfully to bridge the gap between them. "This horrified horde is unrelenting...!"

"Tokoyami, listen!" Izuku shouted now that he knew they could both hear each other. "I think I can stop this stampede, but I need your help! Can you have Dark Shadow lift me up to the exit sign near the door?"

Tokoyami nodded, silently recognizing what Izuku had planned. He muttered a soft apology to all those around him for the inconvenience he was about to cause before he drew Dark Shadow out of the depths of his body. The students around him cried out indignantly as they were pushed aside even further against one another by the shadow. Tokoyami muttered quick instructions into Dark Shadow's ear before the creature snaked its way through the crowd.

"Yo, Midoriya!" Dark Shadow said as it reached the boy. "Hop aboard!" Of course, the shadow didn't wait for Izuku to move on his own, instead grabbing him by his waist and hoisting him above the stampede. Using his elongated body, Dark Shadow stretched out far enough for Izuku to hop above the exit door, gripping a pipe for balance as he sucked in a deep breath.

"Everybody, calm down!" Izuku yelled as loudly and authoritatively as he could, channeling his Inner Iida in order to grab the attention of the writhing masses below. One by one, the students paused to look up at the short, green-haired boy shaking from where he was perched. "There's no reason to panic! The alarm was caused by the media, nothing more! So please remain calm as we evacuate the building! I-I'll even use my Quirk to make things easier for you all!"

Izuku circled his free hand as the students took his words to heart, with several corroborating by finally noticing the media amassed nearby. Tokoyami in particular breathed a heavy sigh of relief, drawing Dark Shadow back into his body as the stampede came to a halt at long last.

To the amazement of many of the students, a ring of flame sprouted in the doorway leading out of the cafeteria. The adjacent walls seemed to disappear, and the doorway appeared widened just enough to facilitate a quicker exit for the students. Tokoyami recognized that Izuku was utilizing his portals, with the entrance being on one side of the cafeteria doorway and the exit being immediately on the other, giving the impression that the doorway had actually widened.

"Give it up for our Class Representative!" Kirishima rallied most of 1-A into a rousing round of applause for Midoriya after they finished their afternoon classes, Bakugo and Todoroki excluded. "He handled that stampede in the manliest way possible!"

Izuku remained in his seat, shell-shocked by the unexpected applause. He'd seen Kirishima...
whispering among the students after lunch, but he didn't expect anything like this to come of it.

"Seems we won't have anything to worry about then," Asui said bluntly.

"He's more dependable than I gave him credit for," Yaoyorozu whispered to herself. "That will certainly make being the vice more tolerable."

"Tch!" Bakugo grunted and looked away, feigning indifference.

"Midoriya," Aizawa called the class rep over to his desk. "I'm about to dismiss class for the day, but there is one more task I need to run you through since you are 1-A’s representative."

Aizawa reached into his desk and retrieved a folder, handing it to Izuku. Izuku thumbed through it briefly, recognizing the papers within as updated costume change request forms. Included among the forms were copies of the preliminary costume requests his classmates had sent in before the school year began.

"As Class Representative, you will also be 1-A’s official liaison to the Support Department," Aizawa said. "Run these files to the Development Studio, then you can head home."

"Yes, sir!" Izuku tucked the files under his arm and departed for the Development Studio, giving a final wave to his classmates before he left.

Much like U.A's main building looked to anyone standing outside its gates, the doors to the Development Studio were as tall as they were imposing to anyone standing before them. Thick slabs of bolted steel towered over Izuku, with only a daintily lit neon sign giving off an air of welcome. The muffled sounds of gears grinding and machines whirring could be heard right on the other side, letting Izuku know that it hadn't been closed quite yet.

As he reached out for the giant iron handles, preparing to give the door a mighty tug, the sound of a small explosion rattled through the doors. Izuku yelped and jumped backward as the vibrations ran up his arm and down his spine. Faint wisps of smoke could be seen billowing from underneath the door.

Izuku cautiously tugged the door open, peeking inside. The explosion wasn't too bad—there seemed to be minimal damage to the studio and smoke was minimal—though all the Support students seemed on edge. Izuku quickly realized why after locating the epicenter of the explosion: a coughing Mei was standing over a dying contraption of some sort, beeping its last beeps before shutting off for good. Her baggy pants, work boots, and tank top were thoroughly coated in ash.

"Hatsume..." A growl emanated from the back of the class.

"Everything's fine! All under control!" Mei coughed out. "Just a bit of overheated circuitry is all! Failure is the mother of invention, after all!"

Seems she really took Mr. Stark's words to heart... Izuku thought, grinning weakly at his Support friend's antics.

"Midoriya!" Mei cried out as her scoped eyes landed on the crop of green hair standing idly in the doorway. "So glad you could join us today! Have you come to witness the tech I've already built in my first couple days?"

"A-actually, I'm here to—" Izuku tried to speak but Mei wasn't having any of it, forcefully ushering him inside to peruse her newest 'babies'.
"I've remodeled my standard headgear to allow for even greater visibility with my Quirk!" Mei said, shoving her goggled helmet into Izuku's face. "I even kept the little notch in the back—never know when another nose needs to be broken!"

"That's great, Hatsume, listen: I need to—"

"Oh! Check this one out!" Mei exclaimed, pushing Izuku down the row of gadgets to a belt-looking apparatus. "Baby No. 22: my Wire Arrow!"

"Oh, is it like a grappling hook—"

"It's a grappling hook coupled with steel wiring that can extend over long distances!" Mei spoke over Izuku excitedly. "This one will definitely come in handy in the future! Though I haven't come up with a baby yet that goes well with your magic—mmph!"

"H-Hatsume, that's supposed to stay a secret!" Izuku whispered to her frantically as he smothered her mouth with his hand, pulling away once she'd calmed down.

The calm didn't last long. The irises in her eyes seemed to widen in a manner that Izuku knew could only spell inevitable mischief, pain, or both. Hatsume had just been struck by a spark of inspiration, and she'd be damned if she passed this opportunity up.

Before Izuku could mount a protest, Mei whisked him past her row of gadgets and spun him into a seat decked out with circuitry and exposed wiring. Hooked up to the top of the seat was a dome-like object, which promptly lowered itself onto Izuku's head once he was sat down.

"Uh, Hatsume?" Izuku nervously asked as he felt thin, prodding antennae lowering themselves down from the dome and into his hair, tickling at his scalp. "What are you doing?"

"I just realized a great way you can help me, Midoriya!" Mei said a bit too cheerfully for Izuku's comfort. "I needed someone to help me run this device, and no one would be better than you!"

"H-Hatsume? This isn't going to explode on me, is it?" Izuku gulped, noticing that many of the other students in the studio were giving him and Mei a wide berth.

"My newest baby will not explode on you, Midoriya, I promise!" Mei said with a cheeky grin. "...Maybe, anyway."

"Hatsume—!"

"Sorry, can't hear you over the sound of science!" Mei yelled as she flipped a switch, activating whatever device she'd thrust him beneath. Izuku tensed as the antennae began rapidly combing across the top of his head in seemingly random patterns. They peppered his scalp with small, continuous jolts that weren't painful, but they were incredibly uncomfortable.

When the device whirred to a halt and the scalp-rubbing antennae lifted off his head, Izuku leaped out of the chair, combing a hand through his hair to see if there was any permanent damage he needed to be aware of. He turned to chastise Mei, but all her attention was focused on a computer screen located behind the device.

"Hatsume, what did you do?" Izuku asked with equal parts caution and curiosity.

Mei hummed as her fingers landed one final clack on the keyboard, streams of data indecipherable to Izuku flying past their eyes before finishing with a beep. A data disk popped out of a hardware slot, which Mei swiftly snatched between her fingers.
"This, Midoriya, is my newest baby," She said. "Or rather, it's our first baby!"

"W-wait, w-what!?" Izuku stammered as he stepped back, visibly flustered and embarrassed. "What do you mean, 'our first baby'!?"

"Hmm, this particular baby needs a name," Mei said thoughtfully. "Something fitting, since this came from Izuku's engrams. Perhaps...Victor? Or maybe Mancha? I guess either could be a good enough starter name!"

"Hatsume! You better not be starting work on a new piece of tech without fixing the one you just broke first!" Someone barked.

Izuku and Mei tuned to face the newcomer, a diminutive man sporting a large yellow helmet reminiscent to the scoop of an excavator vehicle. He wore blue pants but was shirtless, and his metallic-tipped hands were disproportionally large compared to the rest of his body.

Izuku shook with excitement—he knew exactly who this man was, and he was once again grateful to be part of a school staffed by Pro Heroes.

"And you're not one of my students. Who are you?" The man turned his attention to Izuku. "Students who are not part of any of the Support classes and who have no reason to be here should have a limited presence in the Development Studio for their own safety."

"You're Power Loader, aren't you?" Izuku answered the man's question with one of his own, eyes glowing with adoration. "As in, the Power Loader? The same one that worked with the Founding Avengers—?"

"You worked with the Founding Avengers, sensei?" Mei jumped in, somewhat surprised herself by Izuku's question.

"Oh? I'm surprised you know about all that, kid," Power Loader said, sounding almost impressed by Izuku's hero-related knowledge. If he knew Izuku better, he probably wouldn't be surprised in the slightest. "Yeah, I'm that Power Loader. Worked with the Avengers when All Might and Tony Stark founded the group all those years ago, fell off the radar when I started doing my own thing, and well...you see what happens when you're yesterday's leftovers to the media. Big name Pros are immortalized, but sidekicks' years are always numbered."

"I can't believe the media were so quick to forget about you," Izuku said. "You were just as crucial as All Might in defeating—"

"I don't know what you've read or where you read it, but that's all in the past," Power Loader said with a dismissive wave of his gargantuan hand. "Now no more tangents: state your purpose for coming to the Development Studio."

"Oh! Right. I'm the Class Representative for 1-A and I was told to bring these files to you," Izuku said as he handed the folder over to Power Loader.

"Ah, one of our two new liaisons," Power Loader said as he briefly looked through the folder. "Thanks kid, I'll take it from here and put these where they belong. You skedaddle on back to class."

"Y-yes, sir," Izuku said before giving a goodbye to Mei as well.

"Thanks a bunch for your help, Midoriya!" Mei said as she waved him off. "Thanks to you, I now have all I need to understand you a whole lot more!"
Izuku shivered as he exited the studio, half wondering if Mei was referring to his skills with magic and half wondering if she was going to be able to keep his secret for the rest of the first term, let alone three or more years!

"Alright, Hatsume," Power Loader sighed as soon as Midoriya was out of his sight. "What is this 'surprise baby' you said you needed to complete before the end of the first week of classes?"

"And don't tell me to wait!" Power Loader quickly said before Mei had a chance to speak. "Only a few days in, and you've already shown a propensity for explosive devices. So no more waiting. Tell me what this side project you're working on is."

"It's an idea I derived from my meeting with Iron Man several months ago!" Mei said. "He's a huge inspiration!"

Power Loader frowned, obviously displeased by Mei's statement in some way as he shuffled through the pile of gadgets she'd both finished and begun work on. "You should always be wary when deriving inspiration from others, especially men like Stark," He warned. "Your enrollment in U.A's Support Department is meant to cultivate your own set of skills and your uniqueness in order to prepare you for what comes after graduation."

"But this is going to reflect on my uniqueness!" Mei retorted, although to Power Loader it sounded almost like a whine. "I'm going to be unique in that I plan on surpassing Stark in every way I can think of! Starting with this!" She proudly raised the data disk she'd retrieved from her work on Izuku. "I'm going to create an A.I for the Development Studio that's superior to Iron Man's in every conceivable way!"

Clang!

Power Loader had dropped whatever unfinished device he was holding in his hands. He tilted his head upward, his dull blue eyes drilling into Mei with unprecedented terror.

"I mapped Midoriya's engrams and brain patterns with a modified mapper I cobbled together based off of some old theoretical schematics," Mei excitedly continued with her explanation, paying her teacher no mind. "Victor—or Mancha—here will be the first of many A.I that I plan on incorporating into the studio! I want to be remembered as the greatest graduate to ever come out of U.A's Support Department, and this is just the first step!"

"I forbid it!" Power Loader roared, his anger reverberating throughout the entire studio. The other students present paused their work to see what triggered such indignation in their strict but otherwise calm teacher. "Hatsume, I demand that you cease all work on this project at once!"

"What, why?" Mei asked, just as put off by her teacher's uncharacteristic display of anger as any of the other students. "The worldwide regulations regarding A.I have been discontinued, haven't they? I mean, Ultron was defeated by All Might over 15 years ago—"

"I don't care," Power Loader growled. "The governments of the world may have deregulated all work concerning artificial intelligence, but I will not and cannot allow such work in my studio."

"...On our very first day of class, you told us that the best innovators out there are unconstrained by convention," Mei said defiantly, her gloved hands curling into shaky fists.

"And I stand by those words; here are some new ones for you to mull over: 'we may be unconstrained by convention, but there will always be lines that we, as inventors, should never cross,'" Power Loader said as he extended a hand toward Mei. "I'm sorry, Hatsume, but I must
demand that you hand the data disk over to me and dismantle the mapper you constructed."

Mei bit her lower lip and looked as if she was going to continue resisting or outright refuse her teacher's demands. Ultimately, however, she thrust the data disk into Power Loader's large hand without another word. She immediately set to work dismantling the engram mapper she'd used on Izuku piece by piece, cradling every fragment of the device as if it were an actual child of hers.

Power Loader watched to ensure she wouldn't half-ass the dismantling. Once he was satisfied, he turned toward his personal office, a side room adjacent to the studio. He paused and noticed every other pair of eyes present in the room still glued on him and Mei.

"Back to work everyone," He said with a sigh. "I'll be making my rounds in a moment to grade what you've completed."

The other students hastily went back to their work, and Power Loader trudged into his office with as much propriety as he could muster. He fumbled with the key to a locked desk drawer, unlocking and opening it just quick enough to toss Mei's data disk inside, where it clattered against another disk labeled 'Jocasta'.

_I should destroy them_, Power Loader thought as he sank into his chair for a brief respite. _But...should the worst ever come to pass as it nearly did all those years ago..._

_Ah, you can't imagine how sorry I am to have done that to you, Hatsume_, Power Loader continued thinking as he slowly lifted his yellow excavator-like helmet off his face, tracing a metallic-tipped finger against an ungainly scar that horizontally bisected his forehead. _But I can tell that you are shaping up to become the brightest, most innovative student I've ever had the pleasure of teaching here at U.A. And I don't wish to see you cross the same lines I did when I created Ultron all those years ago..._

Chapter End Notes

And now, I present to you the summary of this story's planned prequel: The Ultron Imperative

A suit of armor around the world--that was what Power Loader designed him to be. Marred and corrupted by twisted views regarding the rise of Quirks, he broke free and created his own imperative. All Might and Hero Society are now all that stand in the way of his mission. And that mission--whether he admits it or not--is global destruction.

Prequel to 'Of Quirks and Magic'.
In the aftermath of the infiltration at U.A, the members of the League of Villains each prepare for the upcoming USJ operation in their own manner. While Ikiji struggles with a memory-delving ritual, Kurogiri and All For One discuss the boy's place among the League, as well as what the future holds for him...

Clink. Clink. Clink.

Kurogiri rummaged through rows and columns of bar glasses, sifting through assortments of cordials and flutes, plucking those resting in the far back for cleaning. It was always part of his routine—his favorite part if he were being honest—while maintaining his personal bar space. It was always something he saved for last: first the jukebox would be wiped down, followed by the burgundy countertop and velvety bar stools, proceeded by a meticulous sweeping of the floor. Only then would he glide behind the bar and administer his daily sanitization of the often untouched bar glasses.

Such was his routine, standing idly behind his bar, retrieving glass after glass for a mindless wiping while he relished in the silence of his workspace. It had become cathartic for Kurogiri to delve into his daily cleanings after each long day of overseeing Tomura for his master. A routine of stress demanded a routine of serenity, and the silence of the fledgling League's bar space brought more than enough calm to rejuvenate him at the end of each day.

Of course, for practical reasons, Kurogiri kept his bar open to the occasional outside riffraff who'd wander in for a drink now and then, but for the most part, he'd grown to detest late afternoon patrons who he saw as intruding on his relaxation.

Despite the composed demeanor he always made sure to display to friend and foe alike, Kurogiri was not a person who handled unexpected surprises or sudden changes to his routine well. After all, it had taken him plenty of time to adjust to Tomura's needs.

And it would take even longer to adjust to Ikiji Kokotsu.

No, it wasn't Ikiji's personality or even his presence that Kurogiri inwardly objected to, but rather, it was the sudden changes Ikiji brought onto his routine and that of Tomura that unsettled him so.

Adjusting to Ikiji meant adjusting to everything he represented and brought to the League: knowledge, power, all of it. And even after the numerous rituals and sessions he'd witnessed, as well as the operation at Kamar-Taj, it was still difficult for Kurogiri to fully wrap his mind around the concept of...*magic*.

Tomura thought similarly, if the tempestuous relationship between him and Ikiji was any indication. As expected of him, Tomura used a favorite video game analogy to justify his disdain for Ikiji: in his mind, to use magic is cheating, therefore Ikiji is little more than dirty cheater, besmirching his League
with his magic 'cheat code' tricks.

So not only did Kurogiri have to adjust to the reality that magic existed—a reality he understood his master was more than knowledgeable about—but he also had to adjust to the various, unpredictable changes in Tomura's temperament that Ikiji inadvertently caused by being taken under his master's wing.

Joy. No wonder an increasing amount of his free time was spent idling away behind his bar.

Regardless, Kurogiri resolved to oversee the two young men as best as he could, if not for his master then for his own sanity, at least. Supervising their growth these past six years has been no easy feat, especially given their wildly different fighting styles and battle dispositions. Kurogiri definitely found Tomura to be the easier of the two; not only had he known that boy for far longer, but there was also far more to work with given that his powers were grounded in the laws of Quirks, not magic. Ikiji was somewhat similar in that regard—he had a Bone Spurs Quirk that caught his master's eye—but Kurogiri was at a loss when it came to the boy's forays into magic and rituals. He helped where and when he could, but most of Ikiji's growth came from trial and error, as well as accidental discovery.

Of course...keeping Ikiji's growth at a frustratingly slow rate had been the master's plan all along.

Kurogiri reached into the mini-fridge situated beneath the bar once the last glass was wiped, pulling out two small boxes. They were neatly folded, containing small samplings of sushi, white rice, and chopped vegetables he'd prepared earlier in the day. No need to bring them down to eat at the bar; after the infiltration operation at U.A, Kurogiri thought it best to let the boys remain in their quarters and rest for what tomorrow entailed.

With both boxes in hand, Kurogiri ascended the staircase to the boarding rooms situated above the bar. Tomura's room was the first on the left, and was conspicuously the farthest room from Ikiji's, which was the last room on the right of the hall. Tomura's pettiness knew no bounds, but Kurogiri had thankfully long since acclimated to that fact.

Kurogiri approached Tomura's door, the sound of clacking buttons and grunts of frustration followed by the occasional expletive emanating from within. Video games were Tomura's 'routine of serenity'. Just as Kurogiri withdrew into his own mind behind his bar, Tomura withdrew into the realms of the JRPG and fighting games. He played his games excessively, to the point Kurogiri considered it an obstruction to his training and duties. Their master, on the other hand, seemed to encourage it as a means of allowing Tomura to learn and grow in his own manner.

Sensei had a surprisingly hands-off approach to teaching Tomura, allowing the boy to experiment with minimal instruction, only offering guidance when it was asked of him. Given Tomura's desire to prove himself as the rightful leader of the League, it didn't happen often, though Sensei seemed to anticipate this, watching from the shadows in amusement as Tomura tried time after time to impress him.

He could simply warp the food into Tomura's room, but Kurogiri was courteous if nothing else. He gave a light rap against the door to announce his presence, knowing from experience that the door was almost always locked when Tomura played his games. The mashing of buttons and furious mutterings came to an abrupt halt. A moment passed before Kurogiri heard a disinterested grunt, the most he was probably going to get in terms of a response to his knock.

"Tomura," Kurogiri said.

"What?" Tomura responded with a raspy, irritated voice.
"I have brought you a light dinner," Kurogiri said, and no sooner had the words come out of his mouth did the door crack open. Tomura's gangly hand reached out and snatched one of the boxes closing the door promptly once he pulled his hand back.

In the brief moment that the door was open, Kurogiri got a glimpse of Tomura's room: it was disorganized and cluttered, with laundry and electrical cords and controllers strewn about. It was also incredibly dim, the blinds drawn shut and the lights barely giving off any luminance.

What was a surprising sight given Tomura's disposition were several piles of books stacked away in a corner. They weren't regular books of poetry or classical fiction—Lord knows Tomura hated reading those—but rather, gaming books: strategy guides, walkthroughs, magazines, etc..

It made Kurogiri wonder how their master was going to convince Tomura to willingly take up and read the Darkhold, knowing of the boy's distaste for magic and disdain for non-gaming books. He'd suggested merely ordering Tomura to read it, but Sensei thought otherwise; the boy had to be convinced of the book's merits on his own, with as little forcible input as possible. How he was going to do that given he never gave the book so much as a second glance or thought was beyond Kurogiri, but Sensei had a storied history of defying expectations. He would just have to trust that his master's foresight had not blurred since losing to All Might and Doctor Strange six years ago, and that all would remain on schedule and according to plan.

Time would tell.

Lingering no longer on the master's schemes for Tomura's progression, Kurogiri turned toward the end of the hall, to the room that Ikiji occupied. Unlike Tomura's room, however, the door was slightly ajar and the room itself seemed significantly brighter, too.

Assuming decency on the boy's end, Kurogiri rapped his hand against the door as he cautiously strolled in, only to stop short and nearly drop his carefully prepared meal out of shock. Ikiji was suspended in midair, loosely tangled in a mess of coiling threads of pure, white energy. The tips of the threads were probing against and piercing through his skull, ostensibly directly into his brain. The threads themselves emanated from a series of triquetras that at first glance appeared painted onto the floor, but Kurogiri quickly realized they were pure energy, too. The symbols were laced with various runes and symbols, spirals and arches forming complex shapes that defied imagination as much as it did explanation.

But that was pretty much magic in a nutshell, wasn't it? Defying imagination, explanation, even expectation. Small wonder Sensei was so fascinated by and well-versed in it all.

Kurogiri took an errant step toward the boy, unsure of this new ritual's function as well as his wellbeing. A loud creak in the floorboard beneath Kurogiri's step seemed enough to disrupt whatever Ikiji was attempting: his eyes snapped open in a panic, he collapsed to the ground, and the magic threads piercing his head swiftly dissipated back into the triquetras whence they came, which also vanished in a weak flash of light.

Kurogiri's first instinct was, of course, to rush to the boy's aid and administer what help he could, but something held him back. A familiar sensation—a presence even—that lingered in the air like a malignant haze, one that was noticeable to him but masked to Ikiji.

Sensei? Kurogiri asked himself. You must have had a reason for interfering in this ritual of his...

"...That ritual," Kurogiri spoke, formally announcing his presence to Ikiji. "I'd never seen one such as that before. What were you trying to accomplish?"
"It was...a memory-delving ritual," Ikiji said between pants. He kept his face turned away; was he perhaps upset by the intrusion? Or was it the failure of the spell that perturbed him most?

A memory-delving spell? Kurogiri wondered. He was now doubly curious as to why the master would interfere with such a venture, and also why he'd made his actions obvious to him but masked to Ikiji through dark, unknown means. Kurogiri decided he'd play along for now, and feign compassion to glean more answers if possible.

"I apologize if my intrusion is what sparked the failure of your...ritual," Kurogiri said with an apologetic bow. "If there is anything I can do to either make up for it or to help you succeed in your experimental endeavor—"

"No, no," Ikiji said with a wave of his hands, turning to face Kurogiri now. His face showed lingering traces of disappointment, but he was making a conscious effort not to direct said disappointment toward Kurogiri directly. "I am unsure what caused that backlash to occur, but there is little that you could do to help...just as there is little that even could be done about it to begin with."

"My progression is wildly different than Tomura's. I've recognized that for a while now," Ikiji said as he picked himself up, patting the dust off his knees. "I can only utilize what scant magical knowledge All For One possesses, and experiment and train from there." His face briefly twists with resentment. "I must admit, though, that being without a proper teacher these past six years has been...frustrating. My skill with Dormammu's magic has improved greatly since joining you all, but I still feel as if my growth would have been unquestionably exponential if he would allow me to read the Darkhold—"

"That tome is the master's, bequeathed to him by yours after his untimely death at the hand of Doctor Strange," Kurogiri said with a bit of a noticeable edge to his voice, subtly reinforcing that no potential thoughts of treachery would be tolerated while simultaneously rubbing salt in the wound that was Kaecilius's death. "In time, it will be passed down to Tomura, as is his right as the official leader of the League of Villains."

"Patience, Ikiji," Kurogiri continued, injecting a bit more benevolence into his voice. "In time, the master will deem you worthy of reading through its pages. Its knowledge, as we both understand, is vast and nearly incomprehensible—he likely worries such ceaseless knowledge would only derail what progress you've made thus far." Kurogiri walked past Ikiji and gently set the dinner box at the end of his neatly arranged bed. "But if you wish to prove yourself to the master, then you would be wise to prepare for tomorrow's operation."

"The attack on the Unforeseen Simulation Joint..." Ikiji muttered. "The plan to kill All Might..."

"The so-called Symbol of Peace remains as much a threat to your goals as Doctor Strange does," Kurogiri said softly, hoping to provoke Ikiji a little. "After all, he helped obstruct your late master's plan six years ago by defeating your current one."

Kurogiri fell silent, allowing his words to stew within Ikiji's head. Satisfied that the seed of motivation had taken root, he turned to leave.

"Thank you, Kurogiri," Ikiji suddenly spoke, stopping the wispy bartender in his tracks. "Thank you for everything you've done, even if it may appear at first glance that it wasn't a lot. Thank you for tolerating me and my...impatience. I know it must have been a lot to wrap your mind around—with my magic and whatnot—but I appreciate your efforts nonetheless. And I promise to perform well tomorrow. If killing All Might will bring the master one step closer to merging our world with the Dark Dimension, then I will do whatever I can. This I swear; I will do whatever All For One needs me to do in order to finish my master's dream of saving this world."
Kurogiri remained silent and still after Ikiji's declaration. He gave the boy a solemn nod, hoping that it wasn't too stiff and disingenuous, before departing back downstairs. The stairs creaked with each step he took, punctuating the quietude that otherwise permeated throughout the empty bar. He ruminated on Ikiji's words, quietly thankful that the boy's frustration and impatience had not yet reached a point that warranted any suspicions regarding treason.

"Such a good boy he's become," The sickeningly suave voice of All For One spoke through the monitor.

Though this talk with his master was abrupt and unplanned, Kurogiri was not at all nonplussed by it; he had long been acquainted with his master's tendency to arrive unannounced.

"The memory-delving ritual Ikiji was attempting to complete," Kurogiri spoke in hushed tones as he approached the blank monitor behind the bar. "You interrupted it?"

"Indeed," All For One said.

The bar fell briefly back into a state of stillness, and Kurogiri wondered if his master was not going to explain his meddling after all.

"I will do whatever he needs me to do..." All For One said suddenly, parroting Ikiji's words and confirming he had indeed been listening in, too. "I am pleased to see the state of dependency Ikiji is demonstrating himself to be in. Now we must ensure he stays locked in that state until we are ready."

"And that is why you interfered with his ritual?" Kurogiri asked. "To ensure he remains dependent on the League?"

"His drive to prove his worthiness to me will keep him firmly under my service," All For One said, and Kurogiri could practically hear the sneer on his face through the monitor. "And his ignorance of the truth will keep him shackled in place regardless of his determination. The knowledge that even a simple memory-delving spell can offer could inspire him to seek independence and power from others outside my sphere of influence. Ikiji Kokotsu need not gain any more power than he has now, lest he surpass even my skill in magic with his own. The Darkhold will forever be kept out of his reach. He must stay on the path that I have paved for him...the path that will lead to 'the promised time' I have prepared so long for."

All For One's words hung thickly in the air, and the silence that followed was all too beckoning for Kurogiri to ignore. His body dissolved into a swirling mass, flowing through space directly toward his Sensei's coordinates at the Nomu warehouse. His body quickly reconstituted within his master's physical presence, though the man gave no immediate acknowledgment to his servant's arrival. The room remained nearly pitch black as it usually was, the monitor before All For One emitting just enough luminance to read the dark tome laid out before him.

Kurogiri thought long and hard before finally addressing his master: "You are referring to these...so-called 'Infinity Stones', correct, Sensei?"

"Such fascinating objects, are they not?" All For One said with a grin. The pages of the Darkhold began flipping rapidly, settling on a page illustrating all six stones beside a depiction of a golden gauntlet. With a wave of his hand, the six illustrations peeled off the paper, shining in their respective, unique colors as they swirled around his fingers. "Six Universal essences born at the dawn of the Universe, coalescing into concentrated ingots and scattering to the far reaches of time and space."

Kurogiri watched silently as the six depictions danced above his master's hands, his fingertips lithely...
reaching out to touch them, only to fade through the Darkhold’s illusion again and again.

"The Darkhold has told me much about these stones: Space, Time, Mind, Soul, Reality, and Power."
All For One continued. "Sadly, most of their locations are beyond even the knowledge of this ancient grimoire, and all but two of the Infinity Stones remain well beyond my reach, lost in a universe no human can traverse.

"But I was not deterred," he continued, the illusions of the stones drifting away from his fingertips and returning to the page whence they came. "I became determined that if the Darkhold could not help me acquire the actual stones in their entirety...then I would use its knowledge to find the means to create facsimiles that will make up the difference. Thus, I could gather faux Infinity Stones in my own manner."

"And Ikiji is the key to one such stone," Kurogiri correctly surmised.

Again, the Darkhold sprang to life, its pages flipping several times to a new section: one that listed information on the orange Infinity Stone they'd seen just moments before.

"Correct: the Soul Stone," All For One said as he peered down at the page, its contents long since etched into his mind. "There are many different kinds of magic, from the space-shifting magic granted by Dormammu to nature-based Druidic magic to the White, eldritch magic used by that accursed Sorcerer Supreme. There are numerous branches of magic, and each of them abide by their own unique sets of rules."

All For One traced a finger across the lines of text inscribed on the page. "With some types of magic, the rules can be bent or circumvented entirely with the right know-how; others cannot be. Soul magic is one such magic that abides by strict, inviolable rules, and the rule for acquiring something akin to the Soul Stone is no different: a soul for a soul. No exceptions."

The scarred supervillain chuckled darkly. "Ikiji will do whatever I need him to do? What excellent tidings! When the time comes, when the Tentoria Tenebris is finally in our grasp, the boy will need to fulfill his most important role: Ikiji Kokotsu will have to die to give me my own Soul Stone."

All For One continued chuckling over the boy's seemingly sealed fate, but Kurogiri remained silent and still, not offering anymore input into the conversation as he ruminated. There was a restlessness—a doubt—about him that All For One quickly picked up on.

"...You are skeptical," All For One said.

"I am, Sensei," Kurogiri responded honestly. "Forgive me if I come across as rude, but...it all honestly seems too good to be true. Tomura has similar thoughts, and you know as well as I do what his stance on magic is: he considers it 'cheating'."

All For One barked out a laugh. "Tomura must learn in his own manner, and I have no doubt that he will come to see the necessity of magic for our grand plans. Once he recognizes magic as a useful and necessary tool for his dreams of anarchy, he will jump at the chance to learn as much of it as he can."

"...How can you be so sure?" Kurogiri asked cautiously, being careful not to overstep his bounds.

"I believe our operation at the USJ tomorrow will yield a bevy of interesting results," All For One said as the hulking form of their specially-designed Nomu strode out of the shadows. "And I also believe said results will be more than enough to motivate Tomura and Ikiji alike."

"I believe our operation at the USJ tomorrow will yield a bevy of interesting results," All For One said as the hulking form of their specially-designed Nomu strode out of the shadows. "And I also believe said results will be more than enough to motivate Tomura and Ikiji alike."
The day after elections for Class President, 1-A are surprised to learn that they will be traveling to an off-campus facility for the next lesson for Basic Hero Training: rescue training! However, an unexpected incursion by villains that are all too familiar to Izuku has left the fledgling heroes training to rescue themselves!

12:50 p.m., U.A High.

Standard morning classes were dutifully trudged through, stomachs were filled by the assiduous meals prepared by Lunch Rush, and the students of 1-A were now abuzz with anticipation for today's lesson on Hero Basic Training. Some, like Izuku, nervously fidgeted in their seats; some, like Bakugo, were restless with impatience for All Might's arrival; others still, like Kaminari, were wrought with tension and dread as to what mystery lesson they would have to endure today.

The first official day of classes had brought about combat training, pitting classmate against classmate as they tested their Quirks in a battle-oriented environment. The day after was far more studious, as each trial was analyzed from top to bottom, and with each student receiving full, formal critiques of their performances, including their strengths to build on and areas of weakness that required improving.

Izuku's biggest critique had been on his recklessness and eagerness to engage Kirishima in close range combat, a potential disaster given the physical handicap that was his scarred hands and lack of physical bulk. If it weren't for the element of chaos his 'Support tech' injected into the battle, he would've been thrashed by Kirishima quite easily.

I have to remember that my powers are ill-suited for close range combat with the way I am now, Izuku thought. This could change in the future as I incorporate more spells into my repertoire, but for now, I should do my best to keep a reasonable distance from my opponents.

"Afternoon, class," Aizawa said dryly as he entered the classroom, without his signature sleeping bag for a change.

Some of the students groaned aloud, disappointed that Aizawa had strolled in instead of All Might. Izuku and Kirishima, on the other hand, perked up with curiosity: would Aizawa be teaching today's Basic Hero Training lesson? Where was All Might?

"Today's Basic Hero Training session has been turned into one that will include three instructors: All Might, myself, and one other person," Aizawa said from behind the class podium, seemingly anticipating their questions.

'Turned into'? Izuku thought. I wonder what's so special about today's lesson that they would need multiple instructors?

"What will we be doing then, Aizawa-sensei?" Sero asked aloud what everyone else was thinking.

"Shipwrecks, landslides, fires, floods—everything you can think of," Aizawa said as he held up a
card much like All Might had on their first day, with this one reading 'RESCUE' in big, bold letters. "This is today's lesson: Rescue Training."

Most of the class seemed to visibly perk up at the announcement, chattering excitedly at the prospect of practicing rescue operations. Such work was the cornerstone for the Pro Heroes they were training to become, aside from battling wicked villains, of course.

"Rescue, huh?" Kaminari said tiredly, slumping in his seat. "I bet it'll be a lot of hard work, too..."

"Hey, cheer up, man!" Kirishima said excitedly from his seat behind Kaminari, pounding his desk with ecstatic fists as Iida scolded him from where he sat. "Rescue is the core duty of any hero! Just think about it: this is just another step toward becoming manly, dependable pros like All Might!"

Izuku shot a sideways glance at Kirishima. Like All Might, huh? Izuku recalled his earlier thoughts regarding the private conversation All Might had with Kirishima after the Battle Trials. If All Might really is considering you as the inheritor of One For All, then I bet he'll be keeping a closer eye on you, Kirishima.

"I'm not finished." Aizawa said sternly, causing the students to quiet down and all eyes to snap forward again. "During this lesson, you can decide whether you want to wear your costumes." Aizawa pushed the same remote All Might had used, causing all of the costume slots to emerge from the far wall. "However, I recommend that you do wear your costumes. Your time doing rescue training in different environments will allow you to get a good feel of your costume's limitations. That being said, the rescue training will take place at a location off-campus, so we'll be taking a bus. That's all, so get ready, and be quick."

With that, Aizawa turned away and lumbered out of the classroom, leaving the 1-A students to collect their costumes and change without delay. One by one, they rose by column to retrieve their outfits.

Rescue training... Izuku remained in his seat, deep in contemplation as his peers collected their costumes one at a time. The rescue aspect of hero work was something he'd admired ever since he was a boy, watching his idol All Might rescue countless civilians—all with a smile on his face. Sorcerers were no different in that regard, especially his sensei, Doctor Strange, whom Izuku had come to admire as much as All Might, if not more so. The man had saved him from an early, watery grave, and Izuku was now keenly aware of the extra-dimensional threats he staved off as Earth's Sorcerer Supreme.

If he wanted to become a skilled sorcerer—and the greatest Pro Hero on top of that—he would have to give it his all today, letting his instructors guide him how to best use his powers to save people. Above all other aspects of hero work, rescue was the one thing he wanted to specialize in the most.

Looking back throughout his adventures up until this point, Izuku couldn't deny he probably had a leg up over his classmates in this department: he'd stopped Ikiji from killing Wong at Kamar-Taj, defended Mei during the harrowing confrontation with Blackout, saved some of his own classmates during the Entrance Exam, and risked his own life to save his master's during the ordeal with Brigand. If rescue was the name of the game, then Izuku had a bit of experience already under his belt.

But it wouldn't be that simple. Aizawa-sensei had mentioned the implementation of different environments—what exactly did that entail? He figured there was rational logic behind it: different environments meant different factors that could affect how he used his magic when trying to rescue a person, or possibly many.
One step at a time, Izuku! He thought triumphantly as he stood up along with the rest of his column. His costume (sans his cloak, which abhorred being folded) was stored away with all the others'. Just pay close attention and use today to hone your skills as much as possible!

Unfortunately, Izuku's first step for today's lesson involved tripping over his own backpack which rested by his feet in an unceremonious slump, crammed full of books, notes, and papers. With a startled yell, Izuku caught himself before he tumbled to the ground, but his feet sent his pack sprawling open, scattering his supplies all over the ground.

"Watch where you're stepping, Deku!" Bakugo grumbled as he fetched his costume, glancing back toward Izuku with marked disdain.

"S-sorry!" Izuku stammered as he dropped to his knees, hastily trying to scoop everything back into his pack before the rest of his class had departed for the changing rooms.

"Midoriya," Aizawa poked his head back in. "You're taking too much time. Hurry up."

"I'll be right there!" Izuku replied as he crammed the last of his school supplies back into his bag and roughly shoving it back under his desk. He nearly tripped again springing back to his feet, yanking his costume out of its slot before sprinting out the door toward the changing rooms, where he'd left his cloak waiting patiently all day for him.

Izuku had been sure he had all of his belongings accounted for, but alas, hastiness invites sloppiness. In his mad rush to collect his effects, he failed to notice the slip of paper that slipped out his pack, fluttering silently to the floor.

Izuku Midoriya would realize too little, too late that he'd left Doctor Strange's summoning card behind.

"Midoriya! Let's grab seats together, man!" Kirishima yelled, throwing an arm around Izuku's shoulders. Most of the students were milling around outside the school, conversing with one another as they waited for the bus to be ready for boarding. Izuku was standing by himself, lost in thought, which likely prompted Kirishima's approach. "I can't wait to get this rescue training under way! I just hope we don't have to travel too far to get there, you know?"

"Yeah, sure!" Izuku said tensely, surprised by the sudden contact which jolted him out of his thoughts.

"Hey, why so nervous?" Kirishima said with a grin. "I figured out of everyone here, you'd be the least nervous about today."

"Huh?" Izuku blinked. "How do you figure that?"

Kirishima's grin faltered a bit. "Let's face it, some Quirks are better at rescuing people than beating up bad guys. And your Quirk lets you open up portals, summon shields; heck, you even have a piece of tech that lets you fly! But me?" He raised his arm, letting it stiffen and sharpen for effect. "My Hardening doesn't have any of the flashiness so many current pros have. Regardless, I don't know how suited for rescue I can be with my power."

"That's nonsense!" Now it was Izuku's turn to surprise Kirishima. "There are plenty of applications for your Quirk in rescue scenarios! Just think about all that extra endurance your hardened body parts have: you could catch a wall or pillar that's about to fall on some trapped people, or lift it off of them, or even use your power to barrel your way through debris and obstacles if a preferred path is destroyed or otherwise blocked! With a bit of practice, starting with today's lesson, you'd be great at
rescue, Kirishima!"

"I...never thought about any of that," Kirishima blinked, staring at Izuku with wonderment. "You're as smart as you are manly!"

"Eh, I wouldn't be so quick to say that," Izuku said as he sheepishly rubbed the back of his head. "I'm here for the same reason as everyone else: to learn how to properly become a hero!"

Kirishima chuckled. "True, but you have to admit, your Quirk is pretty well-suited for rescue. It's definitely the best out of anyone else that's here!"

"What'd you say!?"

Izuku and Kirishima swiveled their heads to see a steaming Bakugo stomping toward them from behind, his glaring eyes darting back and forth between them as he clenched and unclenched his hands repeatedly, and with his grenade gauntlets equipped, he seemed all the more volatile. Kirishima didn't seem too nonplussed by Bakugo's approach—he was more curious than anything else—but Izuku knew an angry Kacchan when he saw one.

Kirishima, oblivious to the brewing storm of hostility clouding above Bakugo's head, attempted a greeting. "Hey! You're Bakugo, right?"

"Shut it, Shitty Hair!" Bakugo growled, jabbing an accusatory finger into Kirishima's shoulder. "What'd you say about that nerd? That he'd be the best at rescue!? Well, I'm here to make it clear that the only one who'll be dominating today is Katsuki Bakugo! You hear me? I'll blow everyone away on my way to the top! And you both better believe that!"

"We believe it! We believe it!" Izuku cried, waving his hands back and forth as Bakugo whirled right back around and stomped back to where he was standing.

"Huh. Bakugo's got quite a competitive streak. I dig it!" Kirishima said, rocking Izuku back and forth with the arm over his friend's shoulders. "He's pretty manly, too, huh?"

_You're too pure for this world, Kirishima..._ Izuku thought as Kirishima rocked him. "Y-yeah, manly and then some..."

"Bakugo's Quirk uses explosions, right?" Kirishima asked as he finally released Izuku's shoulders. "If a guy like that could learn to rescue people with his power, then I guess I really don't have any excuse to not learn how to rescue with my own!"

Kirishima laughed and went off to chat up some of the other 1-A classmates before boarding began, leaving Izuku behind to watch him inquisitively. _I said there were plenty of applications for your Hardening power, but that's not all there is to your Quirk, is it, Kirishima...? You never explained it yourself, but it appeared to let off a lot of strength all at once during the Battle Trial...something to do with stockpiled energy from your hardening, perhaps?_

A whistle suddenly went off directly behind Izuku, causing the poor boy to leap up in fright as well as catching the attention of the rest of the students. He turned and saw that Iida had approached him from behind, a whistle clearing stuck between his lips, his countenance stern and rigid with authority.

"Izuku! As our new Class President's staunch supporter, I must recommend we begin the boarding process right away!" Iida said with robotic gesticulations. "I suggest having the class form two lines by student numbers in order to make boarding as smooth as possible—!"

As Iida raved on about his suggestions, chopping his hands up and down all the while, Izuku waved
his own hands to try and calm his overly eager but well-meaning ally down.

_Iida was serious when he said he'd try to help me any way he could!_ Izuku thought. _I guess everyone means what they say at U.A!_

"We're here," Aizawa said in his usual tired manner as the bus drove past a final copse of trees, slowing to a halt before a splendorous glass and steel-covered dome.

"This is where we'll be doing rescue training?" Izuku wondered aloud as he and the rest of the heroes-in-training departed from the bus. They unloaded right before the doors of this new facility: large, blue, and quite imposing.

"Welcome, everyone! You made it right on time!"

I-A honed their sights on the source of the new voice, a stout figure with a domed helmet, garbed in a thick, white coat of sorts. Large, white eyes peered at them from underneath the helmet, appearing as excited as some of the students were.

Izuku recognized this hero immediately. "That's—!"

_"The Space Hero Thirteen!"_ Uraraka cried out from beside Izuku, startling him with her sudden show of excitement. _"A gentlemanly hero who specializes in rescuing people during disasters! One of my absolute favorite heroes!"

_Uraraka_"Wow, I can't believe someone other than me is willing to nerd out over heroes!_ Izuku thought.

"I look forward to working with all of you!" Thirteen said, ushering the students toward the enormous doors of the facility. "Let's enter without anymore delay!"

Upon entering past the giant double doors, Izuku rubbed his eyes to make sure the sight he and the rest of I-A were all seeing wasn't a mirage of some kind.

"Wow...!"

The yellow and red-bricked pathway they were following led down toward a courtly central plaza, fitted with a stately fountain and exquisite greenery. Of course, that wasn't what everyone's attention was drawn to: it was the six sections surrounding the central plaza that had the students fascinated, with each one emulating a different environment.

Scanning from left to right, Izuku first laid eyes on a section devoted to a destroyed urban environment, its buildings cracked open and tilting precariously above shattered streets. Next was a sloped zone with the tops of buildings jutting out of the ground; Izuku surmised it was a landslide-themed section. The zone beyond that was mountainous, with twin crags peaking above the rocky terrain, and a bridge connecting the two. Beside that was a red-tinted domed section. Heat ceaselessly rippled off the dome, indicating something fire-related within its confines. A large lake was situated to the right of the heat dome, with a large slide constructed above it and a ship resting in the middle; probably a shipwreck disaster. To the right of that—and the left of Izuku—was another domed section, this one tinted blue instead of red. There was no heat rippling off the roof, but the sound of howling winds could be heard from within: a windstorm scenario.

"It's so reminiscent of Universal Studios Japan!" Kirishima exclaimed.

_"This facility is a training ground I developed for U.A, incorporating a variety of disaster scenarios for young heroes-in-training to practice with!"_ Thirteen said proudly as the students overlooked the
magnum opus that was their facility. "I call it...the Unforeseen Simulation Joint! USJ for short!"

*It really is just like the actual USJ...*

"Thirteen," Aizawa said as he sauntered toward the coated hero. "Where is All Might? I was told that he would meet us here before the lesson began."

"About that..." Thirteen leaned in to whisper to Aizawa. "He's resting in the teacher's lounge. Seems he did too much hero work this morning." Thirteen held up three fingers for emphasis to get the point across without outright spilling the beans to the students. Izuku and Kirishima, however, instantly recognized what Thirteen meant.

*Three fingers? Did All Might reach his time limit doing heroics again...?* They both thought simultaneously.

"What an irrational man," Aizawa grumbled, shaking his head. "I suppose it can't be helped. The floor's all yours, Thirteen." Aizawa meandered over to the USJ's gate, leaning against it as he relinquished class authority to his fellow Pro Hero.

"A few things before we begin," Thirteen said, raising a hand before the class to reel in their attention. "I am sure most of you are aware of my Quirk: Black Hole. With my power, I can suck up anything into my body and disintegrate it."

"And you've been able to save many people during disasters with that power, right?" Uraraka asked excitedly.

"True, but my power is also one that can kill rather easily," Thirteen said, eliciting looks of surprise from the students of 1-A. "More than a few of you have powers like that as well, correct?" Those wide white eyes, shielded by the domed helmet, now scanned each of them studiously. "In our current society, Quirks are certified and strictly regulated by S.H.I.E.L.D., but even with all that regulation in place, there will always be abilities that can kill with a single misstep."

"With the fitness tests Aizawa had you complete, you learned how to creatively utilize your Quirks in ways you couldn't do before," Thirteen continued. "During All Might's Battle Trials, you learned firsthand the potential dangers of unleashing your powers against other people. Now think of the lessons I'll be teaching you today as a fresh start: I will show you how to use your Quirks to save lives. Heroes do not have powers just so they can fight villains; they have powers so that they may help others. It is my hope you will leave here today with that understanding."

*Thirteen's right,* Izuku thought, recalling Kirishima's words about how his powers were so well-suited for rescue. What Kirishima didn't know—what few people aside from Mei and his sensei knew—was that even with his current powers, he was more than capable of killing someone; he'd ended Marcus's life, after all. That incident no longer haunted him as it once did, but the impact it had on his view of his own magic was undeniable. In the context of Thirteen's speech, magic was no different than Quirks. *Even my portals could kill if closed improperly. And I definitely want to make sure I don't have a repeat of Kamar-Taj ever again...*

"That's all I have!" Thirteen said with a bow. "Thank you for listening!"

"All right, guess we should get started," Aizawa said amidst the applause of his students. "First we'll__"

*Zakt!*

An unexpected crackling of electricity echoed throughout the facility, and the rows of lights
illuminating the structure suddenly dimmed, catching everyone present off-guard. The central fountain down in the plaza stuttered repeatedly as a black vortex manifested before it, twisting itself into view before suddenly erupting, spreading itself across the plaza.

"Everyone gather together and don't split up!" Aizawa exclaimed as he caught sight of the black mist swirling down on the plaza. "Thirteen! Stay with the students no matter what!"

"What the hell is that!?" Kirishima asked as he also noticed the mist swirling below. Soon, every one of the fledgling heroes had their attention on the trouble brewing down on the central plaza.

Izuku looked on with his classmates as the mist stretched itself out, with dozens of figures marching out and assembling in the plaza. The horde of newcomers were varied in size and appearance—some were definitely ganglier and more grotesque than others—but they all carried a certain malevolence to them.

Izuku gulped. Something was off; something was wrong.

"Has the lesson already started...?" Kirishima squinted his eyes to get a better look at what was transpiring.

"Stay where you are!" Aizawa snapped. He slipped his yellow goggles over his face, and Izuku immediately recognized the severity of their predicament. "This isn't part of the lesson; the USJ has become overrun by villains!"

Aizawa's binding cloth furiously unraveled as the last of the villains—a hulking beaked behemoth—stumbled through the black fog. Thirteen stepped in front of the shocked students, keeping vigilance over them as Aizawa prepared for battle.

"Yesterday's breach must've been their doing..." Aizawa muttered.

_Villains invading via a black, transporting fog... Izuku thought frantically. This is just like Kamar-Taj all over again! That villain with the black fog must be the same one who tried to help Ikiji take the Book of Cagliostro, the one I used the Eye against!_

A haunting chill ran down Izuku's spine as he realized the implications of this realization. Was he here, too? Was Ikiji present, mingling among the throng of villains gathered below? Was he responsible for this newest attack? Izuku closed his eyes, trying to reach out with his magic to see if he could detect the same kind of tainted presence like he did back with Marcus, but...he felt nothing conclusive.

"Villains! Infiltrating a hero school? There's no way!" Kirishima said in disbelief.

"Teacher!" Yaoyorozu addressed Thirteen, wiggling her way to the front of the class between Izuku and Kirishima. "Doesn't the USJ have trespasser sensors?"

"We do, but..."

"If the sensors are not responding, one of their Quirks must be responsible for it," Todoroki said, his stoicism not even remotely affected by the sudden appearance of villains. "An isolated part of the campus during a scheduled class...this has all been meticulously planned out. These villains have some sort of goal in mind."

"H-hey guys, I can't contact the school," Kaminari said, tapping the square-like earphone attached to his head as he stepped behind Izuku and Yaoyorozu.
"Thirteen, begin evacuating the students," Aizawa instructed as he stepped forward. "Worry about contacting the school once they're clear of this building!" With that, he launched himself from the top of the stairs, descending directly into the throng of villains waiting below. He masterfully weaved his binding cloth forward, snagging villains left and right and throwing them into each other with little effort.

"Aizawa-sensei can hold his own against a large group of opponents better than I thought! Izuku thought as he joined his classmates in evacuating. And with his goggles on, they can't tell whose Quirks are erased until it's nearly too late!"

"Hey, Midoriya!" Kirishima yelled as he raced to Izuku's side. "We may not be able to contact the school, but you should still be able to open a portal to somewhere in the main building, right?"

"You're right!" Izuku exclaimed, mentally cursing himself for focusing too much on Aizawa's fight instead of doing that earlier. He brought his fingers up, rotating them as the space before the enormous doors into the USJ sparked with swirling embers.

Only for the embers conjured by Izuku's magic to be immediately dispelled and scattered by the sudden emergence of the black fog.

That fog of his...! He used it to cut right through my magic like he did on the whips being used to restrain Ikiji! This is bad!

"Greetings, fledgling heroes," The black fog spoke as it slowly reformed into a vaguely humanoid shape. "We are the League of Villains. Please forgive the rudeness of our sudden incursion, but we have invited ourselves into U.A, the home of heroes, to ensure that All Might, the so-called Symbol of Peace, draws his last breath. Has there been a change to the schedule? I believe All Might was supposed to be here today."

As his face finally reformed, the black mist villain observed each of the students with the yellow, jagged streaks that were his eyes, doing a double take as they passed over Izuku. His eyes narrowed as he undoubtedly recognized the boy, the sorcerous outfit he was sporting as his hero costume making him all the more recognizable.

Izuku gulped. He knew he was caught.

"You." The villain—Izuku struggled to remember his name, though he was positive he'd heard it at Kamar-Taj—addressed him directly. "What is a sorcerer doing enrolled in a class meant to train heroes?"

Izuku could hear confused murmurs among his fellow classmates; it must not have been precisely clear who the villain was addressing...at first, anyway.

"Midoriya?" Kirishima said as he hardened and sharpened his arms. "Is he...talking to you?"

Izuku became acutely aware of nearly every pair of eyes present slowly training onto him.

"What's that villain talking about?"

"Sorcerer? He was talking to Midoriya?"

"Midoriya? Do you...know this guy?"

"How unorthodox," The villain mused. If he was terribly caught off guard by Izuku's unexpected presence, he certainly didn't show it. "No matter. You will just have to be dealt with accordingly, like
all the other 'golden eggs' gathered before me. That is, after all, the role I am to play."

Thirteen aimed a finger toward the villain, only to be taken aback with the rest of 1-A as Bakugo and Kirishima launched themselves into combat. The smoke triggered by Bakugo's explosive punch quickly filled the path, obstructing everyone's vision.

"The role you play?" Bakugo snorted. "The only role you play here is to be defeated by me!"

A malicious chuckle echoed from the fading smoke, revealing the fog villain to be completely unharmed by the boys' attacks. "Oh, yes," he mused. "'Golden eggs', indeed..."

"My role...is to scatter you children to your respective execution grounds!" The villain roared as the mist constituting his body surged forth with a vengeance.

Izuku squinted his eyes as the mist overwhelmed them all. He cried out as Kirishima and Bakugo were swallowed whole by the mist first. Iida tackled Uraraka and Sato the ground. Shoji had his many monstrous arms anchoring Sero to the ground. Ashido and Asui were holding each other, terrified as the mist consumed them next, along with the flailing form of Mineta. Tokoyami and Koda vanished, and then Ojiro and Aoyama were covered in the shadows, as well. Todoroki leaped back, but the fog had them completely surrounded, swallowing him whole from behind. Izuku flinched as a pair of frightened, trembling hands slapped down on his shoulders, and he felt something long and skinny constrict around his waist before the mist sucked him in entirely.

Izuku yelled out in a panic as his feet and the ground were no longer connected. His bearings were totally lost, and the only sensation he felt besides the hands on his shoulders and whatever was wrapped around his waist was that of falling. The mist pulled him down, down, down, until, at last, a glimmer of light could be seen through the end of the shadowy aperture.

"Whoa!" Izuku's vision spun as the shadows spat him out, dumping him onto a hard, rocky surface. He stayed on the ground for a few seconds, shaking his head to regain his senses.

"Midoriya, man, get up!" Izuku heard Kaminari's shaky voice.

Izuku struggled to his feet, noting the hands on his shoulders must've been Kaminari while the cord holding onto his waist was one of Jiro's elongated earphone jacks.

"What...what happened?" Izuku groaned as he glanced between Kaminari, Jiro, and Yaoyorozu, whose attention was focused on something surrounding them. A series of shifting shapes became far less blurred after Izuku rubbed his eyes, and he was quickly aware of the horde of villains that had them surrounded on the rocky crags of the USJ's mountain zone.

_I see...so that villain used his mist-like Quirk to scatter the villains into the different zones along with the rest of us!_ Izuku thought as he glanced over toward the central plaza, where he could vaguely make out Aizawa-sensei's form locked in combat with what villains remained down there.

"Don't zone out, Class Prez!" Jiro yelled at Izuku as she pulled a blade out of Yaoyorozu's body, courtesy of the girl's creation Quirk.

Yaoyorozu manifested a long, steel pole out of her body and took up a defensive stance. Kaminari grimaced as he cowered behind them and Izuku, not all looking forward to facing off against bonafide villains.

The villains, all of varying sizes and appearances—and Quirks—had them surrounded, but made no move against the students. Izuku watched them curiously as his hands blazed with magic, his cloak unfurled, ready to take its master to the skies. What were the villains waiting for? For _them_ to make
the first move? They had them outnumbered easily five-to-one!

The sound of clapping rang out from among the crowd of villains, snapping Izuku out of his musings. Jiro, Kaminari, and Yaoyorozu all turned to face the source along with Midoriya.

"Izuku Midoriya," A hauntingly familiar voice taunted Izuku. The other villains before them stepped to the side, giving the figure speaking ample amount of room to approach the front of the pack. "The apprentice of the Sorcerer Supreme himself is also trying to become a Pro Hero? Will you ever cease to surprise me?"

Izuku's blood froze. It was a figure he recognized all too well. Those flowing golden and brown robes. That jagged white hair. The purple skin around his eyes, outlined silver and cracked. The scar trailing from his left eye to his jaw line. The triple crescent insignia of Dormammu emblazoned on his forehead.

Ikiji Kokotsu was here after all.
Chapter Summary

Separated from the majority of his classmates in a facility overrun with villains, Izuku comes face to face with a notorious enemy from his past. Amidst the subsequent fighting, revelations are made, secrets are revealed, and emotions run rampant! Izuku has surely become stronger since he last fought Ikiji at Kamar-Taj, but has the zealot grown stronger, as well...?

Ikiji Kokotsu was here.

He was here.

Izuku's eyes remained locked onto Ikiji's hauntingly purple gaze, his malicious smile taunting him as the zealot approached through the pack of villains.

"Will you ever cease to surprise me?"

The mere sight and sound of the corrupted zealot caused Izuku's blood to curdle and his mouth to run dry, memories of their first confrontation at Kamar-Taj rushing through his brain in a flood of panic. Amidst that panic a hundred questions tumbled around in his head: why was Ikiji of all people here at U.A? Was he in charge of this 'League of Villains' the Warp Quirk-user introduced themselves as? Izuku knew of nothing magical being kept on the premises—no forbidden tomes or relics of power —so what could have been at the USJ that required his attention as well as his presence?

"...we have invited ourselves into U.A...too ensure that All Might, the so-called Symbol of Peace, draws his last breath."

The Black Mist had declared their intention to kill All Might. If Ikiji is allied with—or even leading —these villains, did that mean he too wished to kill All Might? But why? Izuku understood the zealot's hatred of Doctor Strange, but what grievance did Ikiji have for All Might?

"Questions, questions, so many questions," Ikiji's sickeningly sweet voice tickled Izuku's ears uncomfortably. "If it makes you feel any better, Izuku, I have plenty of questions myself."

"That's the second villain today that's recognized you, Midoriya."

Izuku looked behind him to see his three classmates he'd been warped with staring at him intently. Kaminari was understandably frightened by the ordeal unfolding around them, but Yaoyorozu and Jiro—the one who'd addressed Midoriya just now—were giving him stern looks. Izuku gulped as he locked eyes with Jiro; her eyes were lazy-looking at first glance, but they had a trace of something Izuku found himself fearing greatly: suspicion.

"Please don't think anything suspicious of me, I swear it's not anything like that!" Izuku cried out in defense. "Yeah we recognize each other...because I encountered this guy in the past. The mist guy, too. It was before U.A, even before the Entrance Exam. But I never thought I'd confront them again, here of all places..."

"Took the words right out of my mouth," Ikiji thrust himself into the conversation. "And I never
thought I would encounter *you* here." Ikiji's lips twisted into a sly grin. "Were the teachings of Kamar-Taj not enough for you after all, Izuku? If a more powerful sorcerer is what you wanted to become, then you should've joined me when I gave you the chance."

Izuku saw Yaoyorozu and Jiro tense up considerably. Even Kaminari looked taken aback. He bit his lip—he knew precisely what they must've been thinking: *Izuku was offered to become a villain?* It was true, Ikiji wasn't lying; Izuku's refusal to take Ikiji's invitation is what sparked their first fight after all.

"I trust him."

It was Kaminari. Izuku blinked and looked toward the spiky blonde with a mix of surprise and gratitude. Yaoyorozu and Jiro shared uncertain glances.

"Hey, he saved me during the Entrance Exam!" Kaminari said, noticing the uncertainty on the girls' faces. "And he's our Class President to boot! Midoriya, a bad guy? There's no way!"

"Alright, but why is he calling you a...'sorcerer'?" Jiro asked, stealing glances at the villains surrounding them, brandishing her sword to ensure they stayed at bay. "That mist villain called you that, too."

"Well, it's..." Izuku gulped hard, and he had to resist the urge to trace the scars on his hands hidden just beneath his fingerless gloves. Was he really about to do this? "It's because...I am one."

"...What?" Jiro blinked, clearly bewildered now.

"Midoriya..." Yaoyorozu whispered.

"Oh man..." Kaminari scratched his head and grimaced. "Now I'm *really* confused!"

"I'm sorry," Izuku muttered, balling his gloved hands into fists as he faced Ikiji again, returning his malevolent grin with a determined glare. "I know you all have a lot of questions. I promise to answer them after we get through this!"

"There's no need for any of you to worry about confusing little details and the questions that spawn from them," Ikiji said, his cracked eyes darting between all four students. "After all...why trouble you in your final hour?"

Ikiji raised his left hand and promptly snapped his fingers. The entire mountainside seemed to shudder and groan. Izuku and his companions yelled out as the tremors very nearly threw them off their feet. Izuku looked down as he regained his balance and froze; the ground beneath their feet began to warp and ripple slightly, the very rocks they stood on taking on the consistency of ceaseless small waves. All the hair on Izuku's arm stood up on end, his skin flaring with goosebumps as he remembered with trepidation the vicious assault Ikiji had once launched upon him at Kamar-Taj with this exact same power.

"Watch out!" Izuku yelled as he struggled to maintain his balance. "His powers allow him to manipulate space!"

"Come again!?" Jiro yelled as she jammed her elongated earphone jacks into the ground near her feet, anchoring her to the otherwise rippling earth below.

Yaoyorozu followed suit by ramming the end of her steel pole into the ground, but the constantly moving ground made it difficult for the two of them to keep their tools anchored into the rocks. Kaminari, hapless and helpless as he was, was left to flail and yell as he tried to prevent himself from
"Jiro! Kaminari! Midoriya! Please try to stay calm!" Yaoyorozu said, marshaling her composure as best she could. "And don't split up! We need to stick together!"

Ikiji merely chuckled and raised his right hand, snapping his fingers on that side. A great cloud of dust erupted from the ground, and the would-be heroes briefly shielded their eyes until it cleared moments later. The students collectively gasped in shock at the changes Ikiji spatially imposed on the plateau: the rocky ground had been warped completely flat, and numerous grid-like grooves sectioned the plateau surface into countless square sections. Izuku and each of his other classmates present stood atop one...and so did each villain before them.

"Midoriya..." Kaminari whimpered. "What the hell's going on!?!"

"Stick together?" Ikiji mockingly parroted Yaoyorozu. "Now where would the fun in that be?"
Again he snapped his fingers; multiple empty squared sections sunk downward, each leaving a darkened pit where they once were. The plateau groaned as rock slid against rock, and Izuku paled as the sectioned tiles Ikiji created began clicking into adjacent empty spaces all at once, slow at first, but steadily increasing in speed.

"You've gotten stronger, Izuku," Ikiji said as he too levitated into the air atop his own personal rocky tile, warped and rippling beneath his feet. "And more prepared, I see: Strange gave you your own Cloak of Levitation and trained you specifically for the day you and I confronted each other again."

"Master Strange told me the limits of your spatial magic!" Izuku said. "You can only freely manipulate solid, non-organic matter! You can't manipulate air or water, so fighting you like this gives me an advantage!"

"Does it now?" Ikiji asked coyly, the corners of his lips curling upward. He brought his palms together and slowly drew them apart, the space between them growing distorted and glasslike. He gripped both ends of the distortion and snapped it cleanly in two, brandishing two space shards against Izuku now.

Izuku bit his lip; his foe may not be able to manipulate air as he sees fit, but space is still space. He knew that there was no environment—land, water, or air—where Ikiji would be totally powerless, and therefore completely prone to counter.

"You may have an advantage, no matter how slight, but what about them?" Ikiji asked tauntingly, pointing one of his shards back toward the plateau.

"Midoriya!"

Izuku gasped at his classmates' cries, daring to look down and away from Ikiji at the peril the zealot
was subjecting his companions to. Ikiji's sliding puzzle game was in full swing: square rocky tiles ferrying heroes-in-training and villains alike all sliding against one another, with villains using their Quirks or whatever weapons they carried to swipe at the 1-A students as they passed, aiming for the kill.

Jiro was faring well enough, though Ikiji's spatial manipulation and the rapidly shifting tiles were clearly things she wasn't prepared for. She still brandished the blade Yaoyorozu had created, deflecting all manner of scythes and knives the villains sliced her way, while also bringing some to their knees with her plugged-in stereo boots.

Yaoyorozu was faring the best, parrying blow after blow with her steel staff, and getting a hit in on at least every other villain that slid past her. Still, even from up above, Izuku could see the sweat forming on her brow, and the traces of fatigue threatening to set in.

Kaminari was faring the worst: Izuku spotted various nicks on the arms of his black jacket, blood trickling from underneath. His cheeks had been nicked, as well. His earpiece was missing entirely. He was so overwhelmed with panic—if his wide eyes and flailing demeanor were any indication—that he had devoted himself entirely to dodging and not trying to use his Quirk against the villains in retaliation. Every shift and slide of his tile caused him to stagger and sway to and fro; this particular shift saved him as he stumbled forward, narrowly dodging a heavy punch from a bulky, masked villain.

Izuku grimaced; he'd taken to the air knowing he'd be relatively safe from whatever spatial machinations Ikiji had planned for the mountain, but he'd been too hasty and forgotten that his classmates didn't have the luxury of a Cloak of Levitation.

"Bad form, Izuku, taking your eyes of an enemy right in front of you!" Ikiji yelled, swinging his space shards at him as his rocky platform zoomed by.

Izuku cursed himself for allowing his attention to be diverted, swiftly erecting another hasty barrier to stop the advance of his spatial blades. A shower of shimmering sparks erupted as blades crashed against shield, leaving two sorcerers locked against one another in the sky above the plateau.

"Stronger indeed," Ikiji grunted as he pushed forward, digging the edge of his blades into Izuku's mandala. "The first time we fought, I recall piercing right through your shield with my shard."

"Stop this, Ikiji!" Izuku grunted right back, pushing against Ikiji's blades will all his might. Beads of sweat were already racing down his face from the exertion. "Shifting tiles, sliding puzzles—are you even being serious!? Is this all just a game to you!?" He asked that question, but Izuku's eyes were locked with his, and he could see a seriousness—a madness and rage—stewing just beneath Ikiji's coy exterior.

"Oh, but whoever said a game shouldn't be taken seriously?" Ikiji ground out, raising himself above Izuku, though his foe's shield failed to budge.

Izuku grit his teeth, deciding to end the stalemate instead of futilely pushing any longer. His cloak whisked him backward, Ikiji's space shards slicing through empty air as the mandala shield weakened and faded away into sizzling embers. Izuku paused to catch his breath, eyeing Ikiji like a hawk, and Ikiji responded in kind. The zealot's tactics had thrown Izuku for a loop; he wasn't being overwhelming or acting out of devastating rage with his spatial powers as he had during their first bout. Izuku wanted to chalk it up to Ikiji just being cautious, but sincerely doubted it. Something else was different about him...

Ikiji seemed to sense this uncertainty. "Confused?" he asked with a small smile. "A lot's happened
since Kamar-Taj, Izuku. Even though I proved then that you were nothing to me, that operation had been deemed a failure. It was not until afterwards that I realized how rashly I’d acted, how I’d been blinded by my aggression.” Ikiji traced his knuckles against his right shoulder, gingerly feeling the concealed scars left behind by Strange’s fury. “I only acted because I felt assured of my victory; my arrogance prevented me from preparing properly.” He narrowed his eyes at Izuku, allowing his rage to leak out for a brief second. “Not this time. Months of methodical planning have led to this day. This time we came prepared. This time…” Ikiji’s soft smile mutated into a sinister sneer, recalling vividly the exact words All For One had spoken to him all those months ago. “This time I won’t be crippled by uncertainty, as you and your friends are this very moment!”

Ikiji stretched a hand down toward the plateau, flexing it with gnarled, bone-covered fingers as he willed the shifting tiles to accelerate even further. The already unsettling distortion of the rocky surface became even more intolerable, disorienting the eyes of everyone on the ground. The tiles all but crashed into each other repeatedly, making them appear more like craggy bumper cars now. Jiro, Yaoyorozu, and Kaminari were all flung from where they stood, tumbling helplessly from tile to tile as the villains assailed them, their faces and bodies battered repeatedly; even Ikiji’s allies struggled to maintain their balance.

Izuku remained where he levitated, watching in horror as his friends were brutalized by Ikiji’s twisting, shifting magic. “No…” He muttered fearfully, angling himself to fly down to rescue them before a sharp, glassy blade soared mere inches away from the tip of his nose. He turned to face Ikiji again, only to pale when he saw the rippling distortions of two more space shards hovering above the zealot’s head, their sharpened ends honing in directly toward Izuku’s body.

"I understand this fear, Izuku—yours and theirs," Ikiji taunted him. "It's perfectly comprehensible to think that you would be safe and sound within the boundaries of U.A. But allow me to let you in on a little secret." Again, Ikiji flexed his hand, and this time every single shifting, distorted earthen tile groaned to a sudden halt. The ground beneath Izuku's companions opened up, causing them to fall down feet first. The earth closed around their arms and waists, squeezing them in a stony vice. Only Jiro was in any position to fight back with her powerful earphone jacks, but they were also quickly swallowed into the ground before she could mount any kind of resistance. The villains gathered around them, watching maliciously and lecherously as they were all slowly beginning to be crushed to death.

"Izuku: you are not safe," Ikiji said darkly. "Not even close."

An unexpected yell, mired in fear and frustration, was Izuku’s only reply as he plummeted downward without another moment’s hesitation. The space shards were hot on his trail with a flick of Ikiji’s wrists, their undulating points nipping at Izuku’s heels. Izuku zipped across the sky as fast as the cloak would let him, making sharp turns and unpredictable descents and ascents whenever the shards appeared close to skewering him.

Nowhere to go…! Ikiji thought insidiously as he snapped his fingers once more, materializing a space shard directly in Izuku’s path as the others zoomed toward him from behind.

To the zealot’s shock, Izuku didn’t even flinch. The boy, face marred with ferocious tears, raised and slammed his magic-coated hands against the blade, catching it between his palms. Ikiji was equally caught off guard by Izuku’s cloth vambraces unwinding into lengthy red bindings, lashing out at and constricting the space shards honing in on Izuku’s backside. He could hardly believe his eyes: Izuku had stopped the space shards dead in their tracks.

*The cloak wasn’t the only relic he had!* Ikiji thought frantically as he repeatedly motioned for the shards to move with his fingers, only to irritably discover those bindings were practically adhered to
his spatial blades. They were of no use to him like this. *Three is my current limit*...

Begrudgingly, Ikiji willed the space shards away with a wave of his hand, the sharpened distortions melding back into the air until they were no more.

Izuku wasted no time in zooming back toward the ground, where the villains had gathered around his comrades. He didn't bother rewrapping the vambraces back around his forearms, allowing them to flutter behind him like unspooled threads of yarn along with his cloak. Out of his periphery he spotted Ikiji zooming in on his levitated platform of distorted rock.

*Good, he's coming in closer!* Izuku thought as his hands crackled with tiny arcs of electric magic. *If he thinks his space shards won't be as effective against me, then he'll have no choice but to resort to attacking me with his own close range Quirk! And when he closes the gap...!*

Izuku suddenly halted his descent about ten feet above the villains heads, some of which glanced up at him in confusion, no doubt expecting Ikiji to have dealt with this kid by now. The arcs of enchanted lightning escalated from his sweaty palms, running up and leaping off of his angrily twitching fingertips like voltaic rattlesnakes eager to strike out.

And eager to strike out Izuku was, as the villains that spotted him yelled out an incomprehensible warning and Ikiji's platform came to a lurching halt. Izuku trained his frightened yet ferocious eyes on Ikiji's and saw something he hadn't been expecting: fear. Perhaps the searing intensity of Izuku's lightning reminded him too much of the Seven Suns which Strange scorched him down to the bone with.

Izuku smiled as he extended his fingers out—one hand toward the villains, and the other toward Ikiji. The zealot claimed this day was the product of meticulous preparation on the villain's part, but Izuku knew: Ikiji certainly hadn't prepared for *this*.

"BOLTS OF BEDEVILMENT!" Izuku roared, and the intensity of his voltaic draught blinded even him as numerous bolts of white lightning arced above the mountainside plateau, each streak of electricity vengefully striking a villainous target below, sparring the three trapped 1-A students from Izuku's wrath. Each villain—Ikiji included—was consumed by lightning, the monstrous crackling drowning out the cries of agony that they wailed. The sheer luminance of Izuku's spell reached every corner of the USJ, briefly coating it pure white before the spell quickly died down, leaving only a tingly feel in the atmosphere.

Izuku panted feverishly as the lightning faded and his vision returned to him, his brow drenched in sweat from the heat of his own spell. His nose perked as a singed smell wafted up his nostrils, and he feared for a split second that he'd burned his own hands. No: the singed smell was emanating from the lightly smoking forms of the shocked villains below him, each one utterly blackened by the lightning's intensity. One by one they fell over, unconscious before they even hit the ground.

"Y-you..." Izuku heard Ikiji croak out.

Izuku turned and saw Ikiji's platform crumbling away as the zealot lost his grip over his own spatial powers. Ikiji himself had his arms crossed over his head and torso, the robes covering his forearms completely incinerated by the lightning. Ikiji had coated his arms in a thick layer of bone for protection, courtesy of his Quirk, but even this measure proved ineffective: Izuku had unconsciously directed the strongest of his lightning toward Ikiji, scorching through the bony plates and leaving torched, smoking, vulnerable skin in his wake. The damage wasn't nearly as grievous as Strange's Seven Suns of Cinnibus—that had inflicted 3rd degree burns on Ikiji—but the result was clear: Ikiji's Ivory Aegis was no match for Izuku's searing electricity.
"I-zu-ku..." Ikiji growled out, lowering his torched arms just enough for his eyes—twisted by malice and filled with an unworldly loathing—to dig into Izuku's. Still, his strength faded: the floating platform crumbled away into dust, and Ikiji fell to the ground, landing on his hands and knees as he groaned aloud, spitting out a smattering of blood onto the rocks beneath him.

The collective weak groans of Jiro, Yaoyorozu, and Kaminari reached Izuku's ears, and all his indignance drained away, replaced with worry and concern for his friends. He quickly pushed Ikiji out of his mind, descending to the ground and rushing to their sides. The rocky soil around the three students had loosened considerably as Ikiji's distortions faded entirely, allowing them to wriggle themselves to freedom. Izuku attempted to lift Jiro up, but she swatted his hands away with her earphones jacks, electing to recuperate where she laid.

"What the hell, Midoriya..." Jiro huffed, rolling onto her backside and staring up at the sorcerer incredulously. There were minor bruises on her forehead and her cheeks, but she appeared otherwise unharmed. "Is this what a sorcerer is?"

"Not always," Izuku said with a sheepish grin. "Sometimes it's even weirder."

"...Was that a joke?" Jiro asked, and Izuku couldn't tell if she was exasperated or not.

"What an ordeal," Yaoyorozu piped up, rising to her knees as she panted profusely. All her acrobatics in dodging and attacking the villains had taken its toll. "Midoriya. About what that villain said earlier—"

"I know," Izuku said with a solemn nod. "I promised you all answers, didn't I?"

"And I'm gonna be holding you to it, dude," Jiro huffed.

"W-what!?!" Kaminari exclaimed as he regained his senses, scanning the downed villains strewn across the plateau. "Midoriya, did you use your electric powers after all!? I knew I wasn't seeing things during the Entrance Exam!"

"And how come you didn't use your electric Quirk on them!?!" Jiro demanded irritably, raising her jacks threateningly. "You could've taken down most of these villains on your own, I bet!"

Kaminari flinched and wilted under Jiro's harsh gaze. "Didn't you see what happened during my Battle Trial?" He asked somberly, fidgeting his fingers together. "I can cover my body with electricity and discharge it, but I can't control the trajectory. If I'd shocked the villains, you and Yaoyorozu, maybe even Midoriya, would've been shocked as well. Like I did with Uraraka..."

Kaminari frowned. *What good is a Quirk for heroics if it hurts allies as badly as it does enemies?*

"Kaminari..." Izuku said, moving to put his hand on his shoulder, though the blonde waved off the gesture.

"It's fine," Kaminari said, rubbing his own shoulders instead as he stared down at the ground. "I'll be fine."

"Are you sure about that?" The chilling voice of Ikiji interrupted the students' respite. Izuku and the others promptly jumped to their feet, their eyes firmly locked on the bloodied, singed form of Ikiji, who was still heaving on hands and knees. Izuku noticed the cracks around his eyes had deepened, and more chunks of his skin had flaked off, revealing more of the purple hide underneath. It was unsettling, to say the least. "You feckless neophytes are horribly mistaken...if you believe this is anywhere near over!"

"H-he's still conscious!?!" Kaminari shrieked.
"Ikiji, enough!" Izuku cried out, feeling a twinge of sympathy for the fallen zealot before him, even after he’d tried killing his friends. "Just stop! Why are you even doing this!?"

"I've already told you..." Ikiji said with a pained gasp. "The many becoming the few. The few becoming the One. Everything I do, I do for the dream once shared by myself and my old master and companions. And with the League of Villains, that dream will one day become a reality."

"Dormammu!?" Izuku hissed. "You want the League of Villains to help you bring Dormammu into our world!? But then why help them try to kill All Might!"

"All Might is an undeniable threat to that dream," Ikiji explained. "Six years ago he helped Doctor Strange derail my old master's plans for worldwide salvation. Your so-called Symbol of Peace will most definitely have to die for my dream to be realized...as will you, Izuku!"

"I...I...! I just don't get this at all, Ikiji!" Izuku hissed in frustration. How could he believe that Dormammu would save the world? How could he think so many lives needed to be sacrificed in the name of his twisted dream!? Just then a shadowy vortex erupted beside Ikiji, and the body and face of the black mist villain vaguely formed beside the zealot.

"Kurogiri," Ikiji spat. "What do you want?"

"Ikiji," Kurogiri said in a quick, panicky voice. "We must depart from here at once. I neutralized Thirteen, but one of the students managed to escape. Pro Heroes will undoubtedly descend upon the USJ soon."

"Ngh, the gig is up...?" Ikiji groaned as he forced himself back to his feet.

No. This wasn't over. Ikiji wouldn't allow these heroic sycophants—with Strange's own apprentice to boot—to claim victory today. Ikiji curled his bony hands into fists, shaking them angrily. He had come too far to turn tail and flee like he'd been forced to do at Kamar-Taj. He had come to glean the truth of this world, and this green-haired novice—this speck—thought he'd best him after only a single defeat? Only a resounding victory would prove to All For One that he was worthy of the Darkhold! And what better way than securing a resounding victory than crushing Strange's personal disciple by any means necessary?

"The Pros are on the way?" Ikiji asked Kurogiri. "Well then...that's only a problem if we're all here when they arrive, isn't it?"

Ikiji released a deep breath as he raised both of his hands above his head. The space in his palms became wildly warbled, spinning and shimmering into spheres of tempestuous glass.

Izuku gasped with a start. Is he about to—!? Ikiji slammed his palms into the ground, and the heroes covered their eyes as a suddenly expanding wall of glistening fractals overwhelmed them yet passed through and enveloped them harmlessly. When Izuku and the others blinked their eyes open, it appeared as if nothing had happened or changed...

At first glance. The differences were subtle, but once Izuku spotted one, the rest became crystal clear. The ceiling of the USJ had taken on a kaleidoscopic nature, fractals churning and enveloping into and expanding out of each other endlessly.

Now it was Izuku who could hardly believe his eyes: Ikiji had dragged them all into the Mirror
And not just them: everyone else that was still in the USJ—villain and hero alike—was dragged in, as well.

"You don't 'get this', Izuku? No, I suppose you don't," Ikiji spat contemptuously. "But I'm going to catch you up to speed real quick: you'll get to experience the same hell I did by watching all of your friends get slaughtered before your very eyes!"

"M-Midoriya?" Kaminari asked with a shudder; it seemed even Izuku's fellow classmates could tell something was wrong—off. "What's going on now?"

"I think those answers I promised you all are going to have to wait," Izuku said grimly, understanding fully now what Doctor Strange had meant all those months ago when he spoke about pain and one's responsibility to rise above it in life. He thought he'd understood after his battle with Marcus, but this...this was far worse.

Ikiji thrust his arms above his head as if he were flipping a table, bellowing dementedly as the entire mountaintop behind Izuku and his friends disintegrated into a great rocky spiral, coiling high into the sky above the now engulfed USJ.

Izuku, Jiro, Yaoyorozu, and Kaminari all screamed as they were sent flying into the spiraling helix that was once the mountainous plateau they stood upon.

Izuku now understood from the uncompromising madness in Ikiji what it truly meant to be consumed—nay, corrupted—by one's own pain.
Mirror Madness

The League of Villain's incursion at the USJ continues! Things take a turn for the worst when Ikiji plunges the facility into the Mirror Dimension, seemingly cutting off any hope of rescue for the students within! Faced up against a more powerful nemesis, Izuku, Jiro, Kaminari, and Yaoyorozu must come up with a plan to defeat the mad zealot in order to win their freedom!

"On what basis do you think you can kill All Might?" Todoroki asked coolly. "What is your plan?"

He raised his right hand to the green-masked villain before him, incapacitated by ice along with all the other villains transported to the USJ's landslide environment. He may have attacked more on reflex than strategic planning, but an instinctive burst of ice was more than enough to deal with this ragtag group of thugs sent his way.

It was annoying, if nothing else; the sororal voice in his head warned him to avoid the encircling mist from that dark, amorphous villain, but it had already wrapped itself around the class near the entrance. He'd leapt backwards as per her instructions, but he found himself sucked away and separated from the rest of his classmates nonetheless.

These so-called villains only compounded his annoyance. The moment Todoroki had exited the vortex of shadows, he was rushed by a slew of boisterous villains stampeding up the landslide area. Their uproarious spirits were summarily crushed by an overwhelming wave of ice, freezing all of them in their tracks. More than a few of the rowdy villains, including the green-masked man he was now interrogating, had been quickly reduced to pitiful whimpering and soft sobs upon realizing their defeat, at the hands of a child no less.

"You performed admirably, Shoto," A demure, maidenly voice echoed through his mind. The familiar smooth tone of the voice immediately set him at ease. "You demonstrated your superiority by crushing them in the blink of an eye, filling them with such luscious fright and despair. Now go on: only by filling them with more fear will you receive the answers that you seek."

"Yes, Fuyumi," Todoroki said obediently.

"You're talking to yourself now?" The green-masked villain asked. "You're no kid...you're a monster!"

"Did you not hear what I told you?" Todoroki asked with a now blank expression. "If you stay frozen for much longer, your cells will begin to die. I wish to avoid such excessive cruelty, but if I have to..." A chill suddenly emanated from Todoroki's open palm, coating the villain's face in a thin coating of ice. It was not normal by any means: it was a dark chill, caressing the villain's face like long, gangly fingers of ice as it bit into and numbed his skin, freezing even the tears threatening to spill out of his ducts.
"I'll talk!" The villain sputtered out, his eyes clenched shut from the biting cold. "I don't know all the details, but they brought a weapon with us to the USJ. They called it the 'Anti-Symbol of Peace'!

Anti-Symbol of Peace? "What kind of weapon is that?" Todoroki asked darkly, the eldritch chill threatening to consume the villain's face entirely.

"All I know is that it's some creature of theirs, I'm not even sure if it's human!" The villain sobbed. "I swear that's all I know! I'm not that high up the food chain, you see!"

Clearly, Todoroki thought as he lowered his hand. The frost clinging to the man's face fell away once the hand fell to Todoroki's side. So this has been meticulously planned out, after all. They came here explicitly to kill All Might. This weapon of theirs must've been designed specifically to counter him, especially if they're calling it the 'Anti-Symbol of Peace'...

"Are you afraid, Shoto?" The teasing voice of his sister cooed through his mind.

"No, Fuyumi," Todoroki replied aloud.

"Remember what I told you about fear: it can be crippling, it can be overwhelming, and it's most unfitting of a hero," she said. "Fear isn't something to be instilled into you, it's for you to instill into others. For me. Can you do that for me, Shoto?"

"Yes, Fuyumi," Todoroki said aloud again, obedient as ever. He would do anything for his beloved sister, after all.

True to his word, he undid a bit of the freezing on the villain he'd interrogated, just enough to not leave any permanent damage when the authorities inevitably arrived to collect them all before the day's end. The villain sputtered out a string of pathetic thanks as Todoroki passed him on his way down the landslide area, toward the central plaza.

He didn't make it very far.

He caught sight of it right before it reached him, what appeared to be a translucent wall of sorts. Stretching from ground to ceiling, the rapidly approaching wall was brimming with fractals—swirls and spirals—and a countless number of incomprehensible shapes. Todoroki responded appropriately, planting his right foot in front of him and sending a glacial wall out to meet it. Color the boy surprised when the wall of fractals rushed through it unabated, enveloping the ice, him, and all the villains he'd defeated with relative ease. Todoroki threw his arms up in a last ditch effort for defense, but it didn't matter in the slightest; there was no sensation when the wall passed him and his ice by.

But that didn't mean there was no effect.

Todoroki gave a quick glance to his surroundings, noting at first that nothing appeared to have changed...other than the neverending fractals seemingly superimposed over the entire USJ. They appeared over the ground and his ice as well, distorting them greatly as they began to oscillate with movements unbefitting of their typical rigid nature.

It was only when the ice started to peel off the downed villains like a bunch of soaked rinds was he truly startled. The villains seemed to scarcely believe it either. As the ice literally peeled off their bodies in the same manner a used band-aid might, they stood up, one by one, stunned by their newfound freedom.

"This must be Ikiji!" One of the villains said triumphantly.
"I heard he could do something freaky like this!"

"Look over there! He must be on the mountainside!"

Todoroki whipped his head around just in time to see the tallest peak of the USJ's mountain zone dissolve into a swirl of spiraling rock and stone, pulled apart as if it were made of little more than putty or wet clay. He very nearly felt a twinge of fear, until a mental prodding by his beloved sister directed him back toward the villains. Nearly all of them had their eyes locked onto him, their unexpected freedom apparently instilling them with newfound bravado and confidence.

"That first time was just a fluke!" One of the villains reasoned. "Now that we know what his power is, we won't be caught off guard again! Let's get him, boys!"

The villains roared with approval and stampeded toward Todoroki to engage with him once more. Only the green-masked villain stayed back, apparently recognizing the superiority of Todoroki's power.

"Their despair is gone," Fuyumi's voice said in a borderline whine. "No...no, this won't do at all, Shoto. They think they can stand a chance against you now. Won't you instruct them of their standing? Won't you instill them with renewed despair as a hero ought to? For me, Shoto?"

"Yes, Fuyumi," Todoroki said as ice crept up his right side. He slammed his foot down, slicing the sloped landscape apart with another glacial wave. If Fuyumi wanted it to be, then Shoto would make it so. He would do anything his sister asked of him.

Ah, it's like music to my ears... Shigaraki mused rapturously as Nomu effortlessly crushed Aizawa's second arm, his cries of agony adding a chaotic melody to the USJ's otherwise dull air. His screams made him smile; victory always made him smile.

"It's cool that you can erase Quirks, Eraserhead, but it's nothing overly impressive," Shigaraki said with a mirthful chuckle. "In the face of his overwhelming strength, you might as well be Quirkless. By the way, how do you like Nomu's power? He's like my own personal pubstomper!"

Aizawa didn't respond with anything other than a pained grunt. Not that Nomu was giving him time to respond otherwise, what with him mindlessly bashing Aizawa's face into the ground repeatedly. Tomura watched on with amusement glistening in his wrinkled eyes before he felt the familiar sensation of swirling shadows beside him.

"Kurogiri," Tomura said without even turning to face his longtime companion. "Did you eliminate Thirteen and scatter the students?"

"I...neutralized Thirteen, yes," Kurogiri said with hesitation in his voice. It did not go unnoticed by Tomura, who felt his hands twitch with annoyance. "However, I was unable to scatter all of the students, and one of them...was able to escape. I alerted Ikiji, and you saw what he did."

"That I did," Tomura said as he lazily scanned the layer of fractals spinning and swirling across the space above them, dancing atop the ceiling, and the various buildings, landscapes, and greenery of the USJ. His fingers twitched madly; they were dying to scratch his neck—hell, they were dying to scratch into anything—as he surveyed the result of Ikiji's actions. He scoffed as he turned around to look upon the helix of spiraling boulders that was once a mountain. Such ludicrous power was a result of his magic—his cheating. Who the hell went and made Ikiji Player One for his operation?

Still, it was cheating for his side, so who the hell was Tomura to complain? He pressed more than his fair share of complex button combinations in boss fights. Was this any different? This space
manipulation—this magic—was ultimately Ikiji just pressing the right buttons in the right order.

Tomura chuckled as the twitchiness in his fingers subsided. He was beginning to understand why Sensei kept that twerp around all these years. More than that, he was beginning to acknowledge the usefulness of magic.

"I see, I see," Tomura mused, stroking his chin instead of scratching it for once. "Ikiji dragged us into the Mirror Dimension so the Pros wouldn't be able to reach us, is that it? They'll show up, and it'll be as if the entire building was vacated. We can kill the students at our leisure and ambush the heroes at Ikiji's convenience. In other words, Ikiji just gave the League an infinite amount of 'Continues'. Not bad for a cheater."

He turned away from the mountain, his eyes landing on the gross, black monstrosity squatting over Aizawa's beaten form. The creature stared back blankly, awaiting further instructions as it was engineered to do. "And maybe you'll be able to fulfill your purpose after all, Nomu. We'll see if it was worth it for Sensei to pull you out of the Dark Dimension along with all the others."

"Jiro! Yaoyorozu! Kaminari!" Izuku yelled as Ikiji's magic caused the ground beneath his feet to spiral into the sky. He tumbled head over heels as various rocks bumped and bashed against his body, quickly knocking the air out of his lungs. A quick tug from his sentient cloak corrected him, however, and he caught his breath as the green relic flew him toward one of the larger countless rocks swirling in the sky for a temporary foothold.

He didn't stay there long; the air was suddenly awash with confused and panicked yells. Izuku looked above him, catching sight of his classmates tumbling through Ikiji's aerial maelstrom. Yaoyorozu was holding her own, deftly jumping from boulder to boulder as she somewhat maintained her balance, but Jiro and Kaminari were outright struggling. Jiro at least had the benefit of her earphone jacks; she clung to a single boulder by wrapping her jacks around it multiple times. Kaminari, however, was completely hapless, not that Izuku could blame him. He screamed belligerently as he clung to whatever piece of earth he could, his eyes understandably clenched shut as the rocky vortex spun him and the others around and around.

An unearthly warbling caused Izuku's ears to perk with fright, and he shot a glance down below, spotting a blur of gold and brown racing upward. Oh no...! Ikiji was ascending the vortex towards them, leaping from stone to stone. The sigil of Dormammu emblazoned on his forehead was glowing an even brighter crimson than before. It concerned Izuku greatly—was it indicative of his suddenly increased potency with his spatial magic? Was his connection with the dark deity stronger in this dimension?

Questions for later...! Izuku thought as he took flight, hoping to reach his classmates first. They were all sitting ducks while in the middle of Ikiji's maelstrom. Any plan for survival or victory would have to come after surviving this spiral! Izuku's cloak flapped as he soared above what remained of the plateau, honing in on Kaminari. He was the closest of his classmates, and also the one requiring the greatest amount of aid.

Ikiji seemed to have reached the same conclusion. Izuku heard a dull tremor from beneath him and recognized immediately that Ikiji was beginning to manipulate the spiral with his magic. Two large boulders flying in his periphery suddenly morphed in shape, their previously rotund boulder-like forms flattening and stretching out, blocking Izuku's clear path to Kaminari with a barrier of rock.

Izuku grit his teeth and attempted to fly around them as quickly as possible. A great shattering of the barrier startled him, and as the wall broke apart and rained rubble down upon him, Izuku saw what had caused it through the gaps in the now crumbling wall. Ikiji had manipulated yet more boulders
on the other side of the barrier, reshaping them to vaguely resemble giant hammers, which he brought crashing down, hurtling large chunks of debris down onto Izuku.

Izuku gave full control to his cloak, essentially putting himself on autopilot and letting his partner relic steer him to safety as he deflected the raining barrage of stone with his own shimmering barriers. The rocks bounced harmlessly off his shields, but it set him back considerably—enough for Ikiji to catch up to him.

Izuku gasped as Ikiji leaped past him. The zealot didn't even spare him a passing glance, his frenzied eyes narrowing in on Kaminari. He soared through the raining rubble unobstructed, the rocks dissolving around his body and reforming after he passed through them.

"You'll get to experience the same hell I did by watching all your friends get slaughtered before your very eyes!"

Izuku gulped; Ikiji wasn't just serious, he was dead serious. He was wholly intending on killing Kaminari and the others first, saving himself for last. And now he was in the lead, rapidly ascending to the blonde's location. Izuku sprung into action, swirling his right hand in a circle as he saw Ikiji shifting his palms together, manifesting his signature space shard into existence. Izuku quickly noted that this blade was far more elongated than the ones Ikiji had used before; this one was more akin to a glaive than a regular sword.

If I can't get to Kaminari in time, then...! Izuku thought as a portal sprang to life before him, closing the distance between him and Kaminari in an instant. The portal was angled above Kaminari's head, giving Izuku a downward view as he reached through to grab him. It was then his eyes went wide in shock, a stunned gasp escaping his lips as he watched Ikiji hurl the translucent glaive directly toward a quivering, unsuspecting Kaminari.

"No time...!" Izuku had hardly a second to act. He couldn't yank him up through the portal quick enough. He couldn't risk using a barrier to defend Kaminari, because he didn't know if Ikiji's increased proficiency in the Mirror Dimension made his space shards stronger, and he wasn't about to risk Kaminari's life in order to find out. In that fraction of a second, Izuku did the only thing he could to best protect Kaminari: he shoved him off the rock he was clinging to, and out of the space shard's trajectory.

Kaminari yelped as Izuku's palm shoved against his backside. He whirled around in midair as he fell, eyes widening with terror as the rippling glaive skimmed right past his chest and face. Time seemed to slow as he trailed his eyes upward, following the glaive as it soared past him. He eventually locked onto Izuku, peering at him through his portal above. Kaminari felt his gut wrench in horror as the glaive sliced straight through Izuku's outstretched arm, watching helplessly as his friend's face contorted in what must've been an unbelievable pain. The blade drew no blood as it cut through Izuku's arm—it was almost as if it phased through harmlessly, like it wasn't even real, though Izuku's reaction was evidence to the contrary.

"Midoriya!" Kaminari screamed, reaching out for his classmate as the portal closed, the last thing he saw through the passageway being the torturous look on Izuku's face as he gripped his now limp arm. He turned back around as he fell, and immediately wished he hadn't: the zealot that knew Izuku personally was rapidly approaching, a twisted smirk plastered all over his face. A surge of indignance arose in Kaminari's chest, and he glared at the zealot through a wall of budding tears as he plummeted toward him.

Midoriya allowed himself to get hurt in order to save me! What kind of hero needs saving!? Kaminari bitterly thought as he prepared to meet an inevitable skewering with a voltaic draught. At least this way he wouldn't die being totally useless and helpless...!
Kaminari became aware of a sudden wrapping sensation around his waist, prompting him to think twice before letting loose with his electricity. Jiro had snagged him with her earphone jacks, tugging him toward her and out of Ikiji's path with a jerk of her neck.

"Stay down!" Jiro barked at him as he landed on the rock she was teetering on. Her jacks released Kaminari and slithered down to her boots, plugging themselves in and blasting Ikiji with a torrent of heartbeats as he approached.

Several boulders shot out of the maelstrom with a flick of his wrists, levitating between Ikiji and the deluge of destructive sounds. The sound waves predictably punched straight through the stone, shattering them into rubble, but what Jiro hadn't been expecting was to see Ikiji's entire face covered in a thick white plating, including his ears, rendering her attack inert.

"What the hell, is that bone!?" Jiro thought, bewildered. He covered his ears with bone to defend against my attack! But bone shouldn't outright nullify my sound waves! And I thought his Quirk was manipulating space!?

"What a frighteningly unique Quirk," Ikiji taunted her with a boorish grin as the bone plating popped off his head. "I sometimes forget to factor in an enemy's Quirk because of my usual fighting style. Too bad—you're just a bad matchup for me, girl. It's a shame: under normal circumstances, your Quirk could be quite the devastating threat to me."

"Bad matchup how?" Jiro asked suspiciously. "Bone is a crucial means by which sound travels through our ears. You should've dropped quicker than any of those goons of yours that I blasted down below!"

"You would've been correct...if the only ability I could use were this," Ikiji said coyly.

"But how!?" Jiro demanded, clearly exasperated. "Midoriya said your Quirk was space manipulation!"

"No," Ikiji countered. "He said my powers allowed me to manipulate space. In his panic, he neglected to inform you that this—" he tapped the bone growing out of his head again. "—is the Quirk I developed naturally: Bone Spurs."

"So my heartbeat fuzz didn't affect you—"

"Sound travels through bone, correct," Ikiji interrupted. "But before that, it travels through air. And before that, it travels through space. I may not be able to freely manipulate air the same way I can physical matter, but the space the air occupies? That's a different story altogether. Oscillations so rapid and so small in the space between us that those powerful sound waves never had a chance of reaching my ears at max strength. Or any strength, really. And this?" He rolled a thumb over the newly sprouted bone plating. "I call this...overkill. You never stood a chance, girl."

"You..." Jiro muttered, a scary thought traipsing into her head. "Do you have two Quirks?"

Ikiji burst with laughter. "An unenlightened human would assume that, wouldn't they? Is there even a way of saying this without offending your precious sensibilities? Everything you see around you is a product of my...magic."

Magic again? "What, are you a sorcerer like Izuku is?" Jiro asked. She'd long since lost her sword in the upheaval, but she caught a glimpse of Yaoyorozu grappling from rock to rock behind the villain. The least she could was stall for some time...!

"Hit the nail right on the head," Ikiji said. "Surprised to know your classmate's just a phony, a
second-rate magician trying to fake his way to the top of the hero board? Because I'm not."

"You done?" Jiro asked, her jacks jamming back into her boots. Ikiji reflexively activated his Quirk, ready to cover his face and ears again if need be. "Yeah, maybe that guy is a phony, and a dork, but he sure as hell isn't trying to fake his way to the top. I've only been familiar with the guy for a few days, and I already feel like I know more about him than you do!"

Jiro tilted her leg up, aiming a concussive blast of her heartbeat to the rocks circling above Ikiji's head. Ikiji saw the move a mile away though, and had his hands outstretched above his head to spatially sift the rubble apart before it fell, letting it all fall harmlessly to the ground in small, orb-like clumps.

Yaoyorozu sprang out from behind another nearby floating crevice, aiming a grappling device she'd spawned with her Creation Quirk directly at Ikiji, hoping to capitalize on Jiro's distraction by quickly ensnaring the villain. Ikiji was quick to retaliate: he drew one of his arms toward Yaoyorozu after rendering the falling rubble harmless to him and gave a tight squeeze of his hand. The grapple line—ostensibly made of some kind of steel—suddenly went limp like a noodle, along with the four-pronged claw at the end. The device drooped out of her hand pathetically, and Yaoyorozu was forced to pull herself back with a second rope she'd created as a backup, landing back on a rocky platform before the second rope also unraveled itself into oblivion from Ikiji's magic.

Jiro grimaced; Yaoyorozu could create any non-living material that she had an understanding of with her Quirk, while Ikiji could spatially manipulate any non-living material within his as of yet unknown range. Was there anything she could create that could pose a threat to this villain?

What pests, Ikiji thought cautiously as he glanced between the three students that had joined Izuku to the mountainside zone. He noted that they—well, just the girls—were being just as cautious in observing him. The girl with the Creation Quirk in particular was eyeing him like a hawk, and a bit of unease began to stir within his mind. Ikiji recognized her as a true wild card, one not to be underestimated for this fight. Now that she'd seen and dodged his powers so thoroughly, how difficult would dealing with her be with Izuku still in the fight?

Speaking of which...

"Ikiji!" Izuku yelled as he soared into sight, green cloak billowing behind him as his right hand dangled limply. "I only need one hand to cast this spell!" Five crimson threads shot out from his left hand, sizzling and bright, as they coiled around Ikiji's arms and waist. Sharpened bone fragments immediately erupted along the zealot's forearms, grinding against the sparkling lash.

"Kaminari! Jiro! Help me out for a sec!" Izuku yelled as he landed beside them, motioning for the two to grab hold of the flaming lasso along with him. They both looked hesitant, reaching out with just one hand, flinching upon first contact as if they expected to be burned by the leash's sizzling embers. Upon realizing whatever energy Izuku had conjured posed no harm to them, they readily grabbed hold of the whip with both hands.

"Alright!" Kaminari yelled, feeling some semblance of confidence returning to him. "Now what?"

"Hold on!" Izuku yelled as his cloak unfurled itself completely and nudged them all over the edge. They fell into the center of the rocky spiral as the cloak directed them toward the ground, slowing their descent enough for it to be a less than comfortable glide to the bottom. Nevertheless, Jiro and Kaminari screamed and held onto Izuku's whip for dear life, the controlled descent doing little to assuage their panic.

Ikiji's hands were preparing to mold the arena once more with a single flex of his digits, but the
sudden fall his opponents took caught him off guard, sending him hurtling toward the ground along with them, yelling defiantly all the while.

"I know I'm asking a lot out of you both, but now I need you to spin with me!" Izuku said loudly, hoping his voice would pierce through their screams. He and his Cloak of Levitation began the motions as they flew downward, rotating slowly at first, but gradually picking up speed.

"Are you insane!?" Jiro screamed, turning on Izuku as if he'd sprouted a second head. "Midoriya, I swear, if we live through this, I am going to strangle you!" Regardless, she complied, along with an equally reluctant and petrified Kaminari, and they both added what strength they could to Izuku's swing.

The three would-be heroes glided straight down toward the ground in the eye of the maelstrom, the whip extending outward as Ikiji struggled in vain to free himself from his bounds as the ceaseless spinning disoriented him. The dizzied zealot let out a string of pained shouts as he was spun directly into the spiraling path of the earth he uplifted, crashing headfirst into boulder after boulder. He instinctively activated his Ivory Aegis to dampen the blows, but the pain from the constant collisions was ever-present.

Do you think to bash me into unconsciousness, Izuku? Ikiji thought bitterly at the futility of such a plan. Don't insult me! Ikiji closed his eyes as he spun and crashed into rocks anew, forcibly cutting himself off from the constant throb of pain jolting through his body. He need only concentrate for a moment...

Every floating rock in his path rippled down the middle, a veritable spatial fissure opening up and allowing him to pass through unharmed, allowing him to become more composed as the pain and dizziness lessened.

Izuku, on the other hand, had no intention to give him any such respite. "Three...two...one...! Release!" Izuku and his peers let go of the whip with one last mighty swing, sending Ikiji flying straight out of the cyclone of earth he'd created. Both ends of the flaming whip cracked the air itself as they wrapped around Ikiji's body, entangling him even further as he flew straight over the USJ's second mountain peak and disappeared from view.

"Gack!" Izuku uttered a strangled cry for help as Jiro's earphone jacks coiled around his neck, thrashing him back and forth.

"I told you I'd strangle you!" An indignant Jiro yelled as they finally reached what remained of the rent plateau.

"We—haven't—survived—this—yet—!" Izuku choked out.

"J-Jiro, calm down! He's our best bet at keeping that crazy psycho at bay!" Kaminari interjected, trying to reinstate a semblance of peace and calm.

"I am calm!" Jiro retorted none-too-convincingly. "Also, Midoriya, spells? That's what you call all those crazy powers you can do!?"

"But they are spells!" Izuku countered.

"Kaminari's right," Yaoyorozu's voice sounded from above. Izuku and the others glanced up to see
I-A's vice rappelling down to join them. "With what we've seen of this Ikiji's fighting style, it can be safe to surmise that one sorcerer would be needed to keep an enemy sorcerer at bay. Izuku will be the crux of whatever strategy we use going forward."

All three of them looked surprised at Yaoyorozu's calmly delivered contemplation. Jiro's earphone jacks uncoiled from Izuku's throat, allowing him to gasp for breath. He sent a look of gratitude Momo's way.

"Let me make it clear, I am not saying by any definitive means that I necessarily believe Izuku to be a practitioner of...magic," Yaoyorozu clarified. "For now, I need to remain hypothetical...you understand, Midoriya."

Izuku gave a nod in the affirmative. Honestly, he was just glad to have someone else giving him the benefit of the doubt, and luckily for him, his own vice-rep was willing to fill that role.

"I'm sorry for acting without your input, Yaoyorozu," Izuku said ruefully. "I had to act quickly, and decided you'd be able to follow us down no problem while we put a fair bit of distance between us and him."

"Not to worry, Midoriya," Yaoyorozu said with a small smile. "You gave me more than enough time to scrounge together a possible strategy for surviving Ikiji's next attack."

"Hold up, hold it right there!" Kaminari cried out. "Strategy for surviving? Shouldn't the best strategy be running the hell away from here before that maniac finds us again!?"

"It's not that simple," Izuku huffed out. "This might be difficult to believe, but Ikiji dragged us into another realm called the Mirror Dimension. Think of us as being in a 'mirror' of the USJ, but separated from our normal reality. Not only that, but he's more powerful here for reasons I don't fully understand yet."

Izuku's companions were dead silent after that little exposition dump, causing Izuku to fidget uncomfortably. At least Yaoyorozu was pondering this new information.

"Great. Just great," Jiro said dejectedly, her jacks sagging. "I'm going to die in another dimension that's merely a mirror of our own. Fantastic!"

"S-so let me get this straight," Kaminari stuttered after processing that info. "You're saying that we're not actually in the real world...and that mist villain said one of our classmates managed to get away to alert all the Pros at the school...so when they return...they won't even be able to reach us?"

A considerable pallor of dread descended upon all four of them; even Yaoyorozu's strategizing mind seemed jolted by the revelation.

They were alone. They were truly alone, with no feasible way out except through defeating Ikiji.

_and the one day I misplace my Summoning Card for my Sensei, Izuku mentally kicked himself. And I'm not nearly skilled enough with my portals to traverse between dimensions, mirror one or not! I'm in for an earful if I actually get out of this alive!"

"We've survived two of his onslaughts," Izuku said, trying to instill more confidence in his friends. "We're slowly but surely working out the limits of his powers, drastically increased that they may be."

"I concur," Yaoyorozu said in agreement, stifling whatever dissension was about to come spewing out of Jiro and Kaminari. They both whirled on her, silently demanding an explanation. "I told you,
"I scrounged a possible strategy together while you three kept him preoccupied. And my Quirk's been slowly assembling all the necessary pieces together."

"Your body is currently making something to help us fight him?" Jiro asked. "But he can manipulate non-living, solid matter, you heard Midoriya! Is there anything you can make that could counter him in any way?"

"No, but I don't need it to directly counter him," Yaoyorozu explained as her backside suddenly bulged, shining with an auroras light. "I just need it to stall him long enough for our two main fighters to land a finishing blow!" The bulging light burst, revealing the items she'd been steadily concocting on her way down: three green cloaks identical to Izuku's in all but function.

"Do you see where I'm going with this, Midoriya?" Yaoyorozu asked knowingly as she cradled the cloaks. "I don't fully understand the nature of your cloak, but I recognized early on that its flying capabilities gave you something of an advantage over him: you weren't restricted to the ground like the rest of us, so you weren't nearly as vulnerable to his attacks."

"And with all of us sporting a green cloak, he won't be able to immediately tell which is which!" Izuku said, putting the pieces together. "In his confusion, he won't know for sure which one of you to attack right off the bat."

"But how do you know he won't just assume you still have the real cloak?" Jiro asked skeptically.

"Ikiji is too cautious to think a switcheroo hasn't been pulled," Izuku said. "Besides...you three are his first targets, not me." He wants to kill you all first. And he wants me to see him do it, too. His initial suspicions will be on you three. My right hand is still limp and unusable, but I should hopefully still have more than enough time to strike him with a crippling blow."

"Not just you," Yaoyorozu corrected him. "I picked up on another weakness of Ikiji's: he seems particularly susceptible to energy-based attacks, especially electric ones, which his bone armor seems insufficient in protecting him from. That's why I mentioned our two main fighters..." She trailed off and glanced just past Izuku, who also turned to face the only other member of their party she could've been referring to.

Kaminari blankly kicked some dirt from where he stood, a sea of anxiety droning out what the others were saying. He was focused on hopefully doing nothing but merely living to see another day. Steadily, though, he became aware of three pairs of eyes staring in his direction. He blinked, turning around to see if they weren't simply staring at something behind him.

"...Why are you all staring at me like I have some important role to play?" Kaminari asked with trepidation.

"Time for you to man up, guy!" Jiro yelled, slapping Kaminari on the backside.

"We'll be counting on you!" Yaoyorozu said with a knowing grin.

"Me and you, Kaminari!" Izuku said with an energetic grin. "This is perfect! I suspected the villains might not have known what your Quirks were when we were separated! You're the only other one here who could possibly get through Ikiji's defenses!"

Kaminari puckered his lips. Were they really asking him to—?

"No, oh no, no, no!" Kaminari said fearfully. "You can't ask me to do any fighting with my Quirk! I can't control the trajectory like Midoriya can! You'll all just get caught up in the shock if you're too close!"
Hmm, he has a good point... Izuku thought as Jiro berated Kaminari for perceived cowardice.
"Yaoyorozu!" He said, coming to a quick solution as he turned toward his Vice. "Do you still have enough energy for your Quirk? If so, there's another item I need you to replicate..."
As Izuku clashes against Ikiji, his other classmates are similarly stuck in the Mirror Dimension, fighting for their lives against the League's peons. What obstacles await them as they struggle to survive in Ikiji's realm?

What the hell is even happening?

Shoji's multi-arms had erupted into a grotesque web of numerous ears and eyes, each appendage listening and observing the facility before him from as many different angles as possible. Each ear and eye twitched with every twinge of his muscles. He towered over his downed teacher and crouched classmates protectively, with Sato's bulk standing beside his. Sero and Uraraka were at Thirteen's side, doing whatever they could to console the hero. They were all huddled in the center of the pathway, on the red bricks. They tried to ignore the spinning yellow bricks surrounding them as best they could.

Except that's not what happened.

It all started with the mist villain's disappearance after he and his other present classmates helped Iida escape from his foggy clutches. Sato had hurled the teleporting villain away via Sero's tape right as Iida slipped through the USJ's huge doors, dissipating into thin air. Shoji initially assumed the villain had resigned himself to defeat; he was dead wrong.

He recalled momentarily clenching every eye he had spawned shut as a wall of swirling light spread outward from the mountainside opposite of the entrance, consuming the entire facility in a matter of seconds. When his many eyes reopened, the USJ seemed unchanged—aside from the countless fractals swimming across the ceiling and seemingly in midair. Several of his arms sprouted hands once more, reaching out to grasp the spinning shapes out of caution and curiosity, but they were nigh untouchable.

A tremor shuddered across the USJ's giant glass dome, and all eyes were on the mountain zone as the tallest of its two peaks suddenly dissolved, giant chunks of rocks spiraling into the sky and ripping apart from one another like putty as it swiftly turned cyclonic.

A ripple emanated from the scene, one barely perceptible to even Shoji's keen eyesight. An incessant scraping sound—soft at first, but growing steadily louder—crept into his ears. Shoji had shot a glance down the tall stairway leading toward the plaza: the yellow bricks flanking both sides of central red-colored ones began spinning rapidly as the translucent ripple approached nearer and nearer. It was almost as if the yellow bricks had turned into windmills, spinning and spinning and kicking up clouds of dirt from all the friction.

Shoji hardly had any time to comprehend what he was seeing around him when loud groans filled his ears from either side of him. He couldn't see what was transpiring beneath the blue dome to his
right, but he could clearly see what was happening in the ruins to his left: the artificially crumbled buildings, each one tipping precariously off their foundations, were swaying back and forth violently as if directed by large gears hidden beneath them, crashing against one another, and sending chunks of concrete and steel down into the already ruined streets below.

But Shoji knew these movements were unnatural, and he also knew from his multi-ears that Bakugo and Kirishima had been transported to that zone. His ears could still pick up the faint vibrations from what must've been his explosions, and Shoji felt sure that they would be okay. He would only be worried if Bakugo's explosions suddenly died down for no discernible reason.

A wall of ice erupted from just the other side of the swaying ruins—Todoroki likely ended whatever fight he was involved with there. A slight shiver ran up Shoji's arms; a slight chill from his glacial wall could be felt all the way over here, but it wasn't soothing at all. It felt just as unnatural as all the shenanigans unfolding around them.

Flashes of lightning erupted from the mountainside zone, and a deafening crash from the right! Shoji jerked his face over toward the flood zone right as the bright green slide towering and spiraling above the lake collapsed in a rent, broken heap, boulders and green plastic bits flying into the air amidst all the water also sent airborne from the torrential splash that followed. He knew from his auditory reconnaissance that Mineta, Asui, and Ashido had been sent to the flood zone; he hoped they were unharmed in the crash.

"We have to stay together," One of Shoji's many arms morphed into a mouth, addressing Sato as the yellow-suited student approached him, likely for a status update. But what sort of status update could he possibly give among all this insanity? Spinning bricks, swaying buildings, spiraling mountains, fractals in the air—did anyone else present honestly expect him to make heads or tails of what was unfolding before them? Was he expecting it from himself?

Shoji spared a glance back toward the mutilated remains of Thirteen's body, and Sero and Uraraka, crouched the downed hero. There were no villains present near the entrance anymore, but they couldn't simply leave Thirteen undefended. No, the best course of actions—especially in this hectic, new environment—would be to wait for the return of Iida and the rest of the faculty.

Iida's escape was supposed to mark a turning point, Shoji reminded himself as the steel girders supporting the USJ's ceiling peeled out of place, colliding into the second mountainside peak, followed by a cloud of glass shards. The roof of the fiery conflagration zone became undone soon after, the subdued flames erupting high into the sky at the new intake of fresh, abundant oxygen.

Iida's escape was supposed to mean they would all soon be safe. But as the flaming skyscrapers of the conflagration zone suddenly rose into the sky, stretched like taffy, and towering above even the flames roaring below, Shoji was struck by an uncomfortable possibility that Iida's escape and run for aid could, perhaps, have been meaningless.

Because Shoji did not feel safe.

Not even close.

"Die, die, damn it!"

Bakugo was screaming and swearing incessantly as he unloaded explosion after explosion against the nearest wall. Kirishima had his hardened arms dug into the crumbling floor for balance as the building swayed back and forth, watching Bakugo incredulously as a hole was finally blasted through the wall, crashing onto the street below.
Peering through the hole, Kirishima could see clearly across the ruins zone they were sent to. All the other buildings spread out across the simulated urban expanse were also swaying back and forth.

"H-hey, is this supposed to be part of the USJ!?" Kirishima yelled out to Bakugo as he clung to the floor for dear life. Bakugo, however, paid him and the swaying buildings no mind, instead moving to another stretch of wall and unleashing another barrage of explosions against it.

Bakugo was trying to destroy the ceaseless mosaic of fractals imposed over the building's walls and floors, to no affect. The fractals seemed also ghostly, hanging and swimming in midair as the concrete they seemed to be layered on blasted outward and onto the street below. Even outside, across the ruined city, Kirishima could see the fractals spinning in air or seemingly atop the buildings' walls, faint yet still apparent.

"Damn it all," Bakugo huffed, pressing his grenade-shaped gauntlets against the scorched wall for support as he finally stopped letting off explosions. Kirishima blinked; was he finally giving up?

"This must be the doing of one of those damn villains!" Bakugo snarled, slamming his fists together. Kirishima sighed; of course he wasn't giving up...

Still, the sudden change was as odd as it was jarring. One second the two are wiping the floor with a group of villains ambushing them, and the next the building begins swaying back and forth as the beaten thugs slip away through various cracks, windows, and doorways.

*I wonder if crazy stuff like this is happening in other zones.* Kirishima thought worriedly about his classmates, especially the new friends he'd made in Midoriya, Aoyama, and Tokoyami. How were they faring against the villains? *Especially Midoriya...what did that fog guy call him again? A sorcerer? The hell was that about!? And he said he'd be dealt with accordingly...do they have a way to counter even Midoriya's crazy Quirk!??*

"We should go find the others!" Kirishima said as he tried forcing himself to his feet amidst the swaying. "I'm worried about those who don't have offensive powers, and if stuff like this is happening elsewhere—"

"Screw that!" Bakugo barked. "You go find them if you want to. Once I figure out what's going on here, I'm going after that warping guy! He's their way in and out, and I want to take him out before any of them can even think about escaping!"

"What!?" Kirishima replied with a start. "Doesn't that sound a bit childish? Shouldn't we regroup with the others first—"

"Shut it!" Bakugo barked again. "Those extras will be fine! Especially if they're just facing the kind of small fry we just took down! Now if you'll excuse me, I have to figure a way out of this death trap so I can get a crack at the mist guy."

Kirishima gave pause as he mused over Bakugo's logic, crass and tactless as it was. The idea wasn't without merit: taking down the villains' only way out would leave them crippled and helpless when the Pros arrived to mop up. At least, Kirishima felt confident help was coming...

And then there was Bakugo's assurance that the others would be fine against whatever villains they were facing. He brushed off the idea of seeking them out to help without a moment's hesitation! Kirishima thought at first that Bakugo really was that callous and dismissive, but...was he really just confident in their classmates' fighting abilities? Did he believe in them so much that it wasn't even worth his time worrying about them?
Believing in our friends... Kirishima thought back to the impromptu toast he'd participated in with the rest of his friends in Team Defect. Did his time during and after the Battle Trial not prove they believed in him? Did he not owe them the same amount of faith, not just as a friend, but as a man, too?

"Hang on, Bakugo!" He called out to the blonde, who replied with irritated grunt. "That's super manly of you, reminding me to believe in our friends, even in this situation!" Kirishima smashed his two hardened fists together, silently noting they were much heavier than usual. "I'll follow you!"

Midoriya...Aoyama...Tokoyami! Have faith that I'll do whatever I can, because I know you'll do the same!

"Found you!"

"Nothing personal, kid!"

Tokoyami watched from his darkened perch as two more villains took the bait that was his classmate Koda, rushing at a seemingly vulnerable target and leaving themselves open for a crushing ambush.

Now, Dark Shadow...!

Koda fell into only a meager defensive stance, hiding his face behind his arms as the villains lunged at him, only to be slammed into a wall by Dark Shadow's gargantuan claw.

"That makes six," Tokoyami said, flashing a thumbs-up to Koda as the two villains—a gangly, clawed man and a yellowish brute of an ogre—collapsed to the drizzly ground in a pained heap. "We need only whittle them down until help assuredly arrives..."

Koda—shy and quiet as he was—merely nodded his head in agreement. They both booked it down the nearest alley as the sound of boots stomping across waterlogged streets reached their ears.

The need for guerilla tactics was, in Tokoyami's view, made all the more essential by the zone they'd been warped to. The Squall Zone dumped a seemingly ceaseless amount of water down onto the city streets and alleys, and he was sure there was a complicated drainage system in place that recycled all the water that flowed down the city's various gutters and drains back into the sprinkler system lining the entire dome's ceiling.

The rain was little more than a consistent drizzle, but the wind was anything but consistent, constantly changing directions from whatever fan mechanism Thirteen had installed into the dome. Tokoyami figured it was likely to make the simulation as chaotic—and therefore as realistic—as it could possibly be. It didn't make fighting in such conditions any more enjoyable, what with rain inevitably pelting into his and Koda's faces regardless of which direction they were facing.

And then there was the darkness.

That made fighting in such an environment even more of a hassle for Tokoyami, who'd hurriedly explained the basic ins and outs of his Quirk to Koda as they escaped the initial ambush they'd been warped into. The Squall Zone was dimly lit, and Tokoyami could feel the strength surging through Dark Shadow—and himself by extension—as a result of said darkness. He'd already noted that this was the largest Dark Shadow had ever grown outside of any instances where he’d lost control in the past, and he wanted to make doubly sure he didn't slip with his emotions. The last thing he wanted to do was potentially harm Koda or anyone else who might've come to help.

Unfortunately for Tokoyami, the universe had decided it was pushing the envelope today.
A dull tremor rumbled throughout the city and across the darkened, blue dome as Tokoyami and Koda sprinted out of the network of alleyways webbing the zone and onto yet another soggy street, flanked by towering buildings.

Tokoyami raised a hand to motion for his companion to pause for a moment. What was—

A dim wall of light suddenly rushed by and overwhelmed them, so quick and transparent that Tokoyami thought he was seeing things. In the split second that he'd reflexively raised Dark Shadow to defend against the light, he also swore that every rain drop remained suspended in midair for no longer than a second before resuming its fall. He shared a glance with Koda, who appeared equally confused.

They barely had a moment to observe the shifting fractals layered over their environment when the entire ground suddenly tilted. Tokoyami and Koda quickly found their footing lost as they slid down the asphalt, landing on a new surface: the side of the building that was to their right, now the floor beneath their feet. Tokoyami actually landed on steel, while Koda landed on and crashed through a glass window. The boy uttered a barely audible squeak as he fell through, and Tokoyami sprung into action before he even had time to recollect his bearings. He sent Dark Shadow's arm through the broken window—down the hole?—to save Koda from his fall.

As he reeled in his sentient Quirk's arm like a fishing line, Tokoyami glanced about, silently observing with no small amount of surprise that the entire Squall Zone had turned ninety degrees on its side. The street that was once beneath their feet was now an unscalable wall, and a series of chasms now separated the buildings instead of flat asphalt.

Amazingly, the rain still dropped with normal physics in mind, from the ceiling all the way to their right to the insurmountable street now behind them. Tokoyami stayed facing toward the street in order to mitigate the pelting droplets against his face. Not that he had much choice: he had to still the frantic beating of his heart and mind before he could even think about moving, lest he lose control. If he allowed his panic to flow into Dark Shadow...

"Thank you," A quiet voice spoke. It was Koda, who was finally reeled in from his unexpected fall through the glass. The sound of his voice caught Tokoyami off guard; he realized it was the first time he'd heard the rock-headed boy say anything since classes began. Aside from a few scrapes from the glass, he was unharmed. Tokoyami breathed a sigh of relief; Koda wasn't terribly hurt, and he managed to avoid compounding the injuries in his brief panic.

The respite was short-lived.

Several glass panels surrounding them suddenly shattered, plunging Koda and Tokoyami back into pandemonium.

"Run!" Tokoyami cried out, sprinting down the length of the building toward the dome's ceiling as windows continued to shatter around them. He and Koda made sure to run along the steel segments of the building, avoiding the glass in case they shattered under their weight or in case whatever was breaking them collided into their bodies.

Rotund, metallic objects entered Tokoyami's periphery as they dashed for safety, crashing through and rising above the windows before the zone's new gravity tugged them back down into the building. He narrowed his eyes; there must've been villains with ranged Quirks on the other side of the building—beneath them—firing at them through the windows.

Tokoyami remained behind Koda as they outran the shattering projectiles. Dark Shadow hovered over his head, its arms covering their flanks to block any stray bits of glass that might've otherwise...
hurt and impeded them.

The windows near the top, or now the end, of the building began shattering as projectiles barreled through them, causing Tokoyami and Koda to skid to a halt. There was nowhere else to run, with oversized bullets being fired up at them from both sides of the building, and steadily coming nearer. Except now there were also cannon-sized projectiles thrown into the mix, punching through the steel chassis of the building instead of just the windows. Tokoyami wrapped Dark Shadow around themselves, mind racing for a solution. They had to escape the bombardment, put some distance between the villains and them, but how?

He tensed from a soft tapping on his shoulder. Tokoyami turned and saw Koda gesturing to another building a fair distance away from them, but also the villains firing at them from beneath.

One problem: that building and the one they were currently standing one were separated by the chasm of air he'd noted earlier. Not only that, but it was a solid ten meters to cross. He'd never attempted to use Dark Shadow to jump such a distance before, especially not with a second person in his grasp and villains firing up at them exacerbating the issue.

Tokoyami groaned as he weighed the dilemma before him. He had less than a minute to make a decision before the projectiles reached where they stood. Could Dark Shadow make the distance, with wind and rain pelting down on them? Could he risk his new, quiet companion's safety with such a maneuver? Could he even maintain control while crossing the chasm, what with his heartbeat already pounding against his ribcage as is?

A hefty hand rested atop Tokoyami's shoulder, right where a gentle finger once poked. He spared Koda another glance, blinking in surprise at the thumbs-up gesture the taller boy was returning him. It was the same gesture he'd given Koda after every successful guerilla attack they'd pulled off against the villains thus far, his way of accommodating his hesitation to communicate.

A gesture of faith.

It was the most tacit way of saying 'I believe in you' that could possibly be gestured. Koda was choosing to believe in him even in spite of the risks that Tokoyami had informed him of.

Trust: the currency of friendships, Tokoyami thought as Dark Shadow wrapped one of its monstrous talons around Koda's body, the other digging into the building's steel edge. It was not a currency he'd had much of throughout his childhood, but he'd come to silently cherish the trust he'd accrued in the days following the Battle Trials with the newly founded Team Defect.

His companions. His friends.

Brimming with newfound determination, even as his anxiety and fear threatened to spill over into Dark Shadow, Tokoyami launched himself from the building with Koda in tow. In his periphery, several villains crawled out through the broken windows, yelling and swearing as their prey made a last bid at escape. Tokoyami had cleared the chasm halfway before he began to drop. Dark Shadow reared its arm back and tossed Koda forward, ensuring he'd made it across as shadow and would-be hero fell.

"Tokoyami!" Koda cried out as he landed on the building's side with a roll, mindful that he didn't fall through a window again. He scrambled to the edge, peering down and sighing relief as he saw Dark Shadow's other claw clutching onto the building's steel exterior, leaving Tokoyami dangling where he was much like was at the end of his Battle Trial.

Dark Shadow slowly reeled Tokoyami in until he was within arm's length of Koda. Both reached out
for each other, and Koda quickly yanked Tokoyami onto the flat surface. They'd made it.

Tokoyami sputtered out some quick thanks to Koda before the sound of shouting drew their attention back to the building they were just on. The villains were on the move again, no doubt preparing to pursue their quarry once more.

Tokoyami narrowed his eyes as he allowed Koda to help him back to his feet.

This Dance of Death was far from over.

"Right this way, s'il vous plait!" Aoyama yelled above the crackling of the surrounding flames as his dazzling laser fizzled down, hopefully luring one of several cadres of villains toward his position. He and his companion had managed to shake off the villains when they'd been dumped in this veritable oven, and they'd spread out trying to find them.

He heard a chorus of yells as three club- and knife-wielding villains rounded the corner, spotting him. They instantly charged, weapons raised for the kill as Aoyama remained still. A whirl of white and yellow spun out of a nearby alleyway, striking the villains across the back of their heads with a single, decisive swoop.

"Don't let them get too close to you, Aoyama!" Ojiro chided him as he rubbed his thick, calloused tail. "The last thing we want to do is get caught by them!"

"Excusez-moi!" Aoyama said with a shrug. "But I make good bait, do I not? I certainly don't mind the attention. My laser makes for a compelling lure, and then you swing in to mop them up! A dazzling strategy, is it not?"

"Well, when you put it like that, yeah," Ojiro admitted as he scratched his chin, obviously perturbed by Aoyama's idiosyncrasies. "Uh, by that way...your cape's burning a little bit."

Aoyama's closed smile grew taut as he whipped his head around. Ojiro was indeed telling the truth: the bottom of his glorious purple cape was singed and flickering with a small amount of fire licking at the fabric. He quickly yanked it off his backside and stomped it out, and when he swung it back over his shoulders Ojiro had already leapt up to a street light, hanging it from it by his muscular tail.

"Draw them in for me all you want, just don't feel like you have to put yourself at too much of a risk by letting them rush in too close," Ojiro said. He prepared to leap off in order to find another safe, flameless hole in which to cloister himself in for another ambush, but seemed to pause, eyeing Aoyama once more. "Also, you seemed pretty gung-ho about separating the villains and then luring them in one group at a time for dispatching. I hope you don't mind me prying, but why the sudden confidence? No offense, but I never pegged you as the brave type."

"Ah, je ne sais pas..." Aoyama said with a chuckle before falling silent, his taut smile sagging a little. He knew all too well where this newfound bravery originated from: one Izuku Midoriya.

Aoyama's initial performance during Team Fabulous's Battle Trial was, in his mind, nothing short of disgraceful. In the face of a suddenly appearing enemy, he was all too comfortable with fleeing and cowering away, letting his companion fight on his own. He'd learned his lesson quickly enough, and doing so allowed him to snatch victory from the jaws of defeat, for both himself and Midoriya.

He now found himself in an eerily similar situation, paired with another of his classmates, and thrust into a hostile environment and squaring off against an enemy—only this time it was real. But that was all the more reason for him to stay unwavering in the face of these villains, right? Succumbing to the burgeoning fear in his chest would be like succumbing to his former mindset about how bad of a
"I can't sparkle if I'm running away, can I?" He asked quietly. "Only a defective hero, lackluster and drab, runs away."

Ojiro was about to respond when the entire dome seemed to shudder violently, knocking the tailed hero-in-training off his perch. Aoyama ran to his side, helping him up.

"W-what was that?" Ojiro groaned, wiping dust and soot off of his gi before his eyes trailed upward to the crimson ceiling, freezing in fear.

Ojiro noticed his eyes were stuck on the ceiling and looked up with him, summarily freezing as well. The fire zone's domed ceiling seemed to be peeling apart, much like the skin of a rotted fruit. The fires contained underneath, Aoyama noted, roared with considerable increased fervor, the outside oxygen adding additional fuel for it to consume and grow off of.

Ojiro squinted his eyes as the burning streets were flooded with light as the dome peeled backward, revealing an air of swirling shapes and distortions that defied explanation. Aoyama, with his fancy visor, seemed unaffected by the sudden influx of light, though the shape-filled sky perplexed him all the same.

But the true mind boggling had yet to come. Another tremor, far louder than the first, sent Aoyama and Ojiro scurrying for cover, watching with a mix of horror and awe as the numerous flaming structures of the Fire Zone began rising into the sky. They didn't lift off the ground, ripping apart from their foundations, no, they stretched, as if they'd turned elastic and were being pulled skyward by some unseen force. The elongated edifices were now more or less scorched skyscrapers, towering far above even the fires and smoke raging and fuming below.

"Aoyama?" Ojiro asked apprehensively.

"Oui?"

"You think now might be an okay time to run away?"
Izuku, Kaminari, Jiro, and Yaoyorozu enact their final plan of desperation against the zealot Ikiji, hoping their assault will defeat the corrupted sorcerer and show them a way out of the Mirror Dimension. But even with Izuku’s growth and teamwork, will the 1-A students be able to overwhelm the empowered Ikiji? And if they fail...will outside help arrive in time?

Kaminari stole glances at Izuku, Jiro, and Yaoyorozu as they all remained huddled in a crevice in the distorted mountainside, making sure to stay out Ikiji’s sight as they prepared for their final move of desperation. The blonde tugged at the green cloak clasped to his shoulders, silently wondering if everyone else would be better off if he remained in this wide hole, alone, while they went off to fight this zealot or whatever Izuku described him as.

He nearly jumped as Midoriya suddenly appeared in his periphery, sitting down beside him. The green-haired enigma had familiar vermillion bindings all bunched up in his left hand. He, too, was adorned with a green cloak, as were Jiro and Yaoyorozu who were sitting off to the side, conversing with one another quietly. Every so often, Jiro would cast a glance over at Midoriya.

The first part of the plan, Kaminari thought. Well, it was one of the only parts of the plan he’d been fully paying attention to: have Yaoyorozu create several fake cloaks and switch the real cloak amongst them to throw Ikiji off, make him hesitate and keep his distance, play it safe. They would close the distance with Midoriya’s support, and now that they’d all had a taste of Ikiji’s...’magic’ and what it could do in this mountainous environment, they would all be better prepared when launching their counterattack.

Well, that was the idea, anyway.

Kaminari was nervous. Scratch that, he was down right terrifed. He was thankful that shade was plentiful in this particular crevice, otherwise it would readily apparent to the others how badly he was shaking where he sat. The occasional rumbles, crashes, and explosions echoing across the USJ only worsened his nerves. How were the others faring? Were the different zones he assumed they were scattered to also affected by Ikiji’s magic? Were their other ‘sorcerers’ lying in wait in those areas as well?

He looked over at Midoriya, sitting beside him. He was slowly wrapping one of the crimson bindings around his right arm, despite its limpness. Kaminari studied his classmate’s face and body posture, silently noting that Midoriya seemed far less tense than he was, and aside from the occasional wince of pain that appeared on his face as he methodically wrapped the red strip of cloth over his forearm, he appeared totally calm.

Or perhaps resigned, Kaminari grimly thought. Seriously, how could Midoriya maintain his composure in the face of everything that they’d witnessed so far, let alone what they were about to do? The guy had to have nerves of steel, as opposed to Kaminari, who had nerves of bubble wrap.

Then Kaminari remembered how the villain—Ikiji—had called Midoriya out by name, his full name no less. They’d definitely met before, probably fought, too. Midoriya definitely had some familiarity
with their foe's powers, from his space manipulation to his apparently 'true' bone-related Quirk. But such familiarity was not enough to spare Midoriya from a seemingly gruesome injury inflicted by Ikiji's space glaive, slicing yet also phasing cleanly through his right arm, leaving it limp and wilted. It was an injury that Midoriya had taken for him—

Kaminari blinked rapidly as he narrowed in on Midoriya's injured arm. He shot to his feet as vivid recollections of his Battle Trial with Uraraka flooded his mind, her screams as he accidentally barraged her with his electricity ringing loudly in his ears. The screams sounded so real, as if she were yelling right beside him—

"Midoriya, man," Kaminari spoke up suddenly. "Was your arm always looking like that?" He pointed to the limp limb Midoriya was attending to, the gross discoloration evident even in the shade. His arm was littered with disgusting purple and blackened blotches, his veins highlighted by thin streaks of violet spanning the length of his forearm, and barely concealed by the crimson cloth coiled over his skin.

Before Izuku could formulate a reply, Kaminari was already kneeling by his side, helping him wrap the second red cloth over his left wrist—with his right arm in its current state, he wouldn't be able to secure the second binding without help.

"I'm sorry," Kaminari muttered repeatedly as he coiled the red binding around Izuku's arm as best he could. He had no idea if he was doing it right—he'd blanked out when Izuku had shown him after they'd wrapped up their initial strategy meeting—but the small smile on his lips at least told Kaminari his gesture was appreciated. "You got hurt because of me."

"It's fine, Kaminari, really," Izuku said in as earnest of a voice he could muster. "We'll all be fine. That's what I believe."

The wrapping came to a halt, and Kaminari stares at Midoriya with a look of bewilderment, perhaps even some disbelief, too. "...Do you really believe that?" Kaminari asked. "Scratch that—how can you believe that, and so easily, too?" As he addressed Izuku, Kaminari began tugging unknowingly at his own sleeves, and his classmate reached out to stop him with a gentle touch.

"I promised you answers, but it remains uncertain whether you'll be able to believe or even understand what I want to tell you," Izuku said quietly. "Trust me, Kaminari, I've been exactly where you and the others are right now, and well...I've had more than enough time to learn how to believe without strictly seeing."

The two boys remain quiet for a long while. Kaminari stared hard at Izuku's face, and Izuku kept his gaze downward. "That Ikiji guy wasn't lying," Kaminari said at last. "You and he really are sorcerers, aren't you?"

Izuku nodded.

"And Energy Reign...it really is magic, and not actually a Quirk," Kaminari continued. That last bit was a statement, not a question, and Izuku's second nod only further cemented the truth.

Kaminari took in a deep breath and exhaled just as hard. That was...a lot to take in. A lot to unscramble, unwrap, and process. Izuku was right: even with the cold, hard truth laid before him, Kaminari was struggling to believe it, and to hell with understanding it! And even through the disbelief, the blonde felt a peculiar twang pulse through him. He wouldn't understand it until much later, but Kaminari was—certainly not jealous, but perhaps a bit envious of Izuku's ability to believe without needing to see. He wished he could have faith as easily as Izuku did.
"Are we going to be able to pull this off with your arm like that?" Yaoyorozu questioned as she and Jiro approached the both of them, their identical green cloaks fluttering as they walked. "Do you think that will tip Ikiji off about your bindings?"

"No, I don't think so," Izuku replied. "If I'm right, he'll be too distracted by our cloaks and by you. He understands your Quirk allows you to create nonorganic matter from your body, and sees you as the wild card among us."

Yaoyorozu's eyes shifted to Kaminari. "But our true wild card is—"

"Please don't remind me," Kaminari said, squirming uncomfortably under the weight of his role. "I'm dealing with enough pressure as it is!"

"But what about you injury?" Jiro asked, gazing not-so-subtly as his arm, and the discoloration not totally covered by the red wrapping. "Will you be able to cast your—" Jiro paused and closed her eyes, as if bracing herself for disbelief, "—'spells' with just one arm?"

"Portals will be difficult," Izuku conceded, "especially since it was my dominant hand that was injured, but one arm should still suffice. Besides," Izuku clicks his heels together, a brief shower of embers emanating from the soles of his boots, "I still have more than just an arm to rely on."

"And besides even that!" Izuku threw his sole good arm around Kaminari's shoulders, beaming widely as Yaoyorozu invoked her Quirk once more to help create a sling for his arm, muttering about not needing to take unnecessary risks. "We still have Kaminari!"

The blonde practically sagged under the weight of Izuku's arm. That proclamation and beaming grin if Izuku's were clearly intended to instill some confidence and ease the tension among them, but it all simply fell flat with him.

Kaminari couldn't help but feel as if Izuku's faith in him was severely misplaced.

"Is it all clear?"

"Lots of rumbles, but I don't see anything..."

"Let's go!"

The four intrepid students darted out of the crevice they'd been holed up in, dashing down the vaguely marked mountain path toward the bridge connecting the two peaks. Izuku was, predictably, in front, leading the way, with Jiro and Yaoyorozu running behind him. Kaminari took up the rear.

Their individual cloaks billowed as they ran down the slight slope, away from the cyclone of rocks behind them that was still maintained by Ikiji's magic. Said zealot was nowhere in sight, but Izuku and the others all knew he'd be back quickly enough now that they were on the move. Hurling him out of sight gave them a sliver of time to regroup, but nothing more.

*Crossing the bridge and continuing down the sloped path should lead us right back down to the central plaza*, Izuku thought as he ran. *If we feign escape, Ikiji will surely try to cut us off...!*

Sure enough, as Izuku and the others approached the bridge connecting the two peaks, a ripple in the rocky path materialized near the base of the mountain, steadily approaching and growing into a veritable wave of earth. As the ripple approached, the shorter mountain peak began to tilt and lean toward the taller one, the thin chasm separating the two plateaus becoming narrower and narrower before finally clamping shut with a tumultuous crash. The bridge connecting the two shattered in an
explosion of wooden splinters and rent metal bits, and the path leading down to the central plaza was muddied by Ikiji's magic. The feigned escape was cut off.

"Jiro! Now!" Izuku yelled as the wave in the earth approached faster still, its speed unimpeded by the crashing of plateaus. It crossed seamlessly from one side to the other after they collided, and continued towards the heroes-in-training.

"On it!" Jiro affirmed, running ahead of Izuku and jamming her earphone jacks into her boots, narrowing her vibrations directly on the section of rippling earth directly in their path. Izuku and the others halted behind Jiro as her sound waves oscillated forward, violently blasting through the earth and essentially splitting the wave in two, leaving a clear path for them to run between.

Not that they would've gotten very far. The split wave continued its linear path, traveling past the students harmlessly. But another ripple undulated out of the rock before them, and the familiar figure of Ikiji rose out of the earth. He strode forward with confidence, but whatever certainty of victory he thought he had quickly dissipated after a few paces when he saw Izuku and his companions each wearing a green cloak—their own Cloak of Levitation.

No, not Cloaks of Levitation, Ikiji realized. His eyes were slowly drawn to the spiky ponytailed girl, the one with the creation-based Quirk. Mere copies created by that girl. But which one has the real one? His eyes rapidly darted between the four of them, trying to work it out, but the girl's duplicates were spot on.

No matter, I'll keep my distance and work it out from there, he thought, a smirk gracing his lips. He knew full well that whoever had the cloak held a slight advantage in being able to avoid his powers. But once the real one was revealed? Well, that would still make his job all the more easier.

His eyes, fierce and cracked as they were, settled on Izuku. So, Strange gave him three relics: the cloak, the vermillion vambraces, and the vaulting boots, he mused. However... His eyes trailed to the sling carrying his limp, right arm. "It's a good combination, those relics of yours!" Ikiji called out to Izuku. "But I'm more than familiar with their synergy. So sad, Izuku: you expect to catch me off guard with these cheap parlor tricks? You wouldn't entrust a non-sorcerer with any relic!"

"Only one way to find out!" Izuku yelled back, taking to the air, but with his Vaulting Boots of Valtorr instead of his green cloak. The soles of his magical footwear generated bright, dazzling footholds with each step, keeping him in the air as he began to ascend with each leap.

Izuku grinned—Ikiji was going to play it safe, as he thought. Jiro, Yaoyorozu, and Kaminari began to dash forward as the two sorcerers took to the air. Time to put the plan in motion.

Ikiji eyed Izuku warily, trying to keep his focus on his three companions still on solid ground. He had promised to kill them first, after all. He thrust his fingers in the direction of the ground and swiped his arms left and right. The three stumbled, their run forward crippled as two ravines opened up, splitting the plateau into three separated paths.

Ikiji responded in kind, raising himself into the air atop a chunk of earth ripped into the sky via his powers, levitating backwards to keep a good amount of distance between himself and the students.

Izuku grinned—Ikiji was going to play it safe, as he thought. Jiro, Yaoyorozu, and Kaminari began to dash forward as the two sorcerers took to the air. Time to put the plan in motion.

Ikiji eyed them maliciously, focusing on Yaoyorozu's path and flicking a finger upward. Two large earthen spikes jutted out of the ground directly in front of and behind her, cutting her off. The girl, however, had already sprung into the action with her Quirk, materializing a large pole from her arm
and summarily vaulting over the obstacles Ikiji raised in her path. Ikiji grunted, flicking his finger again and raising another spike directly below her this time. Again, the girl proved herself quick to adapt, slamming the tip of her pole down on the tip of the spike he raised, vaulting again off of it. She landed gracefully and continued her sprint toward him.

He shifted his focus to the blonde boy, again flicking his fingers up to raise spikes in his path. A shining barrier, however, impeded this plan, giving the blonde a solid foothold to leap over his obstacles. Ikiji glanced up toward Izuku, and saw he'd conjured said barrier from his still usable arm, though not without some strain. Ikiji bit his lip; Izuku's Vaulting Boots kept him airborne and gave him free reign to use barriers as he pleased to support his friends below.

He shifted focus again, this time to the girl with the earphone jacks. Again he raised several spikes in her path, and again Izuku defended her with his barriers, allowing her to continue forward. Ikiji growled in frustration; they were doing everything possible to not reveal who had the real Cloak of Levitation. Whoever had the real one could close the distance between them quickly, and if they got close enough before playing their hand...

Ikiji quickly suppressed that possibility before it even finished rattling around in his brain. He would not even entertain the thought of defeat today.

They want to be difficult, do they? Ikiji thought darkly, looking up and reaching his arms toward the wide girders and glass surfaces that formed the structure of the USJ's domed ceiling. Then difficult is what they're going to get.

Ikiji gripped air and wrenched his hands downward. Several of the large panels of glass abruptly shattered as the gargantuan girders holding everything together peeled off, bobbing in the air like steel behemoths. Ikiji directed them with a mere point toward Izuku's companions, and the floating steel girders obediently spiraled downward, crashing into the split plateau and kicking up an enormous amount of dirt.

Ikiji rose above the dust cloud, mentally swearing as he spotted Izuku's cloaked form also leaping above the cloud and landing on another of his boot's footholds. His left arm was strained and directed toward the dust, and Ikiji swore again, knowing that he'd aided the others yet again with his barriers. True enough, the top of the cloud parted, and each of the three pests were running up the contorted girders he slammed into their paths.

The zealot reached up yet again, this time seizing control of the glass panels he'd shattered. He splintered them further into countless, sharpened shards, dividing them into two bunches. He aimed one arm towards Izuku and the other toward his friends. "Izuku, you're making it very hard for me to keep my promise!" Ikiji yelled to him. "Would you kindly fuck off?!"

With the slightest of twitches in his hands, the glass clouds careened toward their targets, a chorus of clinking filling everyone's ears as the glass splinters clanged and chinked against each other repeatedly. Izuku redirected his left hand to conjure a barrier for his own defense, and Ikiji grinned as the glass shards bounced harmlessly off his shielding.

Let's see you protect your friends when you're too busy protecting yourself!

He looked back down to watch the carnage unfold, catching a glimpse of the girl with the earphone jacks plugging into her stereo boots again. Ah-ah-ah, Ikiji mentally chided Jiro. That won't work so long as I have you in my sights!

He aimed a hand toward Jiro, preparing to oscillate the space in front of her to render her sound waves inert when he noticed a bright light zooming into his periphery, from where Izuku was. He
glanced up at him, barely raising his arms in time as the glass-covered barrier crashed against his body. Ikiji was promptly knocked off his platform with a surprised gasp. The shield disintegrated as it struck, coating his arms with the sickening warmth of Izuku's magic as the embedded glass bounced harmlessly off the bony armor protecting his body. Ikiji swiftly ripped another chunk of earth to fly up from below, halting his fall by catching him, and giving him enough time to rub out the embers of Izuku's magic that had flown into his eyes, leaving them teary and irritated.

Ikiji growled up at Izuku once his eyes were clear, but paused as he heard the unmistakable sound of footsteps ascending closer and closer. He whirled back toward the girders and saw that Izuku had knocked him down too close for comfort. His friends had nearly closed the gap entirely.

With a panicked swipe of his arm, the girders suddenly disconnected from the ceiling entirely and bent downward, slamming into the plateaus with their other ends. His three targets had no path to him now. They'd reached as high as they could. They had nowhere to go but down.

All but one of them, that is.

Where the blonde dolt and the girl with the creation-based Quirk all began sliding down the girders, Jiro—the girl with the earphone jacks—leapt into the air, the green cloak clasped to her shoulders unfurling as it carried her high into the sky near Izuku's side.

Ikiji was already sliding his palms against one another, manifesting a sickeningly sharp shard in his hands before Jiro had reached Izuku. *So you have the real cloak...!* His attention—his malice—were squarely focused on Jiro as he sent his space shard flying directly toward her. *One down, three to go!*

But Ikiji had assumed victory too soon. Jiro had her eyes and ears on Ikiji, and the sentient fabric seemed to sense the danger rapidly approaching. It jerked to the side, allowing Jiro to narrowly dodge the shard as it zipped past her head. The shard promptly stopped, flipped around, and resumed honing in on Jiro. Izuku was quick to intercept, however, and a hastily raised barrier stopped the shard in its tracks. Both shard and shield exploded in a shower of embers and fading fractals as Jiro awkwardly landed on Izuku's foothold, sharing the space with him as he conjured yet another dazzlingly bright mandala shield.

The Cloak of Levitation unclasped itself from Jiro's backside and zipped downward. Ikiji's sight strayed away from Izuku and Jiro, following the cloak's trajectory before another rapidly approaching light forced his attention back to Izuku yet again. It annoyed him to no end how his sibling student demanded his focus when he wanted to kill the boy's friends first. He raised his arms as Izuku's barrier crashed against him once more, sending him hurtling off his platform and simultaneously blinding him and coating his arms with his magic. Ikiji noted as he fell that the barrier had struck him much quicker this time, likely amplified by that girl's sound waves.

Another patch of ripped earth soared into the air at his command, catching him before he could plummet all the way to the ground. But he was not given more than a moment to recuperate before a powerful, blunt force slammed against his shoulder, knocking him off his platform yet again. He was far too close to the plateau's surface this time, and he skidded to a halt with the help of his bone spurs. He yanked his head up just in time to see Yaoyorozu speeding towards him, elongated staff in hand, and the legitimate Cloak of Levitation attached to her shoulders, guiding her.

With only moments to respond, Ikiji braced for impact by crossing his arms in front of his chest and face, deflecting the swing of her staff with his bone-covered wrists. The force of the impact caused both to stagger backwards, though Yaoyorozu recovered much quicker thanks to the cloak. She zoomed right back into her offensive, battering him with her staff and landing blows on his shoulders and torso before sweeping him off his feet, sending him sprawling. She brought her staff down for a decisive blow to his seemingly defenseless form, but he surprised her by reaching up and catching
the tip, and no amount of tugging could release it from his bony clutch.

"You're quite impressive," Ikiji rasped, acknowledging Yaoyorozu's skill as the bony plates covering his fingers scraped against the surface of her staff. "But you can't hope to hold a candle to me without any magic." He squeezed his hand, causing the staff to crumble to pieces. The cloak jerked Yaoyorozu into the air right as Ikiji flicked his fingers upward, raising several more earthen spikes beneath her feet. The cloak carried her backwards as Kaminari ran into view, running to her side.

"Ikiji!"

It was Izuku's voice. The yell and a shadow passing overhead drew his attention back to the skies as Izuku and Jiro leaped from foothold to foothold, steadily making their way to the plateau again. Once he was close enough, Izuku launched himself from his final positioning above the ground, an irritatingly blinding mandala whirling to life around his palm once more. He slammed his open palm against the barrier, sending it crashing it toward Ikiji.

The zealot wasn't caught unawares this time, however, and opted to dodge the wall of energy instead of absorbing the impact with his arms, though he did use them to cover his face as he leapt backwards, muttering a curse as the remnants of energy from the dissipated barrier landed on his arms again, defiling them again with their filthy warmth.

Izuku landed directly behind Ikiji, stumbling only slightly as his feet hit the plateau floor. Jiro landed to his right, and Ikiji was already aware of the other two directly before him. They'd closed the distance. Ikiji was almost entirely surrounded.

"It's over, Ikiji!" Izuku yelled with a swipe of his left arm. "Let me and my classmates out of the Mirror Dimension!"

Ikiji stayed silent for a long while, as if considering Izuku's words. Then...he laughed. "You think you have any hope of escaping now!?" Ikiji laughed at them all. "You played your hand too early, Izuku! You and your friends thought to confuse me by creating duplicate cloaks, but I know where the real one is now! And now that I do know, you're right back to whatever middling advantage you did have over me! That is to say...you're back to square one, Izuku."

"You're wrong!" Izuku yelled, rearing his left arm back. "That's not all you didn't know!" He shot his left arm forward, and the familiar vermillion vambrace covering his forearm uncoiled and flew directly toward Ikiji. Ikiji caught it before the binding could adhere to his body like before, ripping it apart with a quick yank of his hand—

—and immediately froze. The Vermillion Vambraces of Vexation were magically enhanced and sturdy; they could not be torn so simply. The sensation of two strips of cloth sticking to his wrists from behind and tugging them back snapped Ikiji out of his musings. Panicked, Ikiji turned his head to see Kaminari—the dolt—with his arms stretched outward, two red bindings extending from beneath his black sleeves.

The real Vermillion Vambraces.

"The cloaks weren't the only duplicates that girl created!? Ikiji ascertained with horror in his eyes. She also made fake vambraces so the real ones could be switched around, too! And Izuku's barriers from before...he made sure to coat my arms with as much energy as possible so his vambraces would automatically attach to them regardless of who wielded the bindings!"

"Figured it out, did you?" Izuku asked, interrupting Ikiji's panicked train of thought. "You didn't know Yaoyorozu made fake vambraces for me...and you also didn't know about Kaminari's Quirk
Kaminari smirked, showing the first glimmer of confidence he'd felt all day. "Indiscriminate Discharge!" He yelled, palms arcing with violent streaks of electricity. "1.3 Million volts!"

_Ivory Aegis_—! Ikiji could barely finish the thought, let alone activate the full extent of his Quirk before Kaminari's electricity sparked through the magical bindings connecting their bodies, dousing him in a ceaseless session of voltaic pain.

"And I only need one hand for this spell!" Ikiji heard Izuku speak through his roars of pain, looking forward to see the boy's free hand crackle with lightning as well. "Bolts of Bedevilment!" Izuku's lightning collided with his unblocked chest, sandwiching Ikiji in a sea of sparks.

Ikiji fell to his knees as he roared in agony, the lightning incinerating whatever meager defenses he'd managed to cover his body with before the attacks landed in the blink of an eye, stunning him from mounting any further defense. He thrashed against the bindings holding his arms back, to no avail; the incessant surges were proving too great even for him. This was nearly as painful as the Seven Suns of Cinnibus spell Strange had struck him with back at Kamar-Taj.

_I...refuse to fall here!_ Ikiji screamed to himself, gritting his teeth so hard he thought they would crack. _I swore to prove myself to you, All For One! I swore to show how I was worthy of the Darkhold! And that means...failure is not an option!_

Even as he screamed above the endless crackling of their lightning, Ikiji's eyes darted around, peering through the bright flashes of their combined attack. The girl with the earphone jacks was now to his left, and the girl with the real cloak had moved to his right.

**Perfect.**

Ikiji's thrashing had amounted to nothing, the adherence of the Vermillion Vambraces to his wrists was too great to simply wrest himself out of.

But he was more than free to move his fingers as he pleased. He pointed at Jiro and Momo with both hands, making a jerky 'some hither' gesture with his fingers. The earth beneath their feet suddenly became loose, and started to race toward Ikiji's body, dragging both girls toward him. The cloak managed to lift Yaoyorozu off the ground before the collision, but Jiro...was not as fortunate. A shocked gasp was all she could utter before colliding into Ikiji's body, convulsing and thrashing as she too began to share in the pain Izuku and Kaminari were inflicting on him, yelling all the while.

The lightning assault from both boys came to an abrupt end, stunned at Ikiji having dragged their friend to suffer with him. Ikiji rammed his palms against the ground, panting in reprieve as he stopped himself from collapsing entirely. Jiro, however, fell limply to the ground, twitching erratically.

"Jiro!" Kaminari screamed, gazing at her downed body with newfound terror as whatever confidence he'd mustered fled from his body in an instant. Staring at Jiro with widened eyes, his mind flashed back to Uraraka, and how she'd also fallen victim to his erratic powers. Kaminari trembled; yet another of his classmates was hurt by his Quirk.

The vambraces fell limp in his hands, and what adherence there was keeping them connected to Ikiji's wrists was no more. Ikiji pushed a thick layer of bone through his wrists, forcibly shoving the bindings off his body as they clattered to the ground. He rose back to his feet with a vengeful growl, glaring down at Jiro's unconscious form with contempt. Before anyone could react, Ikiji reared his foot back and slammed it into Jiro's gut, sending her body rolling down the mountainside with a
vicious kick.

"Jiro!" All three remaining heroes yelled simultaneously, though Yaoyorozu was the one who chased after her body, flying down the mountain with the real Cloak of Levitation still adorning her body.

Izuku stood deathly still as he processed the sudden turn of events, only snapping out when Ikiji chuckled hauntingly at him. They'd done a solid number on the zealot: his bone defenses had truly been penetrated, and two holes had been burnt through his tunic, one on his front and one on his backside, exposing sizzling, seared flesh left from their attack.

"Fool me twice...shame on me," Ikiji said with a dark grin. "How right you were, Izuku: those were certainly things I didn't know about. But it seems there's something that you didn't know." Ikiji turned to face Kaminari, who was still standing still, paralyzed by an amalgamation of fear and despair. "You didn't know you'd placed your faith in a spineless coward."

Ikiji conjured a space shard between his palms in a flash, hurling it toward Kaminari, who remained rooted in terror.

No...! Izuku raised his left arm, wincing through the magical strain as he hastily opened a portal beside Kaminari. He hadn't been lying to his classmates earlier: it was indeed far more difficult opening a portal with one's non-dominant hand. The second rift opened next to Izuku, who promptly reached out his sole working hand and dragged Kaminari through the portal and into his grasp before his traumatized friend could be impaled.

"Kaminari!" Izuku yelled, shaking the blonde out of his state of anguish. "Kaminari! Snap out of it!"

Another chuckle from Ikiji distracted Izuku; he turned back and saw the zealot smiling devilishly. Just past him, the space shard hung eerily still in the air, having failed in its first skewering attempt. It had shifted in midair, angling itself perfectly toward the portal—straight towards Kaminari's exposed back.

"No!" Izuku yelled, moving before his mind had even fully processed what he was doing. He whirled around as the space shard went flying through the portal, diving to the ground with a pained grunt with Kaminari beneath him.

"M-Midoriya?" Kaminari coughed as his back hit the ground, staring up into the wide, glassy eyes of his friend. His eyes trailed down, and he audibly gasped as he saw Ikiji's space shard piercing through Izuku's chest, the tip mere inches away from skewering his own.

"Kaminari," Izuku sputtered, shakily running his working palm over the blonde's chest. He smiled; the shard hadn't pierced Kaminari. "You're not injured..."

Izuku's body was suddenly lifted off of Kaminari before he could collapse completely, dangling from the space shard sticking out of his chest.

"And here I wanted to leave you for last," Ikiji said with a crazed smirk, staggering closer to them. "But who am I to deny you a sorcerer's death if you crave it that badly!?" Ikiji conjured another shard in his hands and stabbed Izuku again, this time through his shoulder.

"Stop!" Kaminari begged, tears trickling from the corners of his eyes. "Please!"

"Is that a last flicker of defiance I sense?" Ikiji asked, casting a contemptuous glare down at Kaminari as he stayed his hand. "You all just can't seem to make up your minds about the order in which you all die."
"Fine, fine," Ikiji conceded after staring long and hard into Kaminari's blubbering face, "I suppose I'm not really breaking the promise I made to Izuku if I kill you all at once, am I?" The zealot turned, looking out across the USJ with a smirk.

Kaminari followed his gaze toward the red domed environment, heat radiating off the ceiling in rippling waves. What was he planning...?

Ikiji stretched a hand in the direction of the red dome before quickly swiping it to the side. Kaminari saw how Ikiji's spatial magic stretched even that far, the red dome rolling into itself as the flames and smoke festering beneath rose into the sky as it opened apart. Ikiji flipped his hand over, palm up, and raised it high into the air. Kaminari trembled as the flaming buildings housed beneath the dome suddenly rose into the sky, stretching from their foundations as they towered above even the mountain he and the others were on.

*Move!* Kaminari tried prying himself from where he lay, but he was utterly rigid. *Move, damn it!* His eyes wearily trailed back to Izuku's seemingly lifeless body. Were they both going to die here, crushed beneath flaming structures? Were Jiro and Yaoyorozu far enough away to avoid such a fate?

"Insufferable, isn't it?" Ikiji asked him out of the blue. "Knowing that all you and your companions did was snatch defeat from the jaws of victory? I understand," Ikiji's face turned grim with what looked like remorse, "I became quite *intimate* with that feeling six years ago. A shame that you won't live to see the timeless and painless world that will be ushered into existence in time, but at least your suffering will end here and now!"

The buildings from the Fire Zone began to move once more with a final, decisive swipe of his hand, rising into the sky before arcing downward, their flaming roofs pointed squarely at the mountainside. With precise aim, they honed in on the second peak, and Kaminari just managed to close his eyes.

But the impact never came. Instead of a brief but intense flash of searing pain, all Kaminari felt was a blast of hot wind rushing past his face. He dared to crack his eyes open to see what had transpired...

The buildings had slowed to a halt in midair, perhaps only a dozen or so meters above their heads. Needless to say, Kaminari and Ikiji were equally startled, one assured of his death, while the other was assured of his victory.

"No..." Ikiji hissed, swiping his hand down repeatedly, trying in vain to reassert control. The fractals spinning throughout the USJ also stalled to a halt, and an uncomfortable quiet permeated the Mirror Dimension. That quiet was suddenly shattered—or rather, the sky was—as a sizeable crack materialized in the sky above the central plaza, stretching from one end of the USJ to the other. The crack was followed by a familiar warmth emanating from the front entrance, a warmth that spread across the entire facility and filled Kaminari with comfort, but caused Ikiji to shudder with dread.

*No...don't tell me...!* Ikiji thought in disbelief, his shoulders sagging as he realized the worst was coming to pass.

Failure, Ikiji now knew, was *always* an option.

Uraraka felt her knees tremble as she stayed by Thirteen's side, watching helplessly as the buildings of the Fire Zone rose into the sky and arced toward the Mountain Zone, intent on slamming into them. The sight distressed her, and the thought of her classmates being crushed to death from such an assault compounded her fright.

That fright, however, was unexpectedly quelled by a warmth flaring to life directly behind her. She
and the others present turned to see a portal open up in front of the gates, swirling in its blazing glory.

*That portal...it looks identical to Midoriya's!* She realized. *But this one's so much brighter and warmer than what he's usually created...*

Whatever fear lingered in her heart and mind were thoroughly dashed as the familiar bulking figure of their Basic Hero Training teacher strolled through the portal.

Uraraka could hardly contain herself. "It's...it's...!"

"All Might!" Everyone exclaimed at once.

All Might inclined his head toward those still present, scanning his shadowed eyes to each of the students before finally landing on what remained of Thirteen's body. His hands clenched into fists, and it was then that Uraraka realized that All Might wasn't smiling like he normally did. His face was instead contorted into a fierce scowl. Not only that, but he was clutching an odd scrap of paper, too.

"You four have done well, enduring the situation up to this point," All Might addressed Uraraka, Sero, Sato, and Shoji. He pulled his yellow suit and tie off, tossing it to the side as he looked across the USJ with unbridled fury. "But it's fine now. Because we are here!"

Uraraka blinked. *We?*

Just then another figure emerged from the portal, standing at All Might's side. He was a stately-looking gentleman, appearing well trimmed and sophisticated, though she'd never seen this man before. He bore a blue tunic that was so strikingly similar to Midoriya's that it couldn't have been a coincidence, even though this cloak was red instead of green. Was the portal this man's doing? Was he a relative of Midoriya's? Was he a Pro Hero, like All Might?

Whoever he was, he was downright intimidating, far more than even All Might was making himself out to be. His warmth, though calming, belied a dangerous fury that Uraraka could see was just itching to reveal itself in the face of this villainous ambush. This was not a man to be trifled with.

"What do you think, Strange?" All Might asked the man.

The man—Strange—merely glanced down toward the central plaza and then the Mountain Zone as he raised a hand into the air. With a single swipe to his side, a massive crack in the air materialized across the USJ's ceiling.

"Where is my Disciple?" Strange asked in a booming yet worried voice, shattering the USJ back to normalcy with a second swipe of his hand. "Where. Is. Izuku?"
We Are Here!

Chapter Summary

The League of Villains' ambush on the USJ grinds to a halt with the arrival of the Earth's Symbol of Peace and Sorcerer Supreme, with Doctor Strange forcibly shattering the Mirror Dimension and freeing the 1-A students trapped within. However, even with Ikiji's plan foiled, Tomura and the League still have one final ace up their sleeve: the monstrous otherworldly creature called Nomu.

"Damn that Ikiji," Tomura bit out as he raked his fingers up and down his neck, scratching irritably. "For him to be going all out against a few scattered students...he must be looking at quite the EXP haul when he finally kills them."

He and Kurogiri were focused on the Mountain Zone at the rear end of the USJ, watching inquisitively as a wave of rock raced up the side of the mountain, only to have part of it blown open by an unseen force. Shortly afterwards, the ceiling came undone, with girders and glass alike buzzing about the air, contorting to Ikiji's will as they slammed down upon his as-of-yet unknown opponents. Well, most of them were unknown; Tomura recalled Kurogiri muttering something about having Ikiji deal with 'that boy from before,' whatever that meant.

"I won't forgive him if he levels up before me," Tomura muttered under his breath. He turned to face his obedient Nomu, squatting silently and still over Aizawa's bloodied, beaten body, waiting for further orders. Things had fallen quiet since the teacher was broken by Nomu and the Central Plaza was claimed as theirs. Those villains still conscious after Aizawa's Quirk-cancelling blitz had their attention transfixed on what was occurring on the mountain where Ikiji was currently fighting. "I'm supposed to be Player One today—me with my Nomu—so it's not right for him to upstage us—!"

"Where the hell are you looking at, you bastards!"

Tomura and Kurogiri whirled around, their vision filled with several rapid fire flashes and the acrid scent of nitroglycerin punching their nostrils. Tomura's battle instincts kicked in and he leapt back, narrowly avoiding a flash of red and black slamming into where he once stood. His senses were further bombarded by the subsequent cloud of dust kicked up from whatever crashed before him. Amidst all of that, Tomura heard a faint grunt from Kurogiri.

"Hey, hey," Tomura grumbled as the dust cleared, "we're supposed to be the ones pulling off an ambush here..."

Two of the students Kurogiri scattered had apparently fought their way out of whatever zone they'd been dumped in, making their way to the Central Plaza and pulling off a lucky, semi-successful sneak attack. Tomura thought it was luck; no way he was going to admit—not even to himself—that he'd been too wrapped up in watching Ikiji's antics and allowed his guard to drop.

"Damn!" The spiky, red-haired boy lamented, raising his jagged, hardened arm out of the crater he's just punched into the ground. "I didn't get to land a hit!"

"Should've gone for the warping bastard like I did!" A less spiky blonde boy barked from atop Kurogiri's downed body, his grenade-gauntlet hands placed firmly against the three metal plates
constructed around where the villain's neck would normally be. "Ain't that right, you smoky fuck? You can spit out a ton of fog, but you still have a physical body underneath it all, don't you!"

Damn, he figured it out even after his first unsuccessful attack against me... Kurogiri groaned to himself as the boy threatened him to stay still with explosive sparks against his neck plates.

"Nice one, Bakugo! Even though it's not a completely heroic way to act," Kirishima said, pointedly ignoring the 'fuck you' Bakugo spat back in retort. He glared back at the remaining villains, wielding his hardened arms against them once more and trying to ignore the bulkiness that seemed to now accompany his body whenever he activated his Hardening. "There's no escape for you villains now that we have your warp gate pinned down! Get away from Aizawa-sensei and surrender peacefully!"

Those nameless thugs still present in the Central Plaza went stiff, unsure of how to react with their way home suddenly yanked out beneath their feet. One by one, their eyes went to Tomura, silently looking to him for guidance.

But Tomura remained still, calm even. He had his hands crossed in front of him and didn't budge an inch, coldly observing the two boys who dared to catch them unawares.

"Perhaps we should just throw in the towel and call it quits," Tomura said a bit too nonchalantly, surprising nearly everyone present. "I know a Game Over when I see one."

"But," Tomura continued, drilling his maliciously gleeful eyes into Kirishima, "losing our warp gate just won't do! Nomu! Free Kurogiri so we can leave, but not before you crush All Might's spirit by crushing those brats!"

The monstrous, dark-hided behemoth squatting over Aizawa's body slowly lumbered to its feet, catching Kirishima's attention.

So that guy—no, thing—is called Nomu? Kirishima wondered, put off by the beast's grotesque, exposed brain and generally inhuman appearance. The monster's rapidly rotating eyes suddenly honed in on a target, and Kirishima realized that it had Bakugo locked on as its first target. No! He's going to free their warp gate by going after Bakugo first!

I've gotten a bit better with One For All, but please don't break my bones again with this! Kirishima pleaded with himself as he channeled his inherited power into his legs, huffing as they instinctively hardened, and noting the bulk that accompanied it yet again. He released the stockpiled energy in his legs all at once, sprinting to intercept the villains' monster as said beast disappeared in its own blur, racing to squash his friend with an outstretched palm.

Kirishima hardly registered any pain in his legs as he swung his fist into the monster's open palm, transferring his hardened, stockpiled release into his arm right before it made impact.

No holding back!

With a roar, Kirishima unleashed all the strength he'd derived from the great well of One For All coursing through his body, grinding the beast's lunge with his 100 percent punch. The force from the punch exploded forth, whipping up a tumultuous flurry of dust and wind that seemed to reverberate across the plaza, knocking thugs back, whipping the water of the nearby lake, and forcing even Bakugo and Tomura to duck and cover their faces.

What? Kirishima blinked in amazement as the dust cleared after his punch, revealing no bruising or bleeding anywhere on his arm. Was he somehow able to fully control One For All in that instance? He glanced up and immediately paled; his jagged fist had stopped the beast in its tracks, but it hadn't
flinched or incurred any damage in the slightest from the punch.

"The hell!?!" Kirishima yelled aloud. "My Hardening didn't even break through its skin!" True enough, his notched fingers were digging into Nomu's blackened hide, but it stood up to the serration, no matter how hard Kirishima pushed into its massive palm.

"Of course it didn't."

The black palm suddenly clamped shut around Kirishima's arm, causing the boy to wince in pain; Nomu's strength was massive enough to crush through his Hardening without any effort! Another blur darted around his body, headed toward Bakugo, who kept the warping villain firmly pinned under his gauntlets.

"Bakugo!" Kirishima yelled out as Tomura appeared in view, gangly hands reaching out toward the blonde.

Said blonde muttered a slew of swears as he raised one palm to respond to this new threat, his sweaty glove igniting in a furious, explosive show of power.

The hand-covered villain remained undaunted, however, and merely swatted Bakugo's palm away before he could suffer the brunt of the blast, and the explosion detonated off to the side of his face instead of directly in front of it. Hissing through the heat, Tomura, planted his palm into the grenade-shaped gauntlet of Bakugo's, digging his digits into the material. Beneath the hand covering his face, a smirk bloomed; both boys were wracked with shock as the gauntlet disintegrated into dust before their very eyes. The blonde swore much louder as he raised his other palm to attack, releasing Kurogiri from any explosive threat, but Tomura's other hand was already narrowing in on the brat's head. His attack would surely land first—

A deafening crack suddenly reverberated across the plaza, and all fighting came to an abrupt halt. Tomura, Kurogiri, and the boys all glanced up to the sky, thunderstruck by the blinding crack stretching from one end of the facility to the other. Bakugo and Kirishima clenched their eyes shut as a second tremor rumbled across the USJ, obscuring everything in a brilliant flood of light.

The sound that followed, Kirishima could only describe as an otherworldly shattering.

The beast called Nomu seemed affected by this sudden change, or at least affected enough to loosen its grip on Kirishima's arm. Free from its grip, Kirishima blindly reached behind him to where he knew Bakugo was crouched, grabbing the blonde by his shirt and leaping away from the villains as far as he could. In his grasp, he could Bakugo thrashing defiantly, and he knew that his classmate was trying to give him an earful irrespective of the shattering consuming the air around them.

Kirishima and Bakugo rolled to a stop right as the deafening rupture abruptly stopped, along with the blinding light.

"What the fuck, Shitty Hair!?"

Kirishima chuckled; there it was. He groggily opened his eyes and—immediately tuned out Bakugo's angry rant.

"Bakugo."

"I had him right where I wanted him! All I had to do was blast that hand freak away and then—"

"Bakugo!"
"Fucking what!?" Bakugo shrieked.

"Look!" Kirishima said, pointing out across the plaza. "The mountain is back to normal! And the buildings aren't swaying! And those weird-looking shapes are gone!"

"Eh!?" Bakugo blinked, angry eyes darting all around. Well, damn. He was right. The Ruins Zone was looking peculiarly still, the tallest of the mountain peaks had instantly been returned to its natural state, and those bizarre fractals overlaying the entire USJ—the ones he'd spent more than a few minutes trying to destroy—had up and vanished. The USJ went back to normal with about as much warning as it did leaving it, with the exception of villains still being present.

Not that Bakugo minded that in the slightest. He rose both hands, flexing them as he felt his sweat exuding from his palms; not even the loss of one of his gauntlets was enough to put a damper on his fighting spirit.

"I-Ikiji," Kurogiri groaned as he slowly righted himself from Bakugo's initial surprise assault. "Does this mean you lost...to that Izuku boy I sent to you?"

That was more than enough to cause both Kirishima and Bakugo to perk up...as well as put a bit of a damper on that fighting spirit of Bakugo's. And the fact that the fog bastard correlated this Ikiji guy's defeat with the sudden reversal in the USJ—did that mean whoever the warp gate villain was talking about was the one responsible for the zany environmental changes he had to endure? That had to be a hell of a Quirk to do such a thing. And for a guy like that to lose to that damned nerd...

Bakugo grit his teeth. No, he thought bitterly. No way in the hell that once-Quirkless loser overcame a villain like that. No way in hell that damn pebble got so strong in less than two years...!

"Lost? To that damned nerd!?!" Bakugo barked out. "Must not have been very strong to begin with! A Quirk like that is wasted on a tool like him!"

Kurogiri directed his yellow, narrow eyes toward Bakugo, but before he could offer a retort, a wave of unseen warmth washed over the plaza, drawing all eyes present toward the USJ's entrance, where it originated.

"It cannot be..." The black fog muttered, a wave of trepidation settling upon his amorphous shoulders along with the warmth. There, at the top of the stairs, he could see the faint swirling embers of the Sorcerer Supreme's portal. And if he was here...

It surely meant this was Game Over for the League.

He glanced over to Tomura, almost certain his fledgling superior would display a visage that agreed with his silent sentiment. To Kurogiri's surprise, however, Tomura showed no such fear; if anything, he was pleased by the new arrivals.

"So you've finally arrived," Tomura seethed maniacally under his breath. "One last Continue for the seen and unseen trash of society. Nomu!" He whirled around toward the darkened monstrosity, standing perfectly still and silent as it awaited orders. "Kill those two before the Symbol of Peace's very eyes!"

Nomu dissipated back into a wicked blur, lunging for Kirishima and Bakugo, who stood by helplessly, unable to keep track with its speed. Kirishima was only vaguely aware of the swiftly approaching danger before becoming swept up in a flash of yellow and white, and he knew instantly: All Might had arrived.

Kirishima was instantly placed back on his own two feet alongside Bakugo. He blinked, rubbing his
eyes as he registered the sudden distance placed between them and the villains. They'd been dropped at the very foot of the USJ's extravagant staircase, and he could plainly see that the remainder of the nameless fodder villains had been downed in an instant. All Might stood by their side, towering over them with Aizawa in his arms. Kirishima looked across the plaza, seeing the creepy, hand-covered villain lurching from a hit, presumably from All Might as he zoomed by.

_He downed more than a few villains, grabbed hold of Aizawa-sensei's body, rescued Bakugo and I, and landed another hit on their ringleader in the span of a couple seconds!_ Kirishima thought, amazed by the sheer speed of his teacher.

"We'll take it from here, Young Bakugo, Young Kirishima," All Might said solemnly as he thrust Aizawa's unconscious form into the arms of Bakugo, who was just barely able to carry the man's weight. "You both need to return to the entrance as quickly as possible!"

"The hell are you handing him to me for!?" Bakugo grumbled loudly. "And there's no way I'm leaving! I had that fog bastard dead to rights!" _And who the hell is 'we'!?_

"Sorry for going on ahead!" All Might suddenly spoke, though not in response to Bakugo's indignation.

"It's quite alright, All Might," A calm, composed voice sounded from above. Kirishima and Bakugo glanced up to see a gentleman clad in an all too familiar blue tunic and a red, flowing cloak descending toward them. "After all, it's been a while since we last fought side by side."

A flicker of light from where the defeated villains lay drew Kirishima's attention away from the newcomer for but a moment. He gasped with a start as he saw each of the thugs ensnared in multiple fiery whips, whips identical to the kind Izuku had used in the heat of battle.

"You!" Bakugo growled at the gentleman. "I know you! You're that Doctor Strange flunky!"

"Ah, Katsuki Bakugo," The newcomer—Strange—replied with a chuckle. "You're as impassioned as ever. And you," he turned to Kirishima, a peculiar glint appearing in his eye, "must be Eijiro Kirishima. We meet at last, although I do wish it was under more hospitable circumstances."

"Huh? Hold on...you know our names?" Kirishima asked, confused. "Are you U.A staff like All Might?"

"No, but now isn't exactly the time for us to be making acquaintances with one another," Strange said, looking over to Tomura as he scrambled for the hand that was covering his face before All Might struck him. "A day like that will come, but it's certainly not today. You two must rendezvous back at the entrance posthaste."

"I already said I'm not going anywhere!" Bakugo barked back. "What is an obscure flunky of a pro like you going to be doing fighting alongside the Number One Hero!?"

"Young Bakugo—!" All Might tried to chide the boy, but Strange stifled any admonitions with a dismissive wave of his hand.

That wave of his hand soon flowed into a repeated swirling hand motion aimed directly at Bakugo's feet. It was a motion all too familiar to Kirishima, having seen it up close.

"If you're not going to listen to reason, Bakugo..." Strange left his comment hanging in the air as a blazing portal opened up beneath Bakugo's feet. The boy fell through with a surprised grunt, landing at the USJ entrance alongside Shoji and the other students not scattered with Aizawa's body still resting in his strained arms. Shoji and the others jumped, startled by Bakugo's sudden appearance.
and shooting perplexed looks up through the sideways portal.

"Why, you...!" Bakugo growled through grit teeth, hastily shoving Aizawa's body into the many waiting arms of a worried Shoji before launching himself at the portal with his explosions. Strange's timing was too quick, however, and the portal closed in on itself before Bakugo was even close to reaching it.

From the bottom of the staircase, Kirishima watched on as Strange displayed his powers, mystified by the striking similarities between his abilities and Izuku's. Portals? Whips? Levitating cloak? It's all the things Midoriya could do, but I can tell there's more to this man just by looking at him...!

"Doctor...Strange, was it?" Kirishima asked nervously. "Those powers of yours...they're awfully similar to those a classmate of mine uses. His name's Midoriya. Are you and he related?" As he asked that question, his mind instantly recalled the words the warp gate villain used to describe Izuku: sorcerer. He could ask this Strange fellow for clarification on that front, but something was nagging at Kirishima to ask Izuku about it first before approaching anyone else.

Strange turned to Kirishima and said nothing for what seemed like a long while, as if contemplating how—or whether—he should answer that question. Eventually, the man settled on a mere, knowing smile.

"You should return to the entrance as well, Kirishima," Strange said. "You don't want to be down here when All Might and I engage these villains."

"Wait!" Kirishima blurted out, suddenly recalling how the villain named Nomu completely resisted his hardened One For All punch. "All Might! I punched that black, beaked villain as hard as I could and it had no effect—!"

"Young Kirishima!" All Might interjected his young protégé with a booming voice. "Heed Strange's words and believe me when I say this," he turned toward the boy, a bright, beaming grin manifesting where a grim scowl once was, "It'll all be fine, because we are here! Trust those words! Trust your teacher!"

Kirishima looked up at All Might, obviously feeling conflicted between staying and fighting alongside his mentor like he wanted, and running to the entrance to guarantee his own safety.

Which choice is the manly one? Kirishima pondered. The one that leaves me with no regrets! In that case...!

The conflict in Kirishima's face seemed to melt away, giving rise to one of resoluteness. "I understand, All Might!" Kirishima said with a slight nod before running up the stairs to rejoin what classmates of his remained up at the top. "Don't give those villains an inch!" To not trust you would be the least manly thing I can do now!

Young Kirishima...I know you might conclude that I am essentially asking you to flee from an enemy, and leave an ally—a mentor, no less—to face them without you, All Might thought as he watched Kirishima ascend the stair, but what we're facing today is the result of something far more sinister than mere villainy. He turned back toward the plaza, eyes boring into the dark, Hulk-like creature standing eerily still.

"What do you think, Strange?" All Might asked his sorcerous companion, who was also glaring down the demonic ogre.

"It's as I feared," Strange said apprehensively. "That golem has been twisted through unknown
means, but I have no doubt: that is one of Dormammu's Mindless Ones."

All Might grimaced, recalling what myths and stories he'd heard of such denizens of the Dark Dimension from Strange over the years.

*Something far more sinister, indeed.*
Kaminari deals with a severely injured Izuku as All Might and Doctor Strange confront the leadership of the League of Villains in the central plaza. Will the sheer might of All Might and the sorcerous powers of Doctor Strange be enough to fight off Tomura, Kurogiri, Ikiji, and their demonic ally?

"Damn you, Strange..." Ikiji muttered contemptuously amidst a slew of belligerent curses that Kaminari wasn't even going to pretend to understand, but a swear was a swear as far as he was concerned. "Damn you!"

The Electric-Quirk user blinked rapidly, rubbing his eyes as the blinding light that had engulfed them faded away just as quickly. Everything seemed unchanged at first: Ikiji remained where he was, injuries and all, as did Izuku, still unconscious and dangling from the zealot's piercing space shard.

It wasn't until Kaminari actually glanced around their surroundings that he realized the sudden shift back to normalcy: the cyclone of rock that Ikiji had molded out of the taller mountain peak had vanished, replaced by the untarnished summit it once was; the USJ's ceiling had been repaired, girders and all, and the endless layers of fractals spinning and swimming over everything had mysteriously disappeared as well. The fiery, elongated buildings rising out of the Conflagration Zone were gone, and that zone's ceiling appeared unperturbed.

The USJ had been returned to normal, Kaminari realized. Someone, somehow, someway, had undone Ikiji's magic.

Was it this 'Strange' fellow he's muttering about? Kaminari wondered as he carefully watched Ikiji writhe back and forth where he stood, cursing incessantly under his breath.

Amidst the chorus of Ikiji's raspy breaths and incoherent swearing, a slight tinkling sound reached Kaminari's ears. The sound came from about Izuku's body, and he glanced up to see the space shard that had impaled his classmate's body—leaving the boy suspended in midair—slowly dissolving, melting away into the air around them. The bloodless tip shrank back into and then out of Izuku's body as it wilted away. Izuku dropped to the ground in a lifeless heap as the shard faded entirely, landing on his backside.

"Midoriya!" Kaminari cried out to his friend as he scrambled to Izuku's side.

The cry and sudden movement by Kaminari did not go unnoticed by Ikiji, however, and the zealot shakily stepped forward to intercept. He stretched out a gnarled, bone-covered hand toward Kaminari, and Kaminari responded by raising his hand up to Ikiji, sending what arcs of electricity he could muster out of his open palm.

"Stay back," Kaminari uttered in warning as he flashed his Quirk at Ikiji, who stepped forward no further.

"You'll bring me down with your electricity while remaining over Izuku's body?" Ikiji asked between pants, watching Kaminari keenly. The implication was clear: Ikiji knew Kaminari couldn't
attack him without Izuku being further harmed by an electrical torrent whose trajectory couldn't be properly controlled.

"Are you kidding?" Kaminari asked with a shaky grin. "It's not even been a full school week and I'm already used to hurting my classmates with my own Quirk!"

It was a dangerous bluff. Even as he spoke, even as he shot tiny sparks out of his hand while leaning over Izuku's unresponsive form to keep Ikiji at bay, Kaminari could feel his senses fading. Consciousness and unconsciousness muddled together as his vision began to blur. He was right on the verge of short-circuiting, no doubt because he hadn't held back with his Indiscriminate Discharge earlier. The only reason he had any of his wits about him now was because he'd abruptly ended the torrent when Ikiji dragged Jiro into the attack. It still made his gut twist just thinking about it.

Ikiji staggered backward slightly and, instead of conjuring anymore attacks, clutched at the fresh wounds Izuku had inflicted on his chest, pressing his bony fingers against the seared sinews. Kaminari winced from just looking at Ikiji's front; no doubt the wounds he'd inflicted on his backside were just as grotesque and serious.

The zealot nearly fell back down on one knee, and it finally became noticeable to Kaminari that the villain's powers were suffering from some serious drainage. Ikiji was considerably weaker, and growing more so by the minute; had that been why his space shard had withered away, freeing Izuku?

All the changes he did were suddenly reversed...does that mean we're no longer in that Mirror Dimension Midoriya told us about? Kaminari pondered.

Kaminari's befuddled thinking was interrupted by some chillingly raspy laughter from Ikiji.

"Perhaps you will live to see it," Ikiji chuckled. "Perhaps you will survive long enough to witness the timeless and deathless era we envision for this world. Until that day comes...cling to your life, Kaminari. Cling to your life and your suffering...until we clash again."

Ikiji drew his eyes away from Kaminari, directing them toward the central plaza. They flared with newfound hatred as his body slowly dissipated from his feet up, much like his space shard had earlier. His eyes—fierce and burning with indignance and rage—were the last part of him that Kaminari saw before he faded away entirely.

Kaminari stayed still, processing Ikiji's disappearance for only a moment before turning his full attention to Izuku's body lying still beneath him.

"Midoriya!" Kaminari called to him. No response. He opened the top of Izuku's tunic slightly and pressed a jittery finger against his neck. Kaminari nearly cried out in relief—there was a pulse, and a breath. It was certainly faint, but there was a pulse nonetheless.

Izuku was still alive.

"Kaminari!"

Yaoyorozu!? Kaminari whirled around and saw 1-A's vice president slowly floating towards them, Izuku's green cloak—the authentic one—fluttering madly behind her as she bobbed up and down in midair. Her arms were clutching Jiro's body, holding onto her tightly as the cloak struggled to keep them both afloat.

"H-how is she?" Kaminari asked worriedly.
"She's bruised, but breathing," Yaoyorozu said, her studious eyes seemingly taking in his disheveled demeanor, Izuku's injuries, and the lack of one Ikiji Kokotsu all at once. "What is Midoriya's state? And where is Ikiji?"

"I managed to chase Ikiji off," Kaminari said, choosing to ignore the blatant look of disbelief that Yaoyorozu showed for an instant. "But...not before he managed to skewer Midoriya. He's barely breathing, and I can't make heads or tails of his injuries. We have to get him down the mountain now!"

"Wait, Kaminari!" Yaoyorozu called out as Kaminari hoisted Izuku's limp body in his arms. "Don't move him too hastily! We need to take our time so we don't exacerbate his injuries, and it would be a bad idea to take him down to the plaza right this instant!"

"Why!?" Kaminari snapped back, allowing his exasperation to bleed into his voice and speech. He knew deep down she was right; he was in no position to carry Izuku down the mountain trail while he himself was on the verge of short-circuiting, and Izuku's cloak, amazing as it was, couldn't carry all four of them. Still...Jiro and Izuku needed treatment as quickly as possible.

"Because," Yaoyorozu replied, and for the first time since this whole ordeal began, Kaminari recognized that her voice was inflected by genuine relief, "All Might and another Pro are fighting on the central plaza."

All Might lunged forward, crossing his arms in front of his face as Strange slightly levitated into the air, whipping up the fervid embers of eldritch magic around his hands. All Might had launched himself directly toward Tomura, but Nomu was more than quick enough to intercept his trajectory, sliding his black bulk body directly into All Might's path. The creature parted its toothy beak as it stared impassively at All Might, seemingly awaiting the coming smash.

The smash landed, but perhaps not in the way it anticipated. Strange circled a hand toward All Might in an impressive blur of motion. The space between Nomu and All Might opened up, sheathed in a ring of flame and naught but the width of a hair in front of All Might's arms and face. The portal's exit sprang to life to the side of Nomu, and All Might leaped through without a shred of hesitation, appearing at Nomu's unguarded side in the blink of an eye.

"Carolina...Smash!" All Might roared as he brought both of his arms down, crossing Nomu's open torso with a double handed chop. To his and Strange's shock, however, the beast gave little notice to the blow. It inclined its head to stare at All Might with dead yet focused eyes, shrugging off the Carolina Smash as if it were little more than a weak slap.

It took the full force of a Carolina Smash like it was nothing!? All Might grit his teeth, frustrated.

Toshinori didn't hold back with that attack, Strange mused. That was a 100% Carolina Smash, and that attack might as well have bounced right off this Mindless One's mutated hide! I have fought against many of Dormammu's creatures over the years. I am well acquainted with their durability, their weaknesses and their strengths, and none of them should possess the fortitude to withstand any of All Might's attacks.

Is this newfound resilience related to its twisted physique? Strange pondered further as he studied the Mindless One's—Nomu's—mutated form. It was similar in build to the standard form, but the most striking differences laid in the creature's head: Mindless Ones did not typically have facial features, let alone humanoid faces to begin with. And that exposed cranium...Strange shivered. It was easy enough for him to identify this Nomu as a Mindless One and understand that alterations had been made, but it would take time to truly understand how said alterations were made.
Regardless of its appearance, we shouldn't let up! Strange determined as he whipped his magic into a frenzy around his hands again, preparing to back up All Might. It's obedient, dimwitted nature suggests that tacked on cerebrum is wasted on it!

Just as Strange and All Might were coordinating against and analyzing Nomu, Tomura was doing precisely the same against them. He watched giddily as All Might's downward chop was effortlessly absorbed by his prized Nomu's primary ability.

"It's Game Over for you both, 'Symbol of Peace', 'Sorcerer Supreme'," Tomura hissed under his breath. "Throw whatever combo moves you have at my Nomu, your synergy is nothing compared to its raw power...!"

Tomura cast a wayward glance in Strange's direction, noting the magic that was currently being whipped up. His hand almost instinctively went to his neck, but he just barely managed to stave off the urge to pick and scratch at his skin. "Kurogiri," Tomura rasped. "Stop him."

"Understood," Kurogiri said, narrowing his jagged, yellow eyes at Strange as his warp gate fog undulated off his amorphous body. He moved with not a moment to spare, intercepting the ring of fire that preceded Strange's portals and disrupting it with his shadowy fog before the sorcerer could open up another passage for All Might.

"You cannot sustain those pesky apertures of yours if the ring of flame encircling them becomes disrupted by anything, can you?" Kurogiri asked as he leered at Strange, encircling his fog all around the man's body. "Those portals you sorcerers employ can be quite troublesome. I will not allow you to aid All Might with them anymore."

"Perceptive," Strange replied as he took to the sky with but a tug of his red Cloak of Levitation. Outwardly he remained cool and composed, but on the inside he was groaning in frustration. This warping villain was far more dangerous than the other thugs under the League's employ by several orders of magnitude, and this man was in a unique position to counter his use of portals by way of his Warp Gate Quirk. Eldritch portals were typically stationary, but this adversary could detach, spawn, and manipulate the shape, size, and entry and exit points of his warp fog with little to no known limitations...

Strange glanced down for but a moment to register his companion's progress, though it seemed All Might was having even less luck in bringing down the mutated Mindless One. The Nomu swiped his blackened arms, meaty fingers skimming past All Might's arms and face as it attempted to grab him.

"Take this...!" All Might uttered as he crouched beneath Nomu's grab and shot upward, slamming his fist directly into the beast's gut. Nomu, however, hardly even flinched from the impact, his body absorbing the wind and force behind All Might's monstrously famous Detroit Smash with no discernible effort. All Might leaped back as the creature attempted another grab, stunned by the lack of effectiveness his punches were having.

"Even a punch to the face was ineffective!?!" Just what was up with this abomination? It was as if all the momentum and force put into his punch were sucked out the instant his fist came in contact with its skin...! "Well, I won't let up, either!" All Might yelled as he propelled himself forward once more,
deftly dodging and weaving under and around the monster's hands as he landed blow after blow on its chest and abdomen.

"It's no use, trash of society!" Tomura taunted as Nomu effortlessly weathered the flurry of punches. "Spam that A Button of yours all you want, but your fabled punches will have no effect on my Nomu! You'll never be able to get around its Shock Absorption Quirk! You’d be better off trying to gouge out Nomu's flesh, bit by bloody bit! Not that you'd be able to, though..."

All Might tensed and Strange nearly startled to a halt as he ducked under a lengthy span of Kurogiri's fog that was trying to seize hold of him. A Quirk! Did he say that Mindless One has a Quirk!? And a Quirk that counters even All Might's prowess, of all things! So that explained the nature of the alterations made on this particular creature: the exposed cranium and its more humanoid features were proof positive now that this denizen of darkness had somehow become amalgamated with a human being, a guinea pig of All For One.

All For One... Strange balled his hands into fists, shaking with rage over this newfound revelation. Repressed images of that atrocious tragedy inexplicably came flashing back into his mind, one by one. My master...and my wife...! Is there nothing you can take from others that will satisfy you? Is there no bottom to the pit where your soul ought to be!?

Uttering a quick prayer for whatever poor soul was now fused with Dormammu's denizen—and uttering a curse for one of his most dreaded mortal adversaries—Strange turned back unto Kurogiri with vigor renewed. He stretched an open palm toward the Warp Gate user, weaving and spinning what magic was visible in his palm in a distinct yet small circle.

Kurogiri took the bait, spawning several inky clouds of his warping fog before Strange's hand, but unfortunately for him, Strange wasn't conjuring another portal for him to disrupt and ruin.

He was summoning a vortex.

The instant Kurogiri’s fog manifested before Strange's hand, it got pulled in, latching onto the vortex's energy core instead of severing through it like it had with the portals. The pull of vortex grew larger and larger still as Strange continued swirling the energy in his palm, allowing his spell to grow into a veritable maelstrom in the palm of his hand. The pull extended all the way to Kurogiri's fog-covered body, and with a distraught yell, the villain found himself whirling and swirling into the depths of the conjured cone, unable to warp himself out of the pull, until at last Kurogiri's amorphous body was sucked into the heart of Strange's vortex. Strange swiftly clenched his hand shut, and the open end of the cone suddenly closed in on itself, reshaping into a solid sphere of refulgent energy as the swirling slowed to a halt, with Kurogiri imprisoned in the center of it.

With one antagonist removed from play, Strange shifted every ounce of his focus to Nomu, trying to latch onto All Might's body with its gargantuan hands. Luckily, its movements, while certainly quick, were still clumsy and predictable, allowing All Might to avoid its grasp as he unleashed punch after fruitless punch into the beast's body.

"All Might!" Strange called out to his friend as a stream of energy manifested into view, flowing back and forth alongside the weaving motions of his arms. "If your standard tactics are proving insufficient against this mystical foe, then perhaps we should fight magic with magic?"

The stream of bright red energy floated over to All Might with a flick of Strange's hand, branching into two as it approached. The energy wrapped around All Might's arms, coalescing into several
bracers of solidified energy and manifesting mandalas over his clenched fists.

Coating my body with eldritch magic...! All Might flexed his arms as he dodged another swipe from Nomu, observing the energy layered atop his body bulging alongside his muscles. He smirked and crouched down low, right as Nomu made another swipe at his head. "It's been a long while since I've used this particular Smash...!"

"Let us relish in nostalgia later!" Strange replied. "And make this count!"

"Kurogiri, you fool...!" Tomura hissed, scratching irritably at his neck with both hands now.

"Greenwich...!" All Might muttered as he reared both fists back, the mandalas gifted to him by Strange spinning madly and sending a torrent of sparks sparking into the air, "SMASH!"

All Might drove both fists home, ramming them straight into Nomu's unguarded abdomen and pounding the beast into the ground, kicking up a thick cloud of dust and embers that exploded forth from the impact of the double punch. The dust quickly cleared, revealing Nomu's twitching form planted face down in the concrete.

And there, etched in its grotesque backside, were the twin indentations of the mandalas Strange had weaved over All Might's fists. It had done some noticeable damage; Nomu's Shock Absorption hadn't fully protected it from this particular attack.

Still, despite this attack landing true, Nomu's hulking form recovered quickly all the same, lifting itself out of the concrete and standing upright. Its visage remained neutral, unmarred by emotion and not seeming to recognize any sort of pain from the attack.

"They hurt my Nomu..." Tomura seethed as he dragged his gangly fingers up and down his neck, ignoring any pain or the trickles of blood now dotting his broken skin. "They hurt my Nomu! With their damn magic! Where's my cheat code when I need him...!?"

"That attack actually had an effect, but it didn't keep him down nearly as long as I would've liked!" All Might spoke to Strange, the mandalas and bracers of pure energy reforming over his fists. "If I drive him deeper into the concrete, it should immobilize him long enough for us to inflict some permanent injuries on this foul creature!"

"I'll maintain the magic coating your body," Strange affirmed, "But be wary: I've noticed it hasn't actually thrown a punch at you yet. It's only tried to grab you. An odd battle tactic..."

"Then I'll end this in a flash!" All Might said before disappearing in a blur as he dashed forward, narrowly ducking under another hasty grab attempt by Nomu and sliding behind the beast. He wrapped his arms around Nomu's waist and bent backwards, slamming it headfirst into the ground in a second explosion of dust and embers.

Strange briefly shielded his eyes as the debris from this second impact blew right past his face. And when the dust finally cleared and the clarity of sight returned to the Sorcerer Supreme, he nearly let out an audible gasp.

All Might had not driven the Mindless One into the concrete as planned. He'd instead slammed the creature straight through a more than familiar swirling black fog. The top half of Nomu had risen out of a vaguely defined exit point right next to the entrance point and directly beneath All Might's body, digging his dark claws into his friend's abdomen—notably his weak spot, where All For One had inflicted that crippling, grievous wound six years ago. All Might sputtered a pained grunt as he struggled to wrestle himself out of Nomu's grasp.
Impossible...! Strange whirled back toward the cone he'd used to contain the warping villain, only to see the shell of his sphere cracked ever-so slightly—just slightly enough for Kurogiri's shadowy body to leak out and quietly reform. Strange had nary a moment to process even this turn of events, as the faint shimmering of several thin, glassy surfaces suddenly flew at him from multiple sides and angles.

"By the Ruby Rings of Raggadorr...!" Stephen cried out in surprise as he hastily invoked said deity and erected the seven resplendent barriers to defend himself from this most unexpected attack.

Space shards... Strange grimaced as the barriers spinning around his person effortlessly blocked the translucent blades now grinding against his magic screens. Their tips dug into but could not pierce his defenses. Ikiji.

The space beside Tomura warbled and seemed to unravel, like a tear in a seam of fabric. The disheveled but familiar body of Ikiji Kokotsu staggered out of the distortion, hands outstretched in Strange's direction, willing the blades to push further against the Rings of Raggadorr. He looked worse for wear: his robe had a large, singed hole directly over his chest, and Strange could clearly see seared scarring over his skin; his white, jagged hair was marred with numerous specks of brown and black dust and soot, and though his glare denoted a man willing to fight, the shaking in his legs and his constant panting made it clear that he was on his last legs, even in spite of the magic he was hurling Strange's way.

Ikiji glared daggers into Strange, and Strange reciprocated, blooming with pride and worry: pride, because he knew damn well the cause behind Ikiji's injuries; worry, because he knew not the fate of his disciple. Ikiji was still conscious and now here in the plaza; where was Izuku?

"Ikiji Kokotsu," Strange said as he kept Ikiji's blades at bay, "and Tomura Shigaraki." His eyes trailed to the boy covered in hands. "So you were both working together after all. I figured there was some connection ever since Brigand broke into my Sanctum."

"Don't flatter yourself with your detective skills, sorcerer," Tomura replied. "This hardly qualifies as a plot twist. This reveal is but one of several that have been meticulously planned over the course of many months."

"Nothing has happened that wasn't expected," Ikiji added between pants.

"Except for one of the students escaping the USJ and the subsequent pull into the Mirror Dimension," Strange retorted, "as well as those injuries." A light smile appeared as Ikiji almost instinctively clutched at his wounds. "Only my disciple could have been responsible for inflicting such wounds. Where is he?"

"I left his body on the mountainside," Ikiji snarled back.

Strange's eyes widened fearfully, but before he could mount a retort of his own or demand an explanation, his vision was obscured by Kurogiri's shadow. It crept along the seven rings he'd conjured to fend off the space shards, and Strange soon found himself completely encircled by swirling fog, much like how he had Kurogiri completely encased in a fiery sphere.

This bodes ill for me...! Strange mused as blades and shadow alike began pushing against his barriers, driving them closer to his body inch by inch. The barriers were now less than a foot away from his body, and slowly closing in. There was not even enough space for him to open a portal with his arms. Strange pushed against the constricting force as his mind racked for a solution. With Ikiji with them, they undoubtedly have some knowledge of my repertoire of spells. The Seven Rings of Raggadorr are a nigh unbreakable barrier, but it restricts mobility and keeps one rooted in place.
And now I'm completely encircled—which will afflict me first should I lower my screens? The shadows? Or those blades? And what has befallen Izuku...?

Strange shook his head, forcibly banishing such thoughts from his head. He would have to worry about such things after he dealt with these villains. In fact, such thoughts of worry were not known to frequently muddy his mind—at least not before taking Izuku under his wing all those months ago.

_Just as the master influences the student, so, too, does the student influence the master..._

Strange chuckled and ceased his pushing against the shadows compressing down on his barriers. He promptly lowered himself to the ground and sat cross-legged, closing his eyes.

Inhale. Exhale.

Strange relaxed and slowed with each breath he took, his bodily senses dropping one by one. As he felt the spiritual contours that filled his physical form, the chaotic sounds surrounding him suddenly melted away. Even the sound of his own heartbeat no longer pulsed in his ears, and the subsequent ringing was exiled thereafter.

This was **true** silence.

Strange continued to focus as he sat, shedding off one bodily sense after another as he split his spirit from his flesh.

And then...he **rose**.

"The sorcerer has a point," Kurogiri said as he turned from the shadowy prison he encased Strange in and faced Ikiji. His narrow eyes examined the fresh burns and scars and singed fabric critically. "Your injuries are extensive, Ikiji. I recommend you sit out the rest of the operation."

"I am—" He winced. "I am fine." He didn't even spare Kurogiri a glance. He remained singularly focused on keeping the pressure on Strange's shielding with what few space shards he could still conjure.

"You need not push yourself farther than you need to at this stage," Kurogiri reasoned. "The Sorcerer Supreme is trapped, as is All Might. He lacks the space necessary for a portal. I will have him crushed to death soon enough."

"Let him do as he pleases," Tomura suddenly added, drawing surprised looks from both Kurogiri and Ikiji. "And why shouldn't he? This game is nearly over." He turned toward the struggling form of All Might, trying vainly to pry himself out of Nomu's grip. He honed in on the blood seeping out of All Might's abdomen, where Nomu had his claws dug in, and his eyes lit up with sickened glee.

"Thus ends the multiplayer magic melee. Thanks for playing, All Might."

"You fiend!" All Might shouted as he continued to pull and tug at Nomu's dark hands. "Don't think you've won the day just yet!"

"You thought you could keep Nomu trapped in the concrete while you continued to pummel him with your own cheat code, right?" Tomura asked with a concealed sneer. "Well, you should know by now that that won't work. Nomu is as strong as you are, All Might. And you should also know that just as a bit of magic went into that last 'smash' of yours, a bit of magic went into Nomu's construction, too. After all...cheat codes are no fun when only your enemy gets to use them."

_What power...!_ All Might thought as he continued to fight against Nomu's iron vice of a grip. It was
unrelenting, and the pain from having his wound dug into was nearly unbearable. *I've helped Strange fight off otherworldly creatures before, but nothing like this...!*

"Kurogiri."

All Might felt the slightest of shudders rippling through the shadow. He looked down as he struggled and saw the dark fog begin to slowly shrink and recede, splitting into two as the exit and entry points became clearer.

"I am not one who enjoys the sensation of blood and guts flowing about, but for you, I will make an exception," Kurogiri said as his amorphous body towered over All Might. For a foe as quick as you, it was Nomu's job to restrain you. And when Nomu drags your body halfway through my gate...closing it shut and tearing you apart will be my job."

All Might frowned, pausing to process the villain's words. *So, this creature was made to be this strong just to restrain me? That explains why Stephen noticed it was only trying to grab me instead of throwing any punches! A cooling sensation around his legs, and he glanced down to see his feet already sticking out of the exit point of the warp gate. *Crap, he's already starting to drag me in!*

"Not for much longer he won't."

*That voice...!*

All Might tensed as a sudden surging sensation moved across his body, as if a great unseen force was moving along and into his very being through the very pores of his skin. He caught his breath as the force nestled into his very lungs and spread out from there, circulating through every artery and blood vessel in his body, filling his bones and even his temporary muscles.

*I apologize for the sudden intrusion, but we seem to have found ourselves in quite the conundrum, Toshinori."

"Stephen!" All Might spoke in his mind. *Are you using a telepathy of some sort to reach out to me?"

"A step further, I'm afraid," Strange explained, *"and not one I'm keen on using very often. I separated my astral form from my physical body and entered yours. We must move quickly before One For All fails you and my body is crushed by shield and shadow alike."

"Your astral body...entered my actual body?" All Might asked, mentally shuddering a little. That explained the unseen force that had seized him. It was, he had to admit, a little off-putting.

*I'm sure the claws digging into your weak point make for a far more distressing discomfort,"* Strange said in a slightly chiding voice. *" Besides, this was necessary for me to amplify you with what magic I can again."

"Hold on," All Might argued, *"I might not know my Abra from my Cadabra, but I remember you explaining to me once about the risks of astral projection. It consumes one's personal energies instead of drawing it from your surroundings. If you use it for too long, or give me too much energy, you could—!"

*I will not die, Toshinori,"* Strange said assuredly. *"And neither will you. There is much for us to do still. Our successors are waiting for us."

*"...Very well, my friend,"* All Might said with a mental nod. He reached out to the astral form inhabiting his body, connecting the brilliant multi-colored embers of One For All that still flowed
through his veins to the great fount of magical energy that Strange's soul gave freely. "Help me show these villains the meaning of these words: Plus Ultra!"

All Might startled at the nearly incomprehensible influx of energy that followed. It was an immense escalation, a bountiful boost, a serious spike.

It was a surge.

All Might's entrapped body suddenly exploded with energy, consumed in a blinding polychromatic light. Tomura and Ikiji were sent sprawling by the unexpected upsurge, and Kurogiri had to turn his head away, lest he be totally blinded by the energy blast. He even struggled to maintain his warp gates as the energy and wind billowed against his form, licking at his fog.

The only one present who remained unflinching in the face of such resplendent energy was Nomu itself. The creature would not maintain its stoicism for long, however, as it soon shrieked as a great wrenching sensation ripped its hands from its wrists, severing the grip it had on its prisoner. It slunk through the exit point of Kurogiri's Warp Gate, shuddering as a vile, oily blood seeped from the stumps where its hands once were.

"No..." Tomura hissed as he stumbled back to his feet after rolling to a stop. His eyes were wide and glued to All Might once the blinding light had receded. "Another cheat...!"

A radiant light of innumerable colors was swimming across All Might's body. The magic from Strange's very soul washed over him, coating him with an energy even more vibrant than before. The spinning mandalas reappeared over his fists, rotating rapidly as polychromatic embers effused endlessly from the mystical symbols. The energy's heat was such that it produced an ethereal smoke from All Might's shoulders and head, wafting above the central plaza and spreading outward, obscuring it beneath a supernatural haze.

All Might tossed the bloody remains of Nomu's hands to the ground, raising his head and rooting Tomura where he was with a glare that was equal parts rage and assurance of victory. He clenched his closed fists tighter still, drawing all of the magic Strange offered into his arms.

"You were right about one thing, fledgling villain," All Might spoke to a fearfully frozen Tomura. His voice was as if he and Strange were speaking in tandem, as one. "This 'game' of yours is nearly over."
Those had been the words Eijiro Kirishima had running through his head on repeat as he ascended the grand staircase of the USJ as quickly as he could. He had hardly passed the twentieth step when the sound of battle whipped into a roar from where he'd just been, and he knew: All Might and Doctor Strange had flown into battle against the villains.

Again, he repeated his affirmation to trust in his teacher, hoping vainly that the mental repetition would block out the sounds of battle roaring behind him. It was made all the more difficult to ignore by the wind whipping against his backside, no doubt from the impacts of All Might's mighty blows.

Still, he did as his teacher and that Doctor Strange fellow had asked of him, and left the plaza before they'd begun fighting. Kirishima figured this was so they could fight at 100% without the constant worry of collateral hanging over their heads, but still...the doubt was nagging. He had only proven his potential to All Might by refusing to budge in the face of a villain that fateful day, and now it seemed (at least on the surface) that he was doing the opposite.

_The manly choice is the one that leaves me with no regrets_, Kirishima mused, _but will I regret that choice when the day's over, All Might?_

The sound of a dull explosion caught Kirishima's attention, but only because this one came from in front of him instead of behind him. He looked up and saw the steadily approaching form of Bakugo propelling himself down the stairs with his explosions. Kirishima immediately ran into his path, waving his arms, and forcing his classmate to slow to a hostile halt.

"The hell are you doing!!?" Bakugo snapped. He'd only gotten to the halfway point before he was intercepted by Kirishima.

"I was about to ask you the same thing!" Kirishima huffed.

"What does it look like!?" Bakugo spat. "I'm going back down there to fight those villains and hopefully bring down that smoky bastard! That'll show Deku's teacher to not look down on me!"

"Deku's...teacher?" Kirishima placed a finger against his chin as he sought to decipher what Bakugo was saying. _Who the hell is Deku? Wait, that's what he called Midoriya, right? So by 'teacher', is he referring to Doctor Strange...?_

"Regardless, going back down there is a bad idea!" Kirishima continued, getting back on track. "We need to have faith in All Might and his friend, even if he's not a hero we've heard of! Besides, we'd just be in the way—!"

An enormous shockwave reverberated up the staircase from the central plaza. Kirishima and Bakugo were jostled and fell over from the sheer strength of its vibrations.

"Damn it!" Bakugo ground out as he struggled back to his feet. "We're wasting time!"

With that, Bakugo resumed his explosive descent back toward the plaza, with a disoriented Kirishima shouting and tailing him back toward ground zero of the USJ.
of All Might. The hero's body was covered in swaths of newfound energy, and the multi-colored luminance became bent around his muscles, as if it were flexing alongside the flesh. The intense incandescence only amplified that terrifyingly glare that seemed to be piercing Tomura's legs to the ground; this might explain why he couldn't fall no matter how hard his knees were shaking.

Kurogiri was off to the side and behind him a ways, clearly dazed and stuporous from the unexpected surging of magical energies. At least his body was once again covered by his Warp Gate, to protect himself from harm; it was almost instinctive after so many years.

Ikiji was a bit further away from himself and Kurogiri. The blast had sent him sprawling to the ground, and he had yet to move a muscle. Tomura couldn't be certain, but with the injuries he'd already sustained on the mountainside, the zealot could very well be unconscious now. The last vestiges of his power—the space shards—had also been obliterated by All Might's resurgence, along with the Warp Gate Kurogiri had pressing down on the barriers protecting the Sorcerer Supreme's body. Both had flickered out of existence without a trace, revealing a cross-legged sorcerer behind those seven rings of his, each mere inches away from crushing against his body.

Now it was Tomura's arms that shook, not out of fear, but out of a great indignant bitterness that swelled from within, a product of a tempestuous tantrum just begging to be unleashed on anyone unfortunate enough to present as a potential victim.

"H-he's not weakened at all," Tomura stammered as his eyes remained fixed on All Might. "Was Sensei wrong? Did he lie to me?" His fingers on one hand curled until he was shakily pointing at All Might. "Nomu!" he shrieked. "Kill him! Kill...All Might!"

Nomu ceased its writhing once the order reached its indiscernible ears, straightening up immediately. Its grotesque eyes swiveled around before narrowing in on All Might, its face once more impassive and not showing any sense of fear or intimidation in the face of the hero's overwhelming new power. It raised its arms as red bulbous mounds of flesh erupted from its ruptured wrists, quickly expanding back into the shape of large, humanoid hands.

"It regenerated its hands!" All Might mentally spoke with a frown, tensing considerably at the sight. "Is this something the Mindless One are apt to do?"

"No," Strange replied, and although All Might could not see the sorcerer's astral face, he could tell his friend was frowning just as he was. Still, this newest development did not distract Strange from increasing the flow of magic going into, out of, and around his body. "This is likely the result of another Quirk. Stay sharp, Toshinori!"

"You have no chance!" Tomura screamed as Nomu rushed by him in a dark blur.

All Might tightened his fists and responded in kind, lunging forward so quickly his body seemed to instantly disappear into a resplendent fuzz. Hero and beast collided into each other near the heart of the plaza, darkened digits slamming into and burning against All Might's fluorescent fists, powered by Strange's magic. The spinning mandalas covering All Might's fists burned into the Nomu's hands, and the clash of dark and eldritch energies resulted in a monumental shockwave rippling across the USJ, reverberating through every solid structure within range.

"Didn't I tell you about Nomu's Shock Absorption?" Tomura yelled as he surfed the blast away from the clashing titans, landing shakily near the plaza fountain. "Magic may be capable of damaging its hide, but all of the power behind your punches will still be absorbed and rendered useless! And with Nomu's Regeneration Quirk, it'll withstand any magical blow you land on it! In fact, those marks you left on its back have long since healed by now!"
"Are you quite finished, villain!?" All Might snapped as his fists flew into a flurry against Nomu's, bashing the beast back inch by inch with each successive, well-aimed blow. "This Nomu of yours—it absorbs instead of nullifying, correct? That means there's a limit, and if there's a limit, then I'll just have to smash right through it!"

All Might yelled as he pressed forward with his seemingly endless onslaught of magically-focused punches, his blurred arms moving so fast it was as if Strange's magic was piercing into Nomu's body repeatedly, singeing and stinging just beneath its thick, black hide and leaving mandala-shaped marks all over its torso and arms. With each unperceivable slew of hits, All Might pressed forward and pushed Nomu back one step at a time. Every couple of seconds Nomu's head would either snap back or jolt to the side as a burning blow was inflicted directly into its cheek or under its monstrous beak, and that was on top of All Might deflecting nearly every equally unperceivable jab and punch that Nomu gave. Even the magic that Strange's astral form sent coursing into All Might's fists seemed to be overwhelming Nomu—unnoticeable to those watching from afar, the indentations All Might and Strange left on Nomu's inhuman body with each successful blow were healed slightly slower and slower as the seconds ticked by.

"Built to take me at 100 percent, you say?" All Might bit out as those small steps he took while pushing Nomu back suddenly became full-fledged strides. "Then, magic or not, every attack I land will be from even beyond!"

The incessant pummeling suddenly evolved into an outright thrashing, as All Might's movements completely surpassed Nomu's, battering the unflinching monstrosity across the plaza. The embers of One For All that flickered within had been roused into an insatiable inferno, and the stockpiled strength inherited from his master and those that came before her flowed through his fists with a force equal to his companion's energies. Nomu suffered from each blow, as did their environment: the concrete cracked and shattered beneath their stomping feet, any greenery unfortunate enough to get caught in the melee were mercilessly uprooted and sent soaring into the sky, the once tense and still air was whipped into a furious frenzy, and the fountain was all but flattened in the rampage.

Even among the ceaseless barrage of fists and magic, Nomu continued to resist and attempt to mount an offensive even as it was constantly regenerating from the magic burning against its sturdy skin. It drove a fist forward through a lapse of its prey's movement, aiming directly toward All Might's stomach—his weak spot. Those claws never hit flesh; it bounced harmlessly off a nearly transparent barrier that was covering All Might's one weak spot—courtesy of Strange's foresight.

"Thank you, Stephen!" All Might mentally thanked his ally as he continued his thunderous onslaught. "You never neglect to have the foresight to use your hindsight in the heat of battle!"

"It will do us little good if we cannot overwhelm this monstrosity before our vigor runs dry!" Strange responded with a pant. "I cannot sustain this for very long, Toshinori—without a proper stasis I will have to return to my body soon!"

"Then just a little bit more, my friend!" All Might said. "I'll guide the muscle, you guide the magic!"

All Might reared his fist back and shot it forward, striking Nomu in the jaw and sending it careening away toward the back end of the plaza. The beast, as expected, recovered, galloping back toward All Might on all fours. This time, however, its eyes began glowing with an ominous crimson light as it approached. With a guttural shriek, the Nomu unleashed a brilliantly crimson energy beam from its focused eyes, aimed straight toward All Might.

The Symbol of Peace hardly even flinched; he instead reached out with his left hand, the mandala now spinning over his open palm, and caught the tip of the laser beam, stopping the beam dead in its tracks. He stretched his right hand out as he slowly rotated his left, refracting the Nomu's energy
beam with Strange's magic into his right hand, and then refracting it again back at Nomu. The laser sliced through the hide of its left arm, severing it entirely as the creature screeched and fell over, floundering for a bit as its regeneration began to kick in.

"Now, Stephen!"

Several crimson bands materialized out of All Might's open palm, spiraling forward and ensnaring Nomu before its arm was fully regenerated. His hand closed into a fist around the bands and gave it a forceful tug, yanking Nomu's thrashing form toward him. All Might clenched his other hand back into a fist and reared it back as Nomu's body came flying toward him. Right before the collision, All Might stepped forward and swung his fist in a U-shaped motion, delivering a beak-shattering uppercut into Nomu's face. The crimson bands released the beast and retreated back into All Might's hand, letting Nomu spin haplessly in the air as it recoiled from the punch. Its arm had not fully grown back, and now it had to grow back its beak, too.

Not that All Might was going to let it.

"You would do well to remember these hallowed words, foul beast," All Might and Strange spoke in tandem once more. All Might reared his fist back one final time, and all the vibrant energy flowing around his body suddenly coalesced into that one hand, transforming the fist into an orb brimming with sheer power the likes of which he'd never felt in all his years of cultivating One For All.

"Plus...Ultra!"

Nomu's body plummeted down as it continued to spin from the last punch, helpless to block or avoid the coming harbinger of defeat. All Might drove his fist directly into its abdomen, twisting his hand as he punched and allowing the last vestiges of Strange's magic to fully drill into the monster. Its body bulged as it absorbed the shock behind All Might's punch, but, true to his word, he'd shattered its limit, and the great fount of eldritch magic pouring into its body incinerated its insides as it went flying through the air and into the ceiling, the steel girders offering only the barest levels of resistance before rending entirely and exploding from the impact. Nomu's trajectory hadn't been hindered by the steel in the slightest, and it continued to soar, sailing through the sky until it was barreling through clouds and was naught but a tiny, insignificant blink in a clear, blue expanse.

Debris rained down from the gaping hole blasted through the ceiling as All Might and the villains remained where they stood, one rooted by exhaustion, the others, shock and disbelief. All Might maintained his signature smile even as he panted through his nostrils. The inferno of One For All dwindled back down into the smoldering embers it was only minutes before, and a great draining sensation weighed down on his body. All Might knew that it must've been Strange's astral form departing his body, taking the magic that was coursing through his veins along with him. The drain was so great, in fact, that All Might felt as if he'd deflated into his normal appearance, and he doubly struggled to force himself to stay in his buffed form lest he reveal his true, weakened state to those villains still present.

From behind him, the quiet, still, meditative body of Strange suddenly awoke to a start, gasping for breath as his seven rings dissipated. The sorcerer fell to his side, obviously exhausted from the taxing ordeal he'd just aided his ally through.

The power stockpiled into One For All was tremendous indeed, and to amplify that strength with a nearly equal amount of eldritch energy was definitely no small feat for the Sorcerer Supreme. All Might could scarcely turn his head toward Strange to offer him an apologetic look. There, lying on his side and clutching his breast as he panted heavily, the meticulously dressed and groomed sorcerer was beginning to show his age.

All Might suppressed a bloody cough as every muscle in his body twitched painfully, tolerating the
liquid iron taste splashing against his tongue and teeth as best as he could; he was no doubt beginning to show his age as well.

"I apologize for putting you in such a state, Strange," All Might muttered. "I almost expended too much energy, after all. I truly have gotten weaker this past year. If we'd done this back when we first met, five hits would've been enough, but this...took over 300 hits."

All Might swiveled his head toward Tomura and Kurogiri as far as he could to stare them down. The villains stood side by side, the Warp Gate villain rippling his teleporting fog across his body as the hand-covered youth muttered angrily to himself as he shook with barely restrained rage.

"It's as you said, young man," All Might called out to Tomura, "Game Over. Now let's wrap this up and end this charade, shall we?" Even though I'll deflate if I take even a single more step...even Stephen seems spent by this battle. I just need them to hesitate long enough for the others to arrive!

Tomura's hands flew to his neck, scratching and picking at the skin like crazy as he glared down the still standing All Might and the recuperating Strange.

"Lies, lies, all lies!" Tomura hissed. "He's not weak at all! And they just had to whip out an even bigger cheat, did they!?"

"Calm yourself, Shigaraki," Kurogiri whispered to the young man as he leaned in. "Ikiji appears to have been rendered unconscious by that initial blast, but you and I still have a chance to destroy the Symbol of Peace even without his aid. Just look," he gestured toward All Might, "his body is rigid and unmoving. He has definitely been left weakened after his battle with Nomu. And the Sorcerer Supreme looks to be in no position to fight, either. If we act quickly, we can still kill him before reinforcements arrive."

Tomura had paused as he listened to Kurogiri's logic, his hands drifting further away from his neck with each passing second. His breathing steadied and his composure was regained, and before long his hands were back to his sides.

"Yeah, yeah," Tomura quietly hissed. "That's right...there's no other strategy. We're staring down the last boss, after all. Let's clear this level, Kurogiri!"

With that, Tomura lunged forward, his ghoulish hand-covered arms swinging wildly as his fingers trembled in anticipation of grinding the world's Symbol of Peace into dust.

You're coming after all, huh? All Might thought to himself as he stood his ground, lacking any other options. Please hurry, everyone...!

"Go to hell, All Might!" Tomura bellowed as he leaped towards All Might, hand outstretched and ready to crumble the man into nothing with nothing more than a simple touch.

Lacking the energy to mount even the most rudimentary defense, All Might watched anxiously as Tomura's hand was mere inches away from his neck...only to have his vision obscured by a great spray of embers blazing to life and forming a solid barrier between him and Tomura.

Both hero and villain alike were taken aback, with All Might leaning back as far as his already strained body would allow him to and Tomura crashing both hands against the newly conjured barrier, furiously driving his palms against the solid wall of energy that denied him his kill.

But the barrier did not budge, nor did it crack or crumble under the power of his Decay Quirk.

Again, All Might slowly turned his head to spare a glance at the only person who could've
materialized such a lifesaver.

True enough, Doctor Strange had a shaky arm outstretched in All Might's direction, focusing what little energy his body could still manipulate to defend his friend from the villains' last ditch effort to slaughter him. All Might looked astonished that the sorcerer still had any energy left to spare, and frankly, he was, too. But he had meant what he said when he told All Might neither of them would die here—their Successors were waiting for them.

Well...one of them was, anyway.

As the barrier repelled the irate man-child into the waiting grasp of Kurogiri's Warp Gate, twin blurs of blonde and crimson raced toward the fog-covered villain.

"Get away from them!" Kirishima yelled as he aimed his hardened fist directly toward Kurogiri's neck plates.

"Hope you didn't forget about me, you weak bastards!" Bakugo yelled as he aimed his remaining gauntlet toward the exact same area.

A warp gate swirled above Strange's vulnerable body, and Tomura briefly hesitated between leaping through the warp gate Kurogiri had initially set up for him or intercepting the unexpected brats barreling their way towards his only exit.

Luckily, Kurogiri seemed to have seen them coming.

"I won't fall for that twice in a row!" He yelled as his fog swirled into yet another warp gate directly behind him, drawing his physical body into the depths of its vortex and reappearing a fair distance away before the two students could actually land a blow.

Seeing his warp gate safe for now, Tomura dove into the fog before him. Time was of the essence and they had no more time to spare—All Might and Strange were their primary targets. Tomura fell through the fog, reappearing above Strange and dropping down with murderous intent.

"I think you've used up all your spell slots, sorcerer!" Tomura hissed as he reached down toward Strange's head with his gangly hand. Strange had scarcely registered Tomura's sudden appearance above him, raising an arm to try and deflect the attack, but the hand was too close to his head. Tomura felt confident in those few seconds that he'd grind the so-called Sorcerer Supreme into dust.

That is, until a gunshot echoed across the plaza, and Tomura was sent sprawling to the ground in front of Strange as blood splattered from the bullet wound in his arm.

*They made it!* All Might breathed a huge sigh of relief as he angled his head toward the USJ's entranceway. *With not a moment to spare, too!*

"Damn it all!" Tomura screeched as he thrashed and floundered, drawing his bloody arm close to his side. He struggled to his feet and ran toward Kurogiri. "It's Game Over for sure! Take us home, Kuro—gah!"

Tomura fell face first as several more projectiles pierced through his calves and shoulders, dropping him like a rock. Kurogiri quickly responded by raising and wrapping his warp gate around Tomura's body, shielding his sensei's protégé from anymore attacks. A powerful suction suddenly tugged at his fog and their bodies before he could warp them to safety. At first he thought it was Strange's doing, but the sorcerer remained where he laid, not manipulating anymore magic of any sort.

*Then this must be...!* Kurogiri didn't finish that thought, realizing Thirteen hadn't been killed after all.
as he put his focus entirely toward saving himself and Tomura.

"I-Ikiji!" Kurogiri called out to the zealot who was still lying near what rubble remained of the fountain. The young sorcerer appeared to have regained consciousness, but was struggling to pick himself up. He lifted his head and locked eyes with Kurogiri and seemed to understand their predicament immediately.

Apologies, Ikiji... Kurogiri mentally lamented. Ikiji was too far away and could not have possibly made it to them in time, and Kurogiri was in no position to spawn anymore warp gates with Thirteen and the newly arrived Pros bearing down on them.

Ikiji was officially on his own.

"You win this round, 'Symbol of Peace', 'Sorcerer Supreme'," Tomura bit out as Kurogiri's fog enveloped all but his head, shifting his wide, crazy eyes between the two. "But this campaign of ours is far from over! Once I gain a few more levels...I'll kill you all for sure!"

Tomura vanished into the depths of the swirling shadow, the warp gate shrinking until the core of its vortex had vanished from the USJ plaza entirely.

A horridly thick tenseness descended upon those five figures who remained in the plaza. The villains ambush on the USJ and Class 1-A had ended in failure, but two of its ringleaders had successfully escaped.

Kirishima stood apart from Bakugo, appearing equal parts despondent and pensive. He looked down at his hand, hardening and balling it into a jagged fist. He cursed his lack of action against the villains, though he knew deep down that he and the rest of his class were woefully unprepared for the reality that Pro Heroes faced on a daily basis. This 'League of Villains' was but a mere sampling of the dark underbelly of society that heroes mired themselves in day after day.

A stretch of the plaza's concrete suddenly rose, dividing it into two as Cementoss approached them. Kirishima wasn't really paying attention to the teacher's calm words and insistence that they return to the USJ entrance, nor was he paying attention to Bakugo's irate responses to said orders or to Doctor Strange raising himself to his feet and staggering toward what was once the plaza fountain.

No, Kirishima was focused entirely on All Might, remembering with a crashing wave of remorse that he'd gone back on his word and returned to the plaza against his teacher's wishes. And for what? He'd thrown himself at the fog villain, sure, but the villain simply warped himself out of the way. As far as he was concerned, he'd only gotten in All Might's and Doctor Strange's way. How unmanly he must've looked, running into the heat of battle as if he didn't believe in All Might, even after he'd explicitly put his faith in him—

"Young Kirishima!" All Might's voice echoed from the other side of the concrete wall, piercing through the cloud of nagging doubt and shame. "Reflection is important, but...do not allow yourself to dwell too hard or too long on any of your guilt. Do not give in to compunction, my boy."

All Might's voice lacked the heroic deepness he was so well known for, and Kirishima knew immediately that he had deflated into his true form behind the safety of Cementoss's wall. "I was worried what you might have been thinking," Kirishima said as he neared the wall, placing his forehead and a hand against the raised concrete. "I swore to have utmost faith in you and Doctor Strange, yet I came back with Bakugo of my own volition anyway. I'm—"

"Don't apologize for that, Young Kirishima," All Might interrupted. "I saw what you and Young Bakugo did. Even if you both don't realize the impact of your actions yet, just know that I'm as proud
of you as I am relieved that you are unharmed."

A loud, sniffling sound was All Might's only response. Kirishima wiped away a few errant tears as he leaned against the barrier separating teacher and student. He couldn't see All Might, but he had a feeling that his teacher had his head and hand against the wall just as he did.

"Be at ease, Young Kirishima," All Might continued, "There was nothing unmanly in what you did."

"Why...!" Ikiji growled as he finally managed to drag himself onto his hands and knees. His body was littered with dust from head to toe, and his bloodstained limbs and face were caked by the bits of debris from the clash that had sent from sprawling in the first place. "How...!?

The sound of trudging footsteps reached his ears even through the incessant ringing currently plaguing his hearing. He raised his head, and even though his vision was still swimming somewhat, he could make out the two brown boots stepping closer and closer to him, crunching gravel and small rocks beneath each slow step. The boots suddenly stopped only a couple feet before him. He raised his head higher, and even though Ikiji couldn't make out a clear figure or face, he knew well enough that Doctor Strange was staring down at him, his face oddly neutral and impassive in spite of what was said and done here today.

No words were spoken for a solid minute as sorcerer and zealot regarded one another quietly. Despite the enmity Ikiji had for the man, he strangely did not feel tense. His instincts told him that Strange was not going to attack, so he made no move to flee—yet.

"Come to revel in another of your victories, Strange?" Ikiji asked weakly, finally breaking the silence. "Come to proudly proclaim that your 'fallen' student has lost yet again?"

"No," Strange replied simply. "The only victory I've come to proclaim and revel in is Izuku's."

Ikiji shuddered and grit his teeth, suppressing a groan of irritation.

"His skills now rival, if not surpass, yours entirely," Strange calmly observed. "If you had not dragged everyone into the Mirror Dimension, he—along with his companions—would have defeated you soundly. My student is focused on expanding his magical repertoire even further, while you remain singularly focused on your twisted connection with Dormammu—"

"The only thing I am focused on," Ikiji spat, "is the long game. You take this defeat as proof of me languishing? The League of Villains has more power and knowledge to offer than you could possibly imagine. I will prove my worthiness to them just as I did with Master Kaecilius all those years ago. With my vision and their resources, the once shattered dream of my masters will be made whole again!" Ikiji's visage twisted with mad glee. "And right on the eve of this world's salvation, I will strike you and your pitiful successor down!"

Strange's brow twitched in anger and he quickly raised his hand in the air, as if to smite Ikiji with one final almighty blast of magic, before suddenly pausing.

"Are you going to kill me now?" Ikiji asked as his eyes trailed to the hand shaking thunderously above him, teetering on the edge of vengeance and judgment. "Or will pity stay your hand a third time?"

The silence resumed, stretching again into what felt like several agonizing minutes of an impending verdict. The shaking of Strange's hand suddenly stopped, however, and it slowly returned limply to his side. The anger in his brow had sagged, and the impassiveness in his face slipped ever-so slightly.
"Pity it is, then," Ikiji chuckled at the perceived foolishness of his former teacher. "Did I not tell you back at Kamar-Taj? This is war, Strange. And your pity serves no purpose here. Sentiment must be the first casualty in any battle. It's survival...guarantees your destruction."

"Help!" A shrill cry for help sounded across the plaza. "Someone help us!"

Strange looked away from Ikiji, eyes drawn toward the mountainside, where the cry emanated from. From out of the lingering haze, several figures emerged, shambling towards the USJ entrance as quickly as they could. The lead figures were a spiky-haired blonde boy, who was being supported by a petite young girl; both appeared bruised and worse for wear. Behind them was a taller and more immodestly dressed girl, her arms carrying a sizeable green bundle that fluttered slightly with every step she took.

Strange felt his mouth run dry—she was carrying Izuku's body and cloak.

The air beside him stilted and swirled unnaturally as it became disturbed by a sudden distortion. He cast a glance down where Ikiji was—he was gone. Strange correctly assumed he'd slipped back into the Mirror Dimension and would make his escape through there. But he had no time to worry about Ikiji's escape—Izuku's vitality was a far more pressing issue right now.

"Over here, young ones!" Strange called out to Izuku's battered classmates, smiling as their faces lit up upon catching sight of him, the presence of a friendly figure to guide them to safety adding quite a bit of pep into their step.

You're wrong, Ikiji—pity did not stay my hand this time, Strange thought as Kaminari, Jiro, and Yaoyorozu turned towards him. This conflict today has damn near run me dry. Any remaining magic that I cast against you is magic I could be using to aid Izuku here and now.

Still...it would be a lie for me to say that I do not continue to lament the path you've been led down, Strange continued to think as the three students began talking all at once as they neared him, their voices pleading for help. As much as I despise the actions you've taken against us...a part of me has always hoped you would one day do what Kaecilius could not and see through the folly of giving into Dormammu's temptations of power. Killing you will not save you; it will only ensure that you die believing you were right to fall to such dark ways...but I hope you do not believe that I will forever be unable and unwilling to end you. If Clea had died at Kamar-Taj that day six years ago instead of during the battle that followed...I would have ended you with no hesitation.

Thinking on his fallen apprentice no longer, Strange looked upon the students as they reached him, focusing on them and his current disciple entirely. "Lay him down here," Strange spoke authoritatively over the panicked squabble of the three heroes-in-training, directing the taller girl to set Izuku down before him gently.

Yaoyorozu nodded and did so, setting Izuku on his backside as gently as she could. Strange knelt down and leaned over Izuku's body, briefly studying the oddly peaceful look on his face before narrowing in on his injuries.

The cloak unfurled itself from Izuku's body, as if recognizing Strange, allowing the man to undo Izuku's tunic and pull it back. He was confused by the relatively spotless appearance of Izuku's chest for only a moment, quickly realizing the most severe damage he'd accrued was from Ikiji's space shards—all the damage was internal, likely from hemorrhaging. Reaching out with what magic his already exhausted body could manage to manipulate, Strange managed to pinpoint three points of damage: one piercing directly through his chest, another through his right arm, and a third through his right shoulder.
"Can you save him?"

It was the blonde boy who'd asked. Strange glanced up and was nearly taken aback by the amount of sheer guilt and remorse etched into his face. He inferred—likely correctly—that one or more of Izuku's injuries was acquired by protecting his friends from Ikiji's wrath.

"Izuku is quite safe under my care," Strange replied with a gentle smile.

"You know his name," The taller girl spoke, her eyes full of inquisitiveness, not just worry or concern.

Strange became acutely aware that both girls, and the boy to a lesser extent, had been studying him very carefully as he tended to Izuku's wounds. He supposed it was only natural, especially since he'd just let slip that he knew Izuku personally, and called him by his first name no less. Aside from that, their attire was remarkably similar, the only major difference being the color of their levitation cloaks.

He pressed his hand against Izuku's chest, preparing to relieve the greatest of the three injuries his body had sustained. Closing his eyes, Strange focused—he carefully pulsed his energies into Izuku's body, sending it coursing gently through each of his veins and arteries to locate which ones had been severed and repairing the damage accordingly. A thin veil appeared over Strange's fingers, and he suddenly reached into Izuku's chest, ignoring the surprised gasps of his student's classmates as best as he could. A dull flash of red light illuminated Izuku's insides, his heart and lungs becoming briefly visible before fading when Strange removed his hand.

Jiro nearly gagged.

"D-did you save him?" Kaminari worriedly asked, wringing his hands. "Midoriya isn't going to die, is he?"

A sly smile was Strange's immediate response. "Why don't you ask Izuku yourself?" He looked up and snapped his fingers.

"—and thank you for being as gentle as you could with my body, Yaoyorozu, I know I can't quite reach out to you and the others yet while I'm in my astral form, but I'm still very thankful for—"

Yaoyorozu threw a palm against her mouth and shrieked as Izuku's worried, mumbling voice suddenly filled everyone's ears; she'd glanced up to where the voice was coming from and nearly fell backwards as she and everyone else present saw the white, wispy, transparent form of Izuku Midoriya floating over his own limp body.

"Oh my God, Midoriya!" Kaminari was the next one to shriek. "Is that your ghost? Are you dead for real!?"

"Eh?" Izuku's astral body blinked as he looked from person to person present, abruptly aware that everyone could now somehow see and hear him after he'd been muttering and trying to make his presence known to them for quite some time now. "Eh!?"

"Don't 'eh' us!" Jiro yelled. "How about you explain what the hell's going on with you now!?"

"Sensei, are you responsible for suddenly making me visible and hearable by everyone?" Izuku asked Strange incredulously.

"One's astral form can nearly always be made visible to everyone around them, Izuku," Strange informed his disciple with that sly smile still plastered all over his face.
"Oh! I had no idea..." Izuku muttered sheepishly. "I never did finish that book I borrowed from your library before classes officially began..."

Yes, Strange remembered: after the incident with Brigand and Izuku's ascension to Disciple status, he had the boy practicing with certain relics to be better prepared against Ikiji's spatial powers. In return, Izuku asked to finally be allowed to read a certain book on astral projection he'd had his eyes on for some time now, but was unable to squeeze into his training sessions.

"A-hem!" Jiro not-so-subtly cleared her throat.

Strange and Izuku turned back toward the boy's classmates, only to find them staring back dumbfounded, eyes wide in disbelief and lips twitching as words utterly failed them.

Izuku once again looked at his teacher with a sheepish look, rubbing the back of his head. "Um...sorry, Sensei," he began, "but they pretty much know since they helped me fight against Ikiji."

"And how much do they know?" Strange asked.

"...They know enough," Izuku conceded with a sigh, "and I promised them answers when all was said and done. I figured that it was the least they deserved after what Ikiji put them through."

Strange did not immediately respond, as if processing this new revelation as well as what options were available now that the jig was up for the first three of Izuku's classmates. It was not necessarily bad; however, much like today's attack, it was still unanticipated and unplanned for, unlike the reveal to Aizawa, which had been discussed with Toshinori ahead of time.

"I understand," Strange said at last with a heavy sigh. "Leave the answers to me, Izuku." He turned to address Yaoyorozu, Jiro, and Kaminari, who were waiting with bated breath. "You want answers. Explanations." They nodded. "I will tell you all that I can, but only after absolutely everything here at the USJ is settled, understood?"

The quaint atmosphere of the dimmed bar that the League of Villains called home was abruptly interrupted by a haphazard vortex of shadow swirling into existence above the floor. Tomura falls onto the floor in a black and red unseemly heap, writhing as his blood stained the wood tiling. Kurogiri's body reformed a few seconds later, collapsing into one of the bar stools as he caught his breath after that narrow escape from Thirteen's pull.

"We lost..." Tomura groaned. "We lost, even with that high level Nomu in my party..." he glared up at a bright screen that read 'Sound Only'. "You were wrong, Sensei!"

"No," All For One rebuked Tomura coolly. "I was not wrong. Merely unprepared."

"All Might had the Sorcerer Supreme at his side," Kurogiri panted. "We proved no match for their combined might."

"Oh?" All For One asked. "Stephen Strange was at USJ?"

"Yes," Kurogiri said with a nod. "One of Stephen Strange's disciples from Kamar-Taj is currently enrolled in the U.A hero course, as well."

"...Interesting," All For One said. "Most interesting. This new knowledge will make it easier to prepare for the next operation."
"And were the preparations we made with the Nomu still insufficient?" Kurogiri asked. "Even with all the enhancements you and the doctor gave it, Nomu was still overwhelmed."

"Where is the Nomu?"

"It was blasted away by the combined powers of All Might and Strange," Kurogiri said. "I was unable to warp it back into our custody since I am unaware of its coordinates."

"That is...unfortunate," All For One said in a low voice. A pause. "And what of Ikiji? It does not appear he came back with you, either."

"I was unable to save him as well," Kurogiri said, lowering his head. "Our lives would've been forfeit if I even tried. However, I do not suspect he was captured. I believe he managed to escape with his magic before the Pros reached the plaza. We should hear from him soon."

"Magic," Tomura spat from where he lay. He had remained silent as his Sensei and Kurogiri conversed over the dismal failure of their USJ operation, but no more. "Damn magic and anything and anyone even remotely related to it! If it hadn't been for that damn sorcerer...!"

Tomura recalled his impact against Strange's barrier right before he got to All Might, and how his Decay Quirk failed to activate against it. He could not disintegrate magic—energy—like he could nearly anything else he got his hands on, and the fact that something existed that he was powerless to destroy gnawed at his already bad temperament, stoking the fire the fueled his fury.

"I wish..." Tomura dragged his gnarled fingers against the bar's floor, soothed by the soft crackle of crumbling wood as his digits reduced everything at his fingertips to ash. "I wish I didn't have to just touch stuff in order to destroy them. People—things—society—I wish I could turn them all to dust...with just a snap of my fingers!"

Kurogiri tensed and looked over at the 'Sound Only' screen; he could practically hear the smirk written on All For One's face, even from where he sat.

"If that is what you desire, Shigaraki," he said. "I have something that could help you with that..."

It was late afternoon by the time the remaining students of 1-A arrived back at the main campus building, somberly filing off their bus one by one and trudging back to their classroom, still decked out in their hero costumes. Once there, presumably, one or more of the school's other Pros would direct them when they'd all arrived.

Uraraka glanced around at her classmates, anxiously counting the remaining heads—those that were left, anyway. Four of her classmates had not returned with them on the bus ride back: Midoriya, Jiro, Yaoyorozu, and, most distressingly, Kaminari. She had seen the latter three being led away from the USJ after the authorities had arrived, not by any of the police officers or detectives, but by the robed man who'd arrived with All Might. The same man that had simultaneously calmed her and sent shivers racing up her neck.

She had not seen hide nor hair of Midoriya since they were scattered, and given Thirteen and Aizawa's injuries, she shuddered to think that he had sustained crippling injuries himself. Her mind invariably went back to robed man. His attire and powers were so similar to Midoriya's—she found herself wondering again if they were related, and if he had separated Midoriya from the rest of the class after the end of the USJ incident.

"You're thinking about that robed man, aren't you?" Asui's blunt voice jolted Uraraka out of her thoughts.
"A-Asui!" she cried out in surprise.

"Call me Tsuyu."

"Ah? R-right...anyways, what were you saying?"

"The man in the red cloak," Asui repeated. "You were thinking about him, too, right? I think pretty much everyone here was."

A pregnant pause arose among the 1-A students walking down that hall, with nearly each of them stopping whatever conversation they were in and turning toward Asui as she brought up the man.

"I won't deny: I still have my fair share of questions after what I saw today," Shoji added.

"Like, just who was he?" Hagakure asked from beside Ojiro, alerting everyone to her easily overlooked presence. "I'd never seen a hero like him before."

"Yes you have," Asui said. "He has a costume that's nearly identical to Midoriya's."

This time, all sixteen students stopped walking, and all eyes were on Asui—and each other.

"Now that I think about it...you're right," Sero said, stroking his chin. "I got a good look at him since I was at the entrance when he arrived. His costume is just like Midoriya's!"

"Not to mention he arrived with All Might through a portal of his own creation," Sato piped up. "That's another key similarity."

"Oh! Oh! Could they be father and son!?" Hagakure exclaimed, jumping up and down in excitement for the potential gossip this possible revelation entailed.

"They're not father and son, you fucking halfwits," Bakugo grumbled. "They're teacher and student."

"Oh yeah?" Hagakure jabbed her glove in Bakugo's direction. "How do you know?"

"I knew that damned nerd before U.A," Bakugo said. "And that cloaked man began personally tutoring him or some shit long before the Entrance Exam back in February. He's definitely the reason the nerd's not here with us now, but I can't speak for the other three extras he spirited away."

"The plot thickens!" Ashido whispered to Hagakure, who nodded fervently, though you couldn't tell just by looking at her.

Most of the students erupted into quiet talk amongst each other regarding Midoriya and his relationship with the cloaked man, all but Bakugo, Todoroki, Tokoyami, Koda, and Aoyama.

Aoyama's usual closed smile had devolved into a tight frown, as he pondered this new information. He paired it with stuff the rest of the class probably didn't know about—namely, that Midoriya was a late bloomer when it came to his Quirk: Energy Reign.

He recalled what Midoriya had told him during their Battle Trial: "I wish I could explain myself to you fully, but I completely understand what you're feeling....I know exactly what it's like to consider oneself a defect for years on end."

Midoriya's defect mentality. His late bloomer status. His relationship to the cloaked man with a similar attire and seemingly identical Quirk to boot—were all of these things connected?
Uraraka turned toward Asui again. "Hey, Asui—"

"Tsuyu."

"R-right, Tsuyu...how did you come to pick up on all this? You weren't at the entrance until after everything had already settled down, right?"

"I was taken to the flood zone along with Mineta and Ashido," Asui explained, pointing out her companions in the USJ ordeal. "I'd rescued them from the water and taken them to the boat, but the villains had us surrounded."

"It was terrifying!" Mineta jumped in, though he was swatted by Ashido so Asui could continue.

"The villains sank the boat, so I leaped to the zone's giant slide with my tongue wrapped around Mineta and Ashido," Asui continued. We climbed all the way to the top of the peak there, where the villains couldn't chase us. I had a clear view of pretty much the entire USJ from up there; I even got to see All Might and the cloaked man fight those villains down in the plaza from where I was. From there we pretty much waited for the Pros to arrive and save us."

"Speaking of All Might, I can't believe he sent that villain flying through the roof!" Sero jumped topic to All Might since he'd been brought up. "What power!"

"Ah!" Kirishima perked up. "That detective said All Might's injuries were light enough to only require Recovery Girl's healing. Maybe he'll be able to come see us before—"

"All Might may not be recuperating in the hospital, Eijiro Kirishima, but you should all give the man some privacy and respite as he rests and recovers."

The 1-A students whirled about to find the cloaked gentleman they'd just been talking about standing only a few meters down the hall from them, arms crossed and eyes studious. His sudden and unexpected appearance put the entire class on edge—even Bakugo and Todoroki seemed put off by his abrupt arrival.

"So," Iida cleared his throat and spoke up first, "you must be Midoriya's—"

"Father!"

"No, teacher!"

"Forget that!" Sero said. "Where'd he even come from!?"

Doctor Strange smiled; getting the drop on people by suddenly appearing before them never did lose its charm and appeal. "Did you not hear me approach you all?"

"Dude, we didn't even see you!" was the exasperated reply.

"Quite right?" Strange asked, scanning his eyes across each individual student present, even the invisible one. "So...you are Izuku's classmates: the heroes-in-training of Class 1-A. Quite the harrowing experience you've all been put through today."

Bakugo snorted—that was an understatement if he'd ever heard one.

"Uh, sir?" Uraraka nervously asked. "You wouldn't happen to know where Midoriya or our other classmates are, would you? If you don't mind answering, that is."

As if on cue, Yaoyorozu, Jiro and Kaminari walked out from behind Strange, and they looked as
shocked as the rest of the class did by their sudden appearance.

"W-wait," Kaminari stuttered. "What the hell—"

"What the hell!?" Many of the other students in the hall exclaimed. Even the typically stoic Tokoyami was at a loss for words, rubbing his eyes and then getting Dark Shadow to rub his eyes again to make sure he wasn't seeing things. But no, he wasn't; none of them were. Three of their four missing classmates had seemingly up and materialized from behind the cloaked man and out of thin air, and they looked just as confused as the rest did.

"Kaminari!" Uraraka shouted, running toward the boy and taking his hands into hers. "I never got to check up on you after the police arrived at the USJ. Are you alright?"

"Yeah, yeah, I'm...fine," Kaminari said with a jittery grin, sliding his hands away from Uraraka's. He didn't seem anything remotely to close, Uraraka observed. In fact, he looked...burdened. As if he were just dropped a bombshell of information that completely and utterly rocked his worldview on a fundamental level. Actually, Jiro and Yaoyorozu looked exactly the same, as well.

"I believe that settles three of your four questions," Strange said, beaming a friendly smile at Uraraka. "As for your friend, Midoriya, he is alive and well, merely resting after today's events."

"Is he resting on campus in Recovery Girl's office along with All Might?" Kirishima asked, a quick dash of panic running through his mind that Izuku might see All Might's deflated form.

"No," Strange replied.

"Is he in the hospital with Thirteen and Aizawa-sensei?" Ojiro asked.

"No," Strange replied again.

"Alright, this is starting to get a little weird," Ashido said, rubbing her palms against her crooked horns. "We have to return to our classroom anyway. Why did you stop us all, mister...?"

"Ah, how rude of me," Strange said to Ashido. "I'm merely here to relay information regarding Izuku's well-being to his fellow friends, as per his request, as well as to drop off these three students," he motioned toward Jiro, Kaminari, and Yaoyorozu, "who were unable to depart with you from the USJ."

Some of the students, such as Bakugo and Tokoyami, furrowed their brow at that. Unable to depart with them? For what reason?

"But I suppose I'm getting ahead of myself," he chuckled. "A few of you may already know me, but allow me to introduce myself: my name is Doctor Stephen Strange."

And thus concluded Class 1-A's harrowing ordeal with the League of Villain's ambush at USJ.

Each of the students risked their lives in defying the villain's attack. They had proven their worth as potential heroes, to each other, their teachers, the villains they'd faced, and more importantly, to themselves. As unprepared as they may have been, Class 1-A proved they could withstand and survive the terrors that awaited them upon graduation.

However, unbeknownst to the fledgling heroes and even the Sorcerer Supreme himself, the attack at USJ was merely a prelude for all the events to follow, the spark that would ignite the inferno that would embroil the whole world and rock it to its core.
Nobody had suspected it at the time, but the League's attack on USJ was merely the beginning.

The beginning of the end.
Chapter Summary

In the aftermath of the USJ attack, Izuku begins to experiment with his astral abilities while his physical body recovers. Meanwhile, a dark shadow that has been lingering over certain 1-A students begins to make its move...

"...and that concludes our investigation so far," Tsukauchi informed the small delegation of U.A heroes seated before him. The staff—Nezu, All Might, Snipe, Midnight, Vlad King, and Power Loader—all stayed absolutely silent as they received Tsukauchi's news.

The air was somber among those staff gathered for the debriefing. Vlad King was pensive, his meaty arms crossed and eyes closed as he processed what meager facts the police managed to dredge from those villains captured at USJ. He supposed it should be expected; it had only been a day since the attack, and heroes and investigators alike have been scrambling nonstop for answers. It was well after dusk now and they still had to prepare for tomorrow's resumption of classes.

"So all we know," Vlad said at last, "is that their top members—Shigaraki, Kurogiri, and this Ikiji Kokotsu—are all unregistered citizens with unregistered Quirks. We now know what those Quirks are, but beyond that...nothing."

"We'll have to move quickly before their ringleader's wounds heal," Snipe added.

"Ringleader, huh..." Toshinori mused pensively.

"The term troubles you, All Might," Nezu said, phrasing it more like an observation than a question. That ever-present knowing glint in his eye suggested he had an inkling of what All Might's reservations were.

"Their supposed ringleader, Shigaraki, carried out a bold attack that even diehard villains wouldn't attempt even if they wanted to," Toshinori explained. "Add to that his immature bragging and his petulant behavior whenever things went awry, and it paints a clear picture of a man-child."

"And it bothers you that so many villains would gather around and agree to follow a person like that," Snipe quickly followed All Might's logic.

"It's just as bothering that villains that are seemingly more powerful than him would follow him," All Might continued. "Kurogiri and Ikiji's powers surpass his at first glance."

"A man-child..." Nezu mused pensively. "In many ways, he is like our students—he is still growing into his villainy just as they are growing into their heroism. And just as we are trying to cultivate our students' sense of justice, someone could be cultivating his sense of malice." Nezu turned toward All Might. "Kurogiri and Ikiji would merely be tools for his growth if that were the case."

Toshinori narrowed his eyes and glanced away, ruminating on Strange's words from just a few days ago.

"We must be prepared to deal with the possibility that All For One is involved somehow."
That had been right after Aizawa's test, and he'd been adamantly that his friend was mistaken or simply missing the evidence needed to make such a worrying claim. But just a few days later, and he and Strange had both squared off against an otherworldly creature blessed with multiple Quirks. How much more evidence was needed really?

"As if all of that wasn't confusing enough," Snipe suddenly spoke again, "the media hasn't given us nearly as much flak as I was expecting. Why is that? You'd think such an unanticipated attack against U.A of all places would put a dent in people's expectations of hero society."

"I think this should answer that question," Nezu said, sipping on some tea before picking up a television remote. He pointed it toward a monitor on the wall and pressed 'ON'.

"—in response to the USJ incident at the famed U.A High. Iron Man, the number two American Pro Hero and leader of the Avengers, pledged to offer whatever monetary support the school needed to recover from this heinous attack," a female newscaster spoke from the news channel Nezu had turned the monitor to. "Additionally, the States' highest ranking hero, Spectrum, rallied heroes and citizens alike in a show of solidarity with the U.A students, teachers, and loved ones affected by the attack. Up next after a quick break, we examine the response given by Director Nick Fury of S.H.I.E.L.D.—" Nezu abruptly turned the monitor off and turned to face the rest of his staff, smiling as a wave of relief and gratitude settled on the shoulders of everyone present. Even Power Loader seemed more relaxed, despite the mentioning of the Avengers.

"Friends in high places," Snipe said with a sigh.

Toshinori nodded, making a mental note to reach out to Stark and Rambeau before the night was done to express his gratitude to them.

"I suppose we'll end this night on a good note," Nezu said. "Let's all get as much rest as possible for tomorrow, shall we? Oh, except for you two—All Might, Power Loader. There are still a couple things I need to discuss with you."

Tsukauchi, Vlad King, Midnight, and Snipe gave their farewells and departed one at a time, until the conference room only held three.

"What's there to still discuss, Nezu?" Power Loader asked, tapping his metal-tipped finger against the desk. "We're still fixing security, and I haven't implemented my recommended changes."

"But I have."

The air in the center of the room seemed to shimmer and split apart as Doctor Strange materialized before their very eyes, stepping forth from the depths of the Mirror Dimension. The passage was closed as quickly as it was opened, and the swimming sea of fractals disappeared before they could spread across the room.

"Thank you for joining us at such a late hour," Nezu addressed Strange. "I apologize, our seemingly frequent calls to you must be throwing off your sleep schedule."

"It's no worry at all, Nezu," Strange replied.

"Stephen Strange...!?" Power Loader exclaimed, standing out of his seat.

"Higari," Strange addressed Power Loader by his real name, giving him a courteous nod. "It's been awhile since we last met. I apologize for not approaching you for a greeting at USJ, but alas, my
"The same could be said of us all," Nezu said. "Have you been to see Aizawa yet, Stephen?"

"I have," Strange said, his brow furrowing with anger and remorse upon recalling the teacher's sorry state in the hospital. "And thankfully, with the help of Recovery Girl, we were able to reverse a fair bit of the damage done to his facial structures. On top of that, I've made sure he'll be better prepared should he ever find himself in a similar situation ever again."

"Hold up, hold up," Power Loader said as he sunk back into his seat. "Surprise appearances aside...when I said I hadn't implemented my security fixes yet, you said yours already were. What were you referring to?"

"A barrier over the U.A premises," Strange said. "A weak one for now, but one that should be more than sufficient enough in detecting any mystical anomalies that could pose a danger to my disciple or the other students."

"Disciple?" Power Loader perked up. "Are you saying one of your own students is attending U.A?"

He glanced over to All Might and Nezu for confirmation, receiving a nod from his chimerical principal.

"In Class 1-A," Nezu confirmed. "Izuku Midoriya."

Power Loader traded more surprised glances between the other three figures in the room, recognizing the name as that of the boy chosen to be 1-A's Class Representative and liaison with the Costume Department, the one Hatsume had been experimenting on before. "A sorcerer in the hero course..."

"Speaking of 1-A," Nezu said, maintaining his grip on the conversation's direction, "how did your meeting with the students go? You didn't tell them the truth about Midoriya, did you?"

Strange slid his hands behind his back and stood silent for a moment. His brow furrowed and he wrinkled his nose just slightly enough for Nezu to notice, tipping the inquisitive principal off to the dissension about to come his way.

"...As per your wishes, I did not tell the entire class the truth regarding Izuku," Strange said at last. "Only three of his classmates know the truth: Young Kaminari, Jiro, and Yaoyorozu. And they only know because of their clash with Ikiji at USJ. The rest of 1-A currently remain ignorant."

"Is it such a good idea to leave it like that, Nezu?" Toshinori asked, craning his head toward the principal. "These are teenagers, and they've been handed this secret in the aftermath of a traumatic attack to boot. To be a few of the only ones who know the truth out of an entire class of students—"

"And when we inevitably tell the entire class, they'll be nineteen students out of millions of people who are ignorant to the existence of magic," Nezu countered. "The truth regarding Midoriya's powers is one that will invariably be revealed, but it needs to be done at our discretion. For now, we will observe how those three handle the truth and interact with Midoriya in the coming week."

"The students have an inkling of what to expect tomorrow when classes resume," Strange said. "I've explained Midoriya's temporary astral state as yet another by-product of his Quirk: Energy Reign. My main purpose was to abate their worries and divert their suspicions before they even had any."

"Was that all?" Nezu asked, his eyes glinting knowingly.

Strange sighed as he caught sight of the glint; Nezu was devious and had already picked up on there being even more that needed to be said. "No," he relented. "I appeared before the students while they
were gathered together so I could scan them all at once."

"You picked up on some anomalies," Nezu said after a quick sip of tea, once again not phrasing his statement as a question.

"Yes, three of them: Young Kaminari, Jiro, and Todoroki," Strange said. "There is a...minute taint within them, but the largest by far is Young Todoroki. From there it likely spread to Kaminari and Jiro."

"Spread?" Toshinori asked, gulping. "Such a word implies...infection. Are the other students in danger?"

"It is hard for me to say from a mere glance," Strange conceded. "The taint is magical in nature and faint, and only slowly growing. It is nothing like Ikiji's corrupted body or the Nomu we faced, so it doesn't appear to be related to the League."

"So it could be unrelated," Power Loader piped up. "Or something potentially rubbed off of Midoriya himself without having realized it."

"...For the record, I don't agree with the decision made regarding Izuku and his classmates," Strange continued. "However, I do not wish to overstep my boundaries since I am technically not a staff member and this is your school, Nezu. So for now, I will acquiesce to your request of secrecy. I suppose all we can do for now is watch over them and plan accordingly."

"Thank you, Stephen," Nezu said with a small, conciliatory smile. "And speaking of watching over—how is Midoriya faring after his battle with Ikiji?"

"Well..." Strange mindlessly slid his thumb over a card in his hand—it was Midoriya's summoning card that he'd left behind in class and the one All Might had found before Iida's arrival. "His body is currently resting at home. His spirit, on the other hand..."

A large clatter rattled through the Midoriya household during the evening, startling Inko Midoriya out of her meditative routine of dinner prep. Dinner was usually the time of day Inko looked forward to most, being the prime unwinding hours of dining and family bonding that she shared with her one and only son, especially with Hisashi absent from the household for now.

The clattering noise had caused Inko to jolt harder than usual; she was still wound up over yesterday's events at U.A, and the state her precious son was in when his body was clandestinely returned home for rest and recovery. She'd nearly flown into hysterics until Izuku appeared to calm her—or at least, his astral form did.

So when the sounds of unknown objects crashing to the floor began to emanate from her son's bedroom, her motherly instincts and frayed nerves instantly jumped to the worst possible scenarios she could think of.

"Izuku?" Inko asked cautiously, rapping her hand against his door. When there was no response, she slowly inched it open to peek inside. "Sweetie?"

Lying blissfully still and quiet on the bed was Izuku's body, his chest rising and falling rhythmically as he rested beneath a fiery golden veil of magic, courtesy of Strange. The veil was transparent, layered atop Izuku's body like a kind of sorcerous tapestry one would drape over a mystic funeral pall. The veil's energy was constantly sending out waves of unseen warmth in periodic pulses, instilling in Inko a sense of great ease whenever she laid eyes on her son's resting body, even if she disliked the veil's shape.
Trailing her eyes down to the floor, she spotted the likely culprits of the clatter she's heard moments prior: several All Might figurines and school books laid scattered at the foot of his desk; Inko felt relieved, assuming they'd simply been placed too close to the edge.

Flip.

Inko paused as she'd turned to return to the kitchen, the distinct sound of a book being rifled through causing her to peruse Izuku's bedroom with a bit more scrutiny. There, floating in the middle of the room, was an opened rectangular tome wrapped in grey leather. It was so still, she didn't even recognize it was there upon first glance.

"Izuku!" Inko puffed her cheeks slightly as she scolded her son. "You should be resting! Not...not...! Training more!"

Hardly a second later, Izuku's floating astral form appeared before the book, his white, wispy hands hiding vainly behind his transparent back. His astral body still appeared as if he was wearing his hero costume, indicating that he hadn't even returned to his body since leaving it for the first time yesterday. "S-sorry, mom," Izuku chuckled sheepishly. "I should've known better than to try and fool you. But I've been practicing all day, and I think I'm getting the visible-invisible astral shift down! I have to focus first, and the differences are slight, but they are noticeable—"

"Izuku!" Inko interrupted her son's fanatic mumbling. Her arms were crossed and she was tapping her foot impatiently now. "Not exactly helping your case. Doctor Strange said you should rest the entire day since you were so adamant about returning to class tomorrow!"

"Technically speaking, I am resting," Izuku said, trying to justify his training. "Rather, my body is. My astral form doesn't need to eat or sleep—only my body does! And the veil Sensei and Wong created is supplying my body with all the energy it needs to keep my astral self sustained!"

That had certainly been a brief spark of panic during the aftermath of USJ. Astral projection is not a magical technique that involves drawing in magic from one's surroundings; in fact, Izuku had been relying on learning to manipulate the universal energies for the majority of his training—whips, portals, bolts, etc.—up to this point. Instead, control of an astral body was derived from one's personal energies, or life force vitality. However, as Strange explained to him on day one of his training, extended use of one's personal energies can prove fatal for sorcerers.

Thus, the veil: it provides a steady stream of energy to compensate for Izuku's constant use in keeping his astral body separate from his physical body.

Inko glanced back and forth between her physical son and her astral son, her lips quivering as if on the verge of another scolding. In the end, however, Inko became simply drained of her furor, her shoulders sagging as she sighed in a relenting manner.

"Alright..." Inko said tiredly. "Alright. But will you at least come out for dinner when it's ready in a few minutes? I know you don't need to—can't—eat while you're like that, but...I would still like you to be at the table."

Just as she shuffled out of his room, Izuku's nostrils flared, picking up the distinct scent of pork and rice. And Izuku could tell, even from his bedroom, that his mother had instinctively cooked for two, despite his current state.

Mom... Izuku thought as he watched his mother shuffle away. *I shouldn't make her worry any more than she already is, even if she is taking everything better than I expected she would.*
I'm sorry, but I can't afford to rest, Mom, Izuku continued as he went back to rifling through his tome on astral projection, absorbing each passage he flipped through. Yesterday was proof of that. From what I understand, those villains just toyed with us, teasing us with their malice. And then there's Ikiji...I may be able to beat him in a conventional fight, but there's nothing conventional about the Mirror Dimension. I need to become strong enough to beat him there on my own. If I didn't have Kaminari, Jiro, and Yaoyorozu with me...

That line of thought gave Izuku pause. Not only had his friends been in grave danger fighting against Ikiji, but he'd nearly died protecting them from a foe they had no way of being prepared for.

Then it'll be as much for them as it is me, Izuku swore to himself. I'll definitely get stronger for my friends' sakes and not just my own! A sanctum to support my friends and the innocent—that's the kind of sorcerer-hero that I want to become.

"Wait a second," Izuku said aloud as he reread a passage he'd accidentally skipped over while he was lost in his thoughts. "You can...you can possess another person while in your astral form!?"

The next day was the resumption of classes at U.A and the end of what had turned out to be an extremely hectic first school week. Still, Izuku was determined to make the most of it, and he found himself experimenting with his powers on his way to school and homeroom. He'd discovered he could still cast spells while in his astral form, though they were much weaker in scope than if he were in his physical body, and they fizzled out within seconds. Further still, that didn't stop him from managing to conjure up a small portal to U.A's premises after bidding his mother farewell for the day. He slipped through quickly (he'd long been taught that a quick closing of an eldritch portal could sever flesh, and he didn't want to find out what would happen to an astral spirit) and invisibly, feeling cognizant of his spectral appearance and the fact his astral body was still in his hero costume and not the U.A uniform.

He felt a twinge of guilt about going against the wishes of both his mother and his sensei, but still felt it was worth it since not a moment of his time spent was wasted while he was astral. He'd constantly been training for over 36 hours straight, and he saw no reason to stop just because he was back at U.A.

His portal had opened up at the far end of U.A's entrance courtyard, tucked away in a corner parallel to the reconstructed barrier. It fizzled away almost as quickly as it sprang up, and no one among the throng of students entering the school's front doors seemed to spare any notice to the small ring of fire Izuku had conjured and slipped through.

Izuku cautiously approached the eagerly chatting student body as they flowed onto the premises, yet none turned toward him, and if they did, it was brief and Izuku was sure they were seeing straight through him instead of straight at him.

A glimpse of a familiar figure flashed out of the crowd of teens, catching Izuku's eye: it was the ever stoic, bird-faced head of Tokoyami, arms crossed and face phlegmatic as he made his way silently across the courtyard. He raised himself above the crowd and floated over toward Tokoyami, weaving through the taller heads among the students. He glanced down at Tokoyami and waved his white, ghostlike hand in front of his beaked face. There was always a perceptive look in Tokoyami's eyes, a perspicacious air that rested just beneath his aloof demeanor, but he still gave no notice to Izuku's hand.

A sudden pep in his gait propelled Tokoyami forward, catching Izuku off guard. His bird-like head moved through Izuku's hand, and he paused, shivering slightly, eyes darting around suspiciously. Izuku felt a similar shivering sensation as well, and observed how his astral hand had maintained its
shape even after moving through another physical body. It felt...weird, to say the least.

That shivering sensation was soon overridden by a sharp tingling sensation crawling up his back. He let Tokoyami continue on his way and whirled around to face the throng of students swarming in. It was an uncomfortable tingle, one that made Izuku feel as if he was being watched. But the sea of bobbing heads and faces was moving too fast for his astral eyes to pick up on any that could've been staring at him rather than through him. The tingling faded quickly enough, but the sensation kept him rooted in midair, eyes darting from face to face as if he were preparing for another to somehow spot him. The last U.A students trickled in through the barrier after several minutes until no one was left entering. The sensation of being watched never returned.

Odd, it really did feel as if... Izuku's thoughts trailed off there as he shook his head, deciding to file the incident away for later. Right now he had to get to class before he was too late, and the front entrance into U.A had closed shut.

Izuku approached the large, imposing doors, glancing between the great slabs of steel and his wispy hands. He placed his palms against the doors, observing it felt somewhat solid as opposed to a person's body, which he moved through effortlessly. He could feel the door and even grab onto it; he hadn't felt Tokoyami's head. Applying a bit more force, Izuku managed to phase his hands through the door, and soon he was forcing the rest of his body through, too. The sensation was peculiar—it felt as if he'd swam through steel as opposed to water. He popped out the other side of the door, looking over his astral body wondrously as he realized all the new possibilities his new ability offered him.

Crap, I'm running late...! Izuku thought with a panic as he began to zoom toward the 1-A classroom, mentally chiding himself for getting too wrapped up in experimenting with his new powers. He rounded the corner into the hall of the hero courses and slid to a halt as he saw an odd figure garbed in black with its arms and head covered in white bandages limping toward 1-A. As he floated nearer, Izuku realized with great shock that it was his teacher, Aizawa.

"You're late, Midoriya," Aizawa unexpectedly called out to him, turning his head to stare straight at his spectral student.

Izuku froze, his body wracked with the tingling sense of being watched that he'd felt out in the courtyard minutes prior. "Aizawa-sensei?" Izuku asked aloud. "You can see me?"

"I can," Aizawa responded with a nod, his eyes barely perceptible from beneath the bandages encircling his head. "A gift from Doctor Strange as it were, among a couple other things, as well..."

Izuku focused his astral body, materializing himself before Aizawa. "I guess I should've figured Sensei would improve your eyes somehow since you're going to be my teacher," he said, chuckling. "But still, is it alright for you to be back so soon, Aizawa-sensei? I mean...your injuries."

"I could ask you the same thing," Aizawa said, flipping the questioning onto Izuku entirely as he looked over his student's ghostly appearance from top to bottom.

Izuku tensed and devolved into a mumbling mess, knowing full well Aizawa had a good point and that it was only by his stubborn nature that he was even attending class today. His physical body wouldn't be fully healed until the beginning of next week.

"Regardless, I'm still pleased to see you here today, Midoriya," Aizawa spoke through the bandages wrapped around his head. "It's proof of your conviction. It's irrational to be overwhelmed by fear and despair while attending a hero course. Now don't waste anymore time; let's come inside, there's a lot to cover today."
Izuku nodded and floated toward the door—

"Midoriya," Aizawa said rather exasperatedly. "Don't phase through it."

Izuku chuckled again and rubbed the back of his head, moving aside for Aizawa to open the door for the both of them. Izuku floated in first, and the entire room of quietly murmuring students abruptly erupted into a cacophony of excited exclamations and questions.

"Whoa! Midoriya's back!"

"His Quirk really does let him split his soul from his body, like Doctor Strange said!"

"Your sensei is a really cool guy, Midoriya!"

"Can you tell us how you managed to do that!?"

Izuku shrunk as he was bombarded with question after question, shout after shout, although he knew this was the only response he could've possibly received from his classmates. At least the more quiet or standoffish students, like Todoroki and Bakugo, were keeping their distance.

"Everyone, please, remain calm and return to your seats!" Iida tried in vain to corral everyone back to their desks with his wildly erratic hand motions. "Oh, and I even got them all seated for Midoriya, too..."

"Back to your desks and stop talking," Aizawa announced in an authoritative voice as he strolled in behind Izuku. "If you want to pester Midoriya, do it between classes or during lunch."

"A-Aizawa-sensei!?" Multiple students exclaimed, and suddenly all attention was shifted from Midoriya to their homeroom teacher. It seemed everyone had even less expectations for Aizawa to show up than Izuku that day.

"Sensei, is it alright for you to be back while you're still injured!?" Iida inquired as his once raucous classmates quickly returned to their seats, with Izuku floating as casually as he could, ignoring stares from his friends and glares from Bakugo as best as he could.

"My well-being isn't a priority," Aizawa said flippantly as he shuffled his way to the podium at the front of the class. "More importantly, the fight isn't over yet."

"Fight?" Bakugo perked up as the rest of 1-A tensed considerably.

"The Sports Festival is quickly approaching," Aizawa informed his class, which collectively released an enormous sigh of relief.

"A super normal school event for a change—!" Kirishima exclaimed before being interrupted by Ojiro.

"Hold on," he said, "is it really wise to hold the Sports Festival so soon after villains attacked the school? What if they attack again?

"The school wishes to remove any doubt the public may have after the recent attack," Aizawa explained. "This year's sports festival will very much be a show of strength to the public, that our crisis management system is rock solid. Security will be five times that of previous years. Above that, our sports festival is one of only a few opportunities for heroes-in-training to get a foot in the door for Pro Hero work. It's not something to be cancelled over a few villains."
All the top heroes from around the country will be watching for scouting purposes! Izuku thought. Even heroes, media, and civilians from across the globe pay attention to the U.A Sports Festival!

"The internship opportunities you receive will depend entirely on your performance during the Sports Festival," Aizawa continued. "The better you perform, the more likely an esteemed agency will scout you. And the more esteemed the agency, the more experience you'll receive. If you're serious about going pro, then I expect you all to not slack off during the festival or in the days leading up to it. Understand?"

"Yes, sir!"

"Good," Aizawa mumbled as he turned toward the door to leave for a well-earned nap. "Homeroom's dismissed."

The morning classes zoomed by before Izuku knew it, and not a single one of the students of 1-A had anything on their minds other than the upcoming sports festival. Kirishima was particularly excited, as was Aoyama, who raved to anyone who would listen about how irresistible he'd be to the scouting pros. Tokoyami perched on his desk, watching the excitement buzz about him with a passive look, though he did nod in agreement about the festival's performance.

Uraraka was exuding a surprising aura of competitiveness, approaching each of her classmates and urging them to do well in the festival with an intimidating voice. Some of 1-A had already begun filing out of the class for lunch by the time Uraraka reached Kaminari at his desk, trying to pump him up. His response, however, was less than stellar, as he offered only a weak fist pump and a shaky nod in agreement. His attention—and worries—were currently trapped elsewhere: namely, in 1-A's resident spectre student, Izuku Midoriya. He'd wanted to approach him all day, and it seemed his best time to do so was now, at the beginning of the lunch period.

"Midoriya!" he called out to him with a halfhearted wave.

"Oh, Kaminari?" Izuku asked, stopping at his desk. He'd been floating by on his way to join the self-proclaimed Defects. "What's up?"

Kaminari glanced down at his desk dejectedly before clasping his hands together and bowing his head in apologetic manner. "Please forgive me!" he hissed out quietly.

"Wait, what?" Izuku asked, caught off guard by the sudden show of shame. "Forgive you? For what?"

"For the state that you're in now," Kaminari said. "If it hadn't been for my panicking, you wouldn't have been...you know, stabbed." It was difficult just recalling what they'd been through, let alone saying it aloud.

"Kaminari, it's not your fault!" Izuku replied. "The only ones to blame are Ikiji and those villains he came with. Sometimes...these things just can't be helped, you know? We here to learn how to become heroes, right? And part of becoming a hero is coming to accept things like that."

"Besides, it's not like I haven't been putting my time like this to good use!" Izuku continued with a beaming grin to try and assuage Kaminari's worries. "Got to find a silver lining somewhere, right?"

Kaminari merely stared blankly at Izuku, as if amazed by the sincerity of his astral friend's words. Izuku had been stabbed multiple times due to his clumsiness, but here he was, playing it off with a big, fat grin. He just didn't get the guy at all.
"Well, I already told this to your sensei, but...the least I can do is keep your secret," Kaminari said softly.

Izuku blinked, remembering that Kaminari had indeed been told nearly everything regarding the true nature of his magical powers. His great, beaming grin devolved into a gentle, thankful smile. "Thank you, Kaminari," he said before moving on toward Kirishima and Aoyama. He felt relieved, hearing Kaminari swear to keep his secret. Some truths just couldn't be helped—maybe Kaminari was well on his way to accepting that after all, since he could accept magic.

He hadn't yet spoken with Jiro or Yaoyorozu, and the two girls hadn't said a word to him either, although his vice representative had offered a small smile in greeting when he'd arrived to class that morning. Izuku figured she'd taken his sensei's revelations well, but Jiro...Jiro was a bit of an enigma. She'd been oddly quiet all day. She didn't greet him when he'd arrived, nor did she participate much throughout the morning classes. She hadn't spared him a passing glance all day. Izuku frowned; perhaps he should approach her and see what she thought about Strange and his magic.

"Midoriya!" Aoyama called to him, gesturing for him to come over. He was standing beside Tokoyami and Kirishima, and they looked to be getting ready to leave for the cafeteria. "I know you can't eat, but you'll still join us for a dazzling lunch, right?"

"You guys go on ahead," Kirishima said. "I want to talk to Midoriya real quickly first."

"Very well!" Aoyama said, turning to leave. "Just be quick! Nous sommes très pressés!"

Tokoyami gave Midoriya one last studious glance before giving him a nod of acknowledgement, turning to leave along with Aoyama.

"What'd you want to talk about?" Izuku asked, half worried he had questions regarding his astral state.

"Well, first things first: are you doing okay after what happened at USJ?" Kirishima asked. "I, uh...saw them carrying your body out. I'd heard you'd been stabbed by the same guy who made the place all topsy-turvy.

"Yeah, I'm doing fine, as well as I could, anyway," Izuku replied. "This'll be the only day I come to class like this. My body should be fully healed when classes pick up again after this weekend."

Kirishima nodded his head in understanding and slid a hand through his red, spiky hair. A pregnant pause developed between the two, with Kirishima clearly wanting to ask more questions, and Izuku floating awkwardly in front of him, not feeling intrepid enough to end the conversation or prod his friend into continuing.

"Listen, Midoriya," Kirishima began at last, "about what that mist villain said—"

"Yeah, crazy stuff, right?" Izuku said a bit too forcefully. His grin, too, was forceful and wide. "Villains will say the craziest things to confuse people, won't they?" He craned his head to the side, as if listening for a noise that wasn't actually there. "Hey, I think I hear Aoyama calling for us! We better hurry after them—us Defects should stick together, you know?"

And with that, Izuku took off, zooming out of the classroom to try and catch up with Aoyama and Tokoyami.

"Yeah...we should..." Kirishima muttered as he watched Izuku hastily depart, an uncertain look on his face as he processed his friend's dodgy behavior. But those words were reminiscent to some choice words Doctor Strange had for him after he'd appeared to all of 1-A after USJ.
"I wish to give you both my sincerest thanks for your actions today," Strange addressed the two boys he had stay behind as he sent the rest of 1-A on their way to their classroom. He was addressing Kirishima and Bakugo, and the look on the older man's face was solemn and honest. "While some might criticize your impulsive rush into battle, I at least recognize that your actions could very well have saved my life today."

"Huh?" Kirishima blinked in surprise. Midoriya's teacher was saying they helped save him? How? This whole time he'd been thinking his actions had amounted to nothing!

"Save the accolades," Bakugo snorted. Although it was clear he was interested in what Strange was saying, it didn't seem like he wanted to hear it. Perhaps the incident with Strange's portal had been too aggravating. "I don't need brown-nosing, I just need to not be looked down on again!"

With that, Bakugo stomped past Strange, not giving the man a passing glance as he made his way toward the classroom where the rest of the extras had gathered.

Kirishima arced a brow in confusion; Bakugo was clearly annoyed by this man, but it was a different kind of annoyance than what he displayed with everyone else around him. With everyone else in the class, Bakugo would chew them out as if he thought them beneath him, but with this Doctor Strange figure...it was if his annoyance stemmed from something that ran deeper than he was willing to ever share, like it was something he wanted to forget. Bakugo had known from before U.A that this man was training Midoriya; what could've happened to sow all this tension between Bakugo and Midoriya and his teacher long before they came to U.A?

"Say what you want about his mannerisms," Strange chuckled out, referring to Bakugo, "but if there's one thing that boy has going for him, it's his honesty."

"Y-yeah," Kirishima agreed with a small grin. "Uh, Doctor Strange? How exactly did we save your life?"

"You and Bakugo threw yourselves at the warp gate villain at the last second when they'd assaulted myself and All Might," Strange said. "They hadn't anticipated you, and although your attacks didn't land, your intervening caused the villain with the decaying Quirk to hesitate just briefly enough to make a difference. He chose to attack me, but his slight hesitation bought the arriving heroes enough time to prevent him from laying hands on my person." Strange rooted Kirishima where he stood with a piercing stare. "You and Young Bakugo saved my life, and by extension, Izuku's."

"Midoriya!?" Kirishima exclaimed. "You're saying...I helped save his life, too!?"

"You did, indeed," Strange affirmed. He paused before continuing, "I think you and Izuku would benefit greatly if you stuck together, Kirishima. Pillars of justice stand all the more firmly when they stand side-by-side, after all."

Several minutes had passed since the lunch period began, and Kaminari was currently the only 1-A student still remaining the classroom. He hadn't left his seat all day, not even to stretch between classes. He fidgeted and squirmed incessantly throughout the morning classes, the events of the past week weighing too heavily on his mind for him to pay attention to Present Mic's grammar lectures or the lessons of his other teachers in any substantive way.

This entire school week had been downhill since the Battle Trials, but not even he had expected it to hit rock bottom a mere two days later with the attack on USJ. First, Uraraka, then Jiro and Midoriya...they'd all been hurt because of his powers, and if not his powers, then just...his sheer ineptitude. He didn't understand how Uraraka or Midoriya could forgive him so easily. Jiro seemed
to be the only reasonable one of the three, ignoring him whenever she could, neither talking or even looking in his direction. It was his fault, didn't the other two get that? It was his fault, and his mind was just constantly playing these awful thoughts and memories on repeat, and he couldn't do anything about it because he was to blame! Why didn't Midoriya get that!?

"Maybe I should just drop out of the hero course," Kaminari muttered to himself. "Like I could stand out at the sports festival anyway..."

"Kaminari?"

The blonde snapped his head toward the door. Uraraka was standing in it, watching him intently. Kaminari blinked—he hadn't even heard her open the door and come back inside.

"Kaminari," Uraraka said again, sliding her hands behind her back, "are you...feeling down?"

Kaminari tensed for a moment before his shoulders sagged almost involuntarily. "Y-yeah," he nervously admitted. "It's only been two days since USJ, and then there was what happened during our battle trial...I'm sorry, I guess I've been a bit too obvious with my mood..."

"Yeah, you totally reek of despair," Uraraka said nonchalantly. "But to be honest...I like it." Her little pink tongue poked out of her mouth, rolling across her lips as if tasting some unseen succulence. "It's...sweet..."

Kaminari blinked and glanced up at her, unsure if he'd heard her right. Uraraka had spoken so nonchalantly and looked...off. There was a disquietude where her earlier sense of rivalrous aggression once was, and her round eyes were now narrow and watching him like a hawk.

"Oh, sorry!" Uraraka corrected her posture with a hasty laugh and a wave of her hands. "Bad phrasing! I like it because that means I can help you with it, you know? Isn't that sweet?"

"You want to help?" Kaminari asked. "It's fine, please don't feel like you have to—"

"I have something that will ease your mind," Uraraka said with a sly grin. She flicked her hand, and a dark card with gold writing was suddenly sticking out between her fingers. She slowly walked over to Kaminari's desk and placed it before him.

Kaminari tilted his head until he had a bird's eye view of the card. His eyes scanned row after row of the elegant, gold writing printed on it before looking back up at Uraraka. "An invitation to a U.A Literature Club?" Kaminari asked.

"Correct you are," Uraraka said with a devious smile. "Todoroki asked me to give that to you. He'd noticed your attitude, too, Kaminari. We all have, in fact."

Kaminari slid a hand over his mouth as he peered back down at the card. It had come from Todoroki? He suppose it made sense that he, a recommended student, would be awash with club invitations from other students who may have been fans of his. He felt lousy, then, that a fancy invitation was being wasted on him all because he'd been making it obvious just how miserable he was to everyone around him.

"I appreciate it, Uraraka, I really do, but...is this smart?" he asked. "I mean, afterschool clubs when the sports festival is coming up—"

"Hey, there's no pressure!" Uraraka retorted. "We're just offering this because we want you to feel better, Kaminari! But if you really don't want to get better..." Uraraka slid behind Kaminari's back. "You can always just...quit."
She snaked her hands towards his shoulders, rubbing them sensually. Kaminari almost immediately pressed his hand over his mouth, retching and dry heaving where he sat as every iota of shame and guilt he'd felt since U.A began to forcibly course through his veins and synapses.

"There's no shame in quitting, Kaminari..." Uraraka leaned down and whispered directly into his ear. Her hands trailed down from his shoulders to his arms, pulling up the sleeves of his uniform as her fingers began tracing the length of his brachial artery. "Don't feel like you have to stay in the hero course..."

Kaminari clenched his eyes shut, the haunting memories of this last week flashing uncontrollably through his mind.

"Don't feel like you shouldn't just end it," she hissed, "and give in to that sweet, sweet despair..."

"Kaminari!"

Kaminari collapsed facedown onto his desk but quickly snapped his head back up, his heart thumbing a mile a minute into his throat and his brain pulsing painfully against his cranium. He looked tiredly toward the door, where the voice had called out to him.

It was Uraraka standing in the doorway, staring at him worriedly with those big, round eyes of hers.

Kaminari rubbed the side of his head as he stared up at Uraraka. "W-weren't you just—?"

"Going to lunch?" Uraraka finished what she thought Kaminari was going to ask. "I...may have left my lunch money in my backpack. Don't tell anyone, but I'm a little bit stingy when it comes to buying food...but forget that! How come you're still here in class, Kaminari? You don't intend on skipping lunch, do you?"

"W-wait, hold on—!" Kaminari stammered, but Uraraka was already walking over to his desk.

"Oh, what's this?" she asks, catching sight of the invitation card on Kaminari's desk. She leaned over his desk and read it line by line before Kaminari could say anything, and by the time she was finished, her round eyes were brimming with curiosity.

"A literature club!" She exclaimed. "Here at U.A? That sounds like it could be fun! Do you want to go, Kaminari? I recall from the bus ride the other day that you're pretty well-versed in literature! It says here the first meeting will be after the end of afternoon classes next Monday! Do you want to give it a try?"

Kaminari stared long and tiredly at Uraraka, and he couldn't help but be drawn to the excitement brimming in those round eyes of hers that he'd come to fancy. Her optimism and peppy energy ate through a bit of his melancholy, and he managed to scrounge up the energy for a smile and nod of his head.

"Sure, we can go," Kaminari relented. "I mean...what's the worst that could happen?"

"What are you two still doing in here?" The voice of Aizawa sounded out, and the two students whirled about to see their bandaged homeroom teacher standing in the doorway, peering at them questioningly. "Lunch has already began."

"Sorry, sorry!" Uraraka cried out, rushing to her desk to retrieve her daily allotment of lunch money. "I accidentally left my money behind! Do you eat lunch in here and not the teacher's lounge, Aizawa-sensei?"
"I'm not here for lunch," Aizawa said with a snort. "Cementoss left some papers when he left, and I elected to retrieve them for him. Now go on, it's irrational for heroes-in-training to miss lunch."

"Right, we won't waste anymore time!" Uraraka said, grabbing hold of Kaminari by the wrist and practically dragging him out toward the cafeteria. "Sorry to bother you, Aizawa-sensei!" She turned to Kaminari as they passed the door. "We'll talk about that club after classes today, alright?"

Aizawa paused as he was rifling through the podium for his colleague's papers. A club? he thought. It's never a good idea for hero course students to become engaged in extracurricular activities outside of hero work. They simply haven't the time for it.

The bandaged teacher compiled the papers into a pile, but nearly dropped them as a dark chill swept by his shoulder. Aizawa paused again as the chill settled into an uneasy cold in the classroom, and the man was overcome with the sensation that he was not alone in the classroom, that someone—or something—was watching him intently, yet not daring to approach him again.

He glanced down to ensure that he'd gathered all the papers when a large shadowy mass moved across the room out of the corner of his eye. He jerked his head up—

Nothing.

Aizawa narrowed his already mostly concealed eyes, and instantly thought about tapping into the power Strange had imbued into his eyes. However, right as he considered activating it, the chill in the room seemed to disperse. The presence departed, and Strange no longer felt as if he was being leered at. He recalled the words he'd shared with Strange yesterday in the hospital, the same words that were undoubtedly shared with Nezu and All Might: there was a taint of unknown magical energy among three of his students aside from Midoriya.

He turned to leave the room, but his eyes caught sight of a dark, gold imprinted card on Kaminari's desk. Aizawa moved around the podium and walked over to the boy's desk, picking up the card to read for himself.

"You are hereby invited to attend the first meeting of U.A.'s first horror-themed literature club: Club Fear," Aizawa read aloud. "Hosted by Gen Ed student Kizuka Yuuku of Class 1-D."

Aizawa placed the card back onto Kaminari's desk and instantly wished he'd chosen his words more carefully when he'd broached the subject of the sports festival to his students.

Because maybe the fight really wasn't over yet.
Coming Full Circle

Chapter Summary

Jiro finds herself distracted by the events and revelations of USJ, allowing herself to become vulnerable to a familiar yet malicious figure from her past. 1-A has war declared on it by an aspiring hero, and in an attempt to ease any bad blood before the sports festival, Izuku inadvertently uncovers a heinous plot hatched by several bitter general studies students.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Thinking back to USJ, it was hard not to remember how hectic the scene outside the facility had become once the pros and police had arrived and the remaining villains rounded up and marched past hastily parked ambulances and into the waiting police caravans. It wasn’t so much a maelstrom of chaos—that had been the attack inside the USJ itself—but it had certainly morphed into a maelstrom of damage control, of hurried quick discussions between students and heroes and investigators to ascertain the facts, and of bumping medical personnel, each desperate to get where they needed to be.

A maelstrom of damage control, with Kyoka Jiro and the rest of Class 1-A right at the center of it all.

She’d been separated from the rest of her class, partitioned off into her own group consisting of herself, Yaoyorozu, Kaminari, Doctor Strange, Izuku, and...Izuku’s ‘astral body’. Even after answers had been promised, by both Midoriya and his sensei, she was still waiting tentatively beside what had to be her strangest classmate and his equally enigmatic tutor.

Jiro had her arms wrapped around her abdomen as she waited, gingerly nursing the nasty bruise left behind after that Ikiji prick had kicked her down a literal mountainside. Her arms were littered with scrapes and small blemishes from the tumble, but most of her discomfort and pain unsurprisingly centered around where that kick had landed. She’d only been briefly inspected by medical personnel, too, though Jiro resisted the urge to outwardly complain about that—pretty much everyone around here had their hands full one way or another, so she guessed it wasn’t too strange that some medic wasn’t making her their sole priority.

What she did find strange, however, was how not one medic, police, or pro hero at the scene had bothered to stop and inquire about Izuku’s seemingly lifeless body, or the astral body floating above it. Her not being a medical priority was understandable—she could still walk around well enough without support—but if she hadn’t caught the nearly unperceivable rise and fall of his chest before they’d carried his body to this Doctor Strange fellow, she’d still be thinking that he was dead.

"This way, children," Doctor Strange said at last, motioning for them to follow.

Jiro narrowed her eyes, noticing immediately that Strange was leading them back toward the USJ’s huge doors instead of the buses where the rest of 1-A was being directed toward. She turned her head as she followed Strange, looking back to where the rest of her classmates were gathering. There were looks of confusion and concern thrown her way by Uraraka and Asui. Or perhaps they
were really focusing on Izuku's body, which had begun levitating several feet off the ground courtesy of his green cloak and was floating behind Strange.

That struck Jiro odd as well, watching what anyone would rightfully assume to be a corpse being lifted into the air with zero notice from the bustling crowd of police and pros; not even a sideways glance was thrown in their direction. It was as if they'd simply melted away and were no longer visible to the adults around them. Even Present Mic had walked by, his face contorted with worry, but not once did he even address them.

Jiro glanced over to Yaoyorozu and saw she'd noticed the lack of attention to, her eyes squinted and suspicious, darting from figure to figure that rushed by them without so much as a glance.

Kaminari—much to no one's surprise—didn't seem like he was paying attention. He just looked plain glum.

Strange paused directly before the USJ's large steel doors, his eyes watching the bus being loaded with the rest of the 1-A students intently. Izuku's astral body floated to his side, watching the bus along with him, and remaining just as silent.

"You promised us answers," Jiro bit out impatiently. "How much longer are you going to keep us waiting?"

The roar of the bus engine fired up, indicating the last remaining students had finally boarded, and Strange immediately placed his hands on the USJ doors, slowly creaking the hefty gate open with seemingly very little effort. "Inside," he said.

Jiro scoffed and crossed her arms as she strode in with everyone else. "I hope this isn't going to be a waste of—"

Actually, it was far too late for that, seeing as how her eyes were as wide as they could possibly be.

"—my time...." Jiro finally finished her sentence, her arms dropping to her side as she stared around the room in disbelief. "This...isn't the USJ."

"Correct, Young Jiro," Strange said as he took in the room with a warm smile, as opposed to sharing in Jiro, Yaoyorozu, and Kaminari's looks of shock. "You have all now stepped foot into my personal Sanctum Sanctorum, one of three that protect this planet."

"Sanctum Sanctorum?" Jiro blinked.

"One of three?" Kaminari joined her.

"Protecting this planet?" Yaoyorozu asked.

Strange slowly twirled his hands, a small globe of the Earth appearing before them. Jiro, Kaminari,
and Yaoyorozu all drew near, watching with fascination as three bright orange runes flared above the earth, a fiery veil spreading out and connecting with each other until the entire globe was shielded beneath this energy.

"The Sanctums are ancient sites of power built by sorcerers long ago over great founts of mystical energy," Strange explained. "They each reside within great cities today—the one we are currently in is located in New York."

"New York!?" All three students exclaimed, pulling back from the globe.

"Are you saying you took us from Japan to New York City in the blink of an eye?" Jiro asked warily.

"Oh man, this is all too much..." Kaminari moaned as he strayed from the group, looking wildly around the Sanctum foyer and taking in all the artifacts scattered about.

"And you said the purpose of these 'sanctums' is to protect this planet?" Yaoyorozu asked, staving off her incredulousness with inquisitiveness.

"The Sanctums cover the planet in a protective veil of eldritch energy," Strange continued, "while also housing numerous artifacts that could cause untold levels of destruction if in the wrong hands."

A great scurrying sound drew their attention toward Kaminari, who had hastily backed away from a cauldron of sorts, but not before nearly knocking it off its pedestal. "S-sorry," he muttered as Doctor Strange leveled a wary eye on the boy.

"Doctor," Yaoyorozu spoke with a respectful tone, "what exactly is the veil protecting our planet from?"

Strange offered the girl a small smile—she was handling these revelations better than the other two, and was inquiring to know more to boot, which pleased him greatly. Wong would not be as pleased, but they would cross that bridge when they got there.

"Other dimensional beings who threaten to consume or otherwise destroy our entire universe," Strange responded as coolly as possible. Several dark tendrils suddenly swirled around the conjured globe, eating away at the veil and crushing the world in its coiled grip. The three students each gasped, and Strange abruptly collapsed onto the bottom step of the grand staircase with a soft grunt as the illusion withered away.

Izuku, who had been quiet up until this point, hurriedly floated to Strange's side. "Sensei!"

"I'm fine," Strange panted, reassuring his student with a wave of his hand. "A moment's rest is all I require. Hardly an hour has passed by since those villains retreated and I still feel a tad long-winded."

"Sensei, please," Izuku all but begged, "don't feel as if you have to overdo it for the truth's sake."

Strange let out a tired chuckle. "That wouldn't be very 'plus ultra' of me, would it? And I would hate to undermine those words after aiding All Might they way that I did. There is still something that I can derive enough energy from to show your friends what they need to see."

Jiro scoffed again. "Will we need to open our third eyes for this?"

Strange grinned and outstretched a hand, focusing until a small amulet-like artifact appeared in his grasp with a small flash of light. Strange draped the amulet around his neck and crossed his arms in front of him. "No," he rebuked Jiro, "but I will."
He made a swiping motion with his arms and the eye-shaped amulet abruptly opened up, covering the students’ bodies in a spectacular sheen of emerald light. Jiro instinctively raised her arms to cover her face from the blinding light, only to see the numerous nicks dotting her arm disappearing one after another. A prickling sensation washed across her abdomen, and she turned around, lifting her shirt and sliding a hand across her stomach to inspect it—the ungainly bruise inflicted by Ikiji was now gone. Kaminari and Yaoyorozu were inspecting their bodies in a similar manner, suggesting their wounds had faded away, too.

They all slowly returned their dumbstruck gazes to the now levitating Strange, whose figure was nearly entirely obscured by the amulet’s emerald brightness.

“What you now know to be magic has existed since the dawn of this universe,” Strange spoke, his voice deeper than it was before. “And the Masters of the Mystic Arts that control these energies have existed to defend the world from mystical dangers long before the emergence of Quirks and modern day pro hero.”

The brilliant emerald sheen of the eye shifts into a the shape of a cone, rotating quicker and quicker until a veritable whirlwind of luminous dust is being generated by the amulet. Jiro covers her face again and resists the whirlwind’s pull before snapping up at the sound of splintering and chipping wood. Great schisms began appearing in the Sanctum, cracking the floor open and rupturing the great staircase in two. The lighting in the room grew significantly brighter, with rays and beams leaking through every violent crack that grew along the foyer’s walls and roof, though it no longer seemed natural, but rather otherworldly and surreal.

Jiro’s wide eyes darted from Kaminari to Yaoyorozu, and then to Strange’s obscured figure and the ghostly form Midoriya was currently in. He floated by his teacher’s side passively, and was watching her with an attentive gaze, as if none of this was new to him.

And she was beginning to suspect that was truly the case.

With one final deafening crack, the Sanctum exploded into a storm of wooden splinters and rent metal bits, and the whirlwind sucked Jiro and her classmates up entirely, sending them hurtling through a bright void illuminated by a multitude of celestial torches and great spirals of gas and dust. Jiro sucked in her breath as she spun and soared, unable to even scream as her mind raced to process this roller coaster of revelations, and she could barely make out the bodies of Kaminari and Yaoyorozu as they, too, spun through whatever void Doctor Strange had set them loose through.

Her eyesight seemed to normalize as the energies in her vision ceased their swirling and began to take real, tangible shape, although her body was still gripped by a whirling sensation. The energies partitioned themselves into two halves before her eyes: one side was of the same lively, orange-reddish energy that Strange and Midoriya employed, and the other side was an all-consuming blackness, and both sides ripped at and ate into each other with an incessant hunger.

The two energies shuddered and began to take shapes anew, the dark side into great toothy maws and talons and sharpened tendrils that terrified Jiro beyond belief, while the lighter side morphed into a familiar figure with a curly head of hair. The fiery form of Midoriya drew a majestic blade of flickering flame out of the remaining eldritch energy and launched itself at the dark beasts, smiting and slashing them to pieces with every swing and slice of the sword.

“The practitioners of these ancient arts defend the world from any form of darkness that threatens it,” Strange’s deep voice rang out across the Aether. “And darkness takes many forms.”

Eldritch and shadowy energy alike was suddenly sucked into a single, burning point until all that remained was a molten core of malicious flame, rearing up and spreading across the void until it
towered over Jiro and the others. Three narrow slits appeared on the flaming core, and the rough outline of a twisted visage sprouted amidst the flames. The blazing head erupted with a deep, cackling laughter that reverberated throughout the entirety of the illusion, spewing huge bursts of blinding fire from its jabbering maw. Jiro clenched her eyes shut to block out the head of flame, its bright fires falling closer and closer, its demonic light searing through even her eyelids until—

A great shudder rippled through Jiro's body and she promptly fell to her knees as the brightness and spinning suddenly subsided. The searing dread had all but vanished and she knew the instant she fell that the ground had returned beneath her feet. She cautiously cracked her eyes open, audibly sighing upon realizing she was back in an unaltered Sanctum along with Kaminari and Yaoyorozu, who appeared equally relieved.

"As you can see," Strange said as he floated down to them as he shut closed the eye-shaped amulet, "heroes and sorcerers are not as different as one might think."

Jiro clutched her chest as she processed Strange's words, and the unspoken request he'd given was easy enough to decipher: please don't view Izuku Midoriya as anything other than a hero that uses magic instead of a Quirk.

She raised her head and locked eyes with Izuku, who floated by with a sheepish grin as his classmates all recovered from their ordeal.

Doctor Strange turned his head and stared straight at her. "Any questions, Jiro?"

"...Jiro?"

"—Jiro!"

"Jiro!"

Jiro awoke with a start, gripping the edge of the table she was seated at. Her friends' voices called out to her, and they barely registered in her drowsy ears as the rest of the cafeteria clamored on.

"Are you alright, Jiro?" Ashido asked, placing her pink hand gently atop her shoulder. "Are you feeling well? You've been quiet all day. If it's about what happened at USJ—"

"I'm good, thanks," Jiro said lethargically, yawning loudly. "Merely tired..." She glances down at her tray and realizes she hasn't touched a shred of her food. Her stomach grumbled, but she didn't feel as if she could eat a single bite.

"You know, I just don't feel as if I can eat today," Jiro mumbled, standing up and stretching before grabbing her tray. She turned to rest of her table, offering a weak grin. "I guess I'll see you girls back in class."

She walked her tray to the garbage before exiting the cafeteria, with Ashido, Yaoyorozu, and Hagakure all watching her worriedly. Trudging down the empty hall with slow, sleepy steps, Jiro decided she'd stop by her locker on her way back to class. There was an eerie quiet about the hall, and her footsteps seemed all the more deafening because of it, but Jiro carried on, ignoring the weighty silence until she'd reached her locker. She spun the combination and swung the door open, only to leap back and shriek as a repulsive, writhing swarm of spiders and centipedes came pouring out of her locker. She slipped and fell on her bottom, covering her head with her arms fearfully before the squirming mass suddenly vanished in the blink of an eye.

"Gets you every time, Kyoka," A familiar voice teased.
Jiro glances up at the girl taunting her with bewilderment. She was leaning against the lockers beside Jiro's with a look of amusement plastered all over her face. Her lips were wide and smiling, revealing that her teeth were sharp like Kirishima's. Luscious amber hair rolled down to her shoulders. One hand was on her hip, the other held a soda can, and her eyes narrowed in on Jiro's shocked face, betraying a look of acrimony in her visage.

"Kizuka!" Jiro exclaimed, looking the girl up and down in surprise, honing in on the fresh U.A uniform the girl was wearing. "I-I haven't seen you since—"

"Since Corellia Junior High," Kizuka interrupted her.

"I can't believe you got into U.A, just as you said you would," Jiro said as she picked herself up. "Are you by any chance in—"

"In the other hero class?" Kizuka interrupted her again. "Oh, no, I didn't make it into either class. Turns out my Fearmonger Quirk which conjures people's fears isn't so good against inhuman robots. Not like you Earphone Jack Quirk," she narrowed her eyes even more and slowly crushed the empty soda can in her hand. "That's just fine and dandy against hunks of metal. I guess you were just destined for heroics."

"Speaking of heroics..." Kizuka continued, her lips closing into a sly smile, "Word throughout the school is that the 1-A class got to fight a bunch of villains off campus the other day, and—"

"I, um, would really rather not talk about that," Jiro muttered twirling her earphone jacks around her fingers as she squirmed uncomfortably. "It's still pretty recent, you know? And a lot happened that day..."

"I won't press, so no worries! None at all!" Kizuka said with a wave of her hand. She deftly chucked her soda can into a nearby trashcan before turning to inspect Jiro's locker. The insides were decorated with stickers depicting a variety of musical instruments, as well as a poster for a concert and old, written out lyrics taped to the back and sides.

"Why, Jiro!" Kizuka said in a sickeningly sweet tone. "What's with this locker of yours? It's filled with nothing but music memorabilia. There's not a shred of anything hero-related in here at all!"

"I-it's just stickers and old stuff of mine..." Jiro offered a meager defense.

"You're not still holding onto any of your old musical aspirations, are you?" Kizuka asked. She reached out and slowly peeled a sticker of a guitar off the inside of her locker door. "After all, you can't be a hero and a musician..."

Jiro shivered where she stood, her eyes averted away from her old junior high companion as the girl's words drifted into and languished in her ears. Her surprise had quickly given way to uneasiness, and a draining sensation weighed down on her shoulders, compounding her current drowsiness.

"It's best that you forget about this music nonsense, Jiro," Kizuka spoke softly as she continued to peel the stickers out of the locker. "You did chose to enter the hero course after all, and a hero always needs to stick by their choices."

"Yeah..." Jiro quietly agreed.

"Ah, but I don't blame you for thinking you could have the best of both worlds," Kizuka said as she slowly ripped the concert poster down, tearing her sharp fingers through the paper. "It must be nice, having supportive parents that have your back no matter what and plenty of paths to choose from..."
Kizuka's countenance briefly slipped into one of jaded bitterness. "I wish the same could be true for myself..."

That twisted, bitter look was swiftly replaced by a mask of cheeriness, and Jiro, in her sheer discomfort, was none the wiser. Kizuka laughed off the air of uneasiness surrounding them, but was silently relishing in Jiro's anxiety.

"Just think of this as me guiding you along your path to becoming a true hero!" Kizuka laughed as she scrunched up the stickers and papers in her hand, crushing Jiro's childhood aspirations into a ball of trash. "I'm glad I could help, especially since we fell out of contact during our last year of Junior High."

"Actually," she produced a dark card out of her pocket and handed it to Jiro, "since we haven't talked in awhile, how about you come to the first meeting of a club I got permission from the school to create?"

Jiro read the card and tensed even further. A horror-based club? Oh no, she didn't do anything related to horror.

"O-oh, that's nice of you, Kizuka, but you see—"

She froze as a dark chill descended upon her, trapping her in a paralyzing grip that numbed every vein in her body and crept into her mind.

Kizuka laughed off her pitiful attempt to come up with an excuse. "It's just a book club, silly!" She leaned in close, admiring the lull Jiro was forced into by the shadowy ally only she could see. She smiled devilishly. "What could go wrong? You'll definitely come to the first meeting come Monday, right?"

Jiro nodded dumbly, not uttering a single sound.

"Good," Kizuka whispered, tossing the crushed ball of Jiro's dreams into the trash bin. "You can go back to class now."

The shadow released Jiro's body and mind and vanished, and the girls stared at one another for a long moment, one incredulous while the other grinned. Finally, Jiro offered a shaky nod and turned around, walking back to class with the same slow steps as when she came to her locker.

"See you then, Jiro," Kizuka whispered quietly to herself. "We have so much to catch up on."

"What the heck!?!" Uraraka exclaimed as she slid open 1-A's classroom door, only to be met with a crowd of inquisitive students blocking the way out. Afternoon classes had just ended, and a bunch of students from other classes had been the last thing any of the 1-A heroes-in-training were expecting.

Izuku, floating above his desk and conversing with Aoyama and Tokoyami, was immediately put on edge. He'd gotten a few curious stares when he attended lunch with his friends, but he suspected it was mostly because he was out of his U.A uniform rather than being in an incorporeal form.

This, however, was much different—everyone gathered outside the room were casting inquisitive stares into the room, and more than a few seemed angry. He considered going invisible to avoid their gazes.

"What business do you all have with 1-A?" Iida demanded before being pushed aside by Bakugo.
"They're here to scout out the competition, Glasses," Bakugo said, pointedly ignoring the cry of indignation from Iida as he stomped toward the doorway. "Even though there's no point for any of you extras to scout me out, since none of you stand a chance against me."

"I can't speak for anyone else here, but I came to get a glimpse of the 'famous' Class 1-A," a lazy voice called out through the crowd. A crop of wild, indigo hair pushed its way to the front, and a young man with dark, half-closed eyes was soon standing before Bakugo, and he didn't appear even the least bit intimidated by him. "Is everyone in the hero course an arrogant little brat like you?"

Bakugo seethed with unrepentant anger as the students behind him all shook their heads vehemently.

"Seeing the hero course act like this sure does make me feel disillusioned..." the newcomer said as he rubbed the back of his head, leveling his gaze directly at Bakugo. "Did you know that there are plenty of students that wound up stuck in general studies because they didn't excel during the entrance exam? But the school still gave us a chance. General Studies students that perform well during the U.A Sports Festival can be moved into the hero course if they so desire. Which means any hero course student that performs poorly...can also be moved out to make room."

The entirety of 1-A went rigid at the thought of being forcibly dropped out of the hero course so soon after the first term began.

The indigo-haired boy narrowed his eyes. "Like I said, I can't speak for anyone else here," he said. "They could be here to scout out the enemy, but me? I came to declare war on you guys."

"I'm going to win, that's what I'm going to do, Shitty Hair!" Bakugo yelled back. "Nothing matters so long as you rise to the top!"

"That's...such a manly attitude!" Kirishima quickly turned a 180 while Ashido smacked him across the shoulder, rolling her eyes.

"Enjoy your seat while you still can, Bakugo," the lazy-eyed boy said as the blonde huffed off. "Because you're just keeping it warm for me."

With that, he stalked out of sight as well, and the majority of the crowd was soon dispersing along with him.

The tingly sensation of being watched overcame Izuku, and he glanced out to the hall again. A few students still remained to observe 1-A, and the boy who'd been standing behind Shinso while he gave his war declaration was glaring directly at him. At him, not through him. The boy was roughly his height, with dark hair and long bangs that drooped down and covered his right eye. That sole, visible eye, however, was glaring at Izuku with the intensity of ten eyes, and only after a couple more minutes had passed did he finally depart. Izuku sighed with relief; he didn't know what that was all about, but he honestly felt marked because of Bakugo's behavior.

I definitely agree with Kacchan's sentiment, though, Izuku thought. Everyone's going to be giving it their all during the festival, and I'm definitely going to, as well! Only by aiming for the top will I have any chance of winning! I want to prove that a sorcerer can become a hero after all! Still, I don't like spreading any bad blood when the festival's still two weeks away, Izuku continued
thinking. *That guy with the wild, purple hair...maybe I can find him and set the record straight so he doesn't think everyone in the hero course is like Kacchan.*

With classes for the day officially over, and after saying his goodbyes to his friends and acquaintances in class (Iida promised to share notes with him when he returned in his physical body after the weekend), Izuku took off down the general studies hall to look for the boy who had declared war on the hero course.

The halls became empty very quickly as the students all rushed home for the weekend. Still, Izuku seemed to have located his target, as he spotted those tufts of messy, indigo hair cross the hall from the corner of his vision and into one of the classrooms.

Izuku floated down the hall toward the room labeled 1-D, but came to a halt as the sounds of shouting and raised voices echoed from behind the door. Cautiously, Izuku made sure he was totally invisible before forcibly phasing his head through the wall beside the door, peering in. The boy he was looking for was there with three other U.A students, and the other student that he immediately recognized was the dark haired boy that had been glaring at him.

"I saw him, Hyou!" Said boy seethed with anger as he gripped a desk, and for a second it looked as if he was going to pick it up and fling it across the room. "There was a guy in the hero course who had the exact same Quirk as me!"

"Ryou, calm yourself!" The boy beside him said, and Izuku was immediately struck by the similarities both boys shared with one another. They were undoubtedly twins, though the second boy—Hyou—had his long, dark hair covering his left eye instead of his right.

The purple-haired boy Izuku had sought out watched Ryou's outburst with little more than an impassive stare, seemingly unimpressed by the tantrum unfolding before him.

"Hyou, Ryou, please," the other figure in the room—a girl with shoulder-length amber hair and wicked sharp teeth—said as she moved off a desk. "Shinso is our guest, so behave yourselves."

"I don't have all day, Kizuka," the boy—Shinso—said. "Hurry up and tell me what you want."

Kizuka giggled mischievously, wagging her finger at Shinso. "Ah-ah, don't be like that! I asked you here because I heard of your little declaration of war on the hero course, and I was mightily impressed. How about you join my Club Fear—"

"Not interested," Shinso said as he spun on his heel, walking away from her. "I have a sports festival to prepare for. This could be my only chance at getting into the hero course."

"You seem pretty sure about that," Kizuka said, grinning. "But why wait until the sports festival to get into the hero course?"

Shinso paused as she spoke, his hands lingering on the doorknob. Slowly, he looked back to Kizuka, silently pressing her to continue.

"Shinso, why are you putting all your hopes in the sports festival?" Kizuka asked with a wily smirk. "You're just like us: general studies students who got screwed over by the entrance exam." She motioned to the twins, who'd fallen silent and sullen. "All four of us have Quirks that are useless for fighting against robots. We were doomed to fail before we even knew what we were up against. It's as if the school knew that a group of students with 'evil Quirks' were going to try out for the hero course this year."
Shinso turned back around to face her, his visage stern and unreadable, though he was still listening, and so Kizuka continued, wedging her hooks in him further. It was clear her ‘evil Quirk’ comment had pushed a button in him.

"We're fed up with being told we can't be heroes because of our Quirks!" Kizuka exclaimed. "We're fed up with having the deck stacked against us from the very start! How will the sports festival be any different? How can the school guarantee a way in for us when they closed the door in our faces with the entrance exam!?"

Shinso was looking down at the ground, clearly mulling Kizuka's words over.

Izuku, too, pondered over what Kizuka was saying. Chances to become a pro hero were already limited as it was, and the odds became slimmer still if one failed the entrance exam. Sure, there were other hero schools one could attend, but competition was surely fierce and unforgiving.

And Izuku knew better than anyone that all men were not created equal. Just one thing confused him, though—what had she meant when she said 'evil Quirks'?

"Fine, I'll join your little club," Shinso said at last. "On one condition: you won't force me to use my Quirk on anyone. Now, are you going to tell me what you're planning?"

Kizuka snickered, covering her sharp teeth with a palm. "I knew you'd agree—"

"Don't push it," Shinso retorted. "Just answer the question."

"Geez, so demanding!" Kizuka laughed him off. "To put it simply...you're a dreamer, just like we are. And, just like us, you've probably long since realized that sometimes the only way to achieve one's dreams...is to stomp out the dreams of those in our way. We're going to clear some spaces in the hero course long before the sports festival even begins."

"That's not putting it simply," Shinso said wearily.

"We're going to force some hero course students to drop out," Kizuka continued. "And us four will fill in in to make up the gap left behind. The school won't wait until the festival to fill those slots; they want to have a strong showing for the public in the wake of the attack on the USJ earlier this week. And then, when the festival does roll around, we'll show the entire world how much more we deserved to be in the hero course than that Todoroki brat or any of the other losers I've selected."

"And how will you guarantee that the four of us alone get chosen to fill in those slots?" Shinso pressed on.

"I think I've told you more than enough if you're serious about getting on board with our plan," Kizuka responded slyly. "You just leave the rest to me."

Izuku was stunned—shaking—from what he just heard. He knew that tensions between hero course and general studies students were high if today was any indication, but for there to be such bitterness that students would conspire to sabotage one another...!

"We just need to first help a certain benefactor of mine if our plan is to succeed," Kizuka said.

"Benefactor?" Shinso asked suspiciously. "Who?"

"My benefactor is the only one who could support dreamers like the four of us," Kizuka said as she reached into her bag. She pulled her hand out, revealing to Shinso a musty red tome in her grasp. "The King of Dreams."
Izuku pulled himself back out of the wall and clamped a hand over his mouth, making doubly sure no one heard him yell and became aware of his astral presence. He quickly composed himself and forced his head back through the wall, staring at Kizuka's book in astonishment as she opened it, displaying its contents for Shinso to see.

The wordless red leather covering the pages was not nearly as brilliant as he remembered. Its spine was worn and wrinkled, and the few pages Kizuka had shown off had waterlogged blots obscuring some of the Sanskrit contents found within.

But Izuku knew. There was no doubt.

It was the exact same tome he'd stolen from Doctor Strange's Sanctum the day his hands were crushed.

Chapter End Notes

And yes, that is the same book that Izuku stole from the Sanctum all the way back in Chapter One! I didn't title this chapter 'Coming Full Circle' for no reason!
Kizuka Yuuku had only ever desired two things as a child: that she would gain a Quirk that she could proudly call her own, and the ability to use said Quirk as freely as possible, unrestrained by society's regulations. Her inability to compromise and her continued defiance ultimately led her down a path of bitterness and spite, resulting in her meeting with the King of Dreams...

There were many milestones human beings celebrated throughout their lives upon reaching them. Some considered their sixteenth birthday, when they received that memorable first car from their parents, to be a significant one. Others thought their eighteenth year to one, when they took their first real steps into legal adulthood. Others of a more carousing variety thought their 21st year to be more memorable, when they would no longer have to rely on older companions to buy them alcohol. Milestones existed for older people as well, such as their fiftieth 'half-century' milestone or the year when they officially retired. Each of these could be considered important achievements in any human life, for any number of reasons, too. They were proof of progress, as it were, evidence of any individual person's growth and integration into society.

But none of these were the first milestone that humans celebrated. And many would also say none of these were the most important.

'Quirk Parties', as they would come to be called, became cornerstone events implemented by preschools and daycares all across the world once the regulation of powers were fully instituted. An entire day devoted to one or more children at any given institution in preparation for the special ability fate and genetics would gift them with.

As one could imagine, a sizeable chunk of these Quirk Parties ended in disappointment: in the present day, 80% of the world's population possessed a Quirk, which still meant that one out of five children would be diagnosed Quirkless, rendered wanting of a unique power to call their own.

But even for those 80% who did develop their Quirks as expected, a Quirk Party was still not guaranteed to end in satisfaction or with a shower of accolades or promises of a bright future to come.

Sometimes...they ended in terror. Such was the case of one Kizuka Yuuku.

Being only four years old then, Kizuka didn't properly recognize the gradual transition of her Quirk Party from anticipation to uneasiness, and then uneasiness to outright dread.

But she did know when the straw broke the camel's back. Everyone knew—it was when the first bloodcurdling screams shattered the illusion of elation permeating the preschool.

"Alright, Kizuka!" her squirrel-faced preschool teacher exclaimed, rallying all the children toward
the main table where the birthday cake was situated. "Let's top your party off with a slice of cake!"

Most of the children, Kizuka included, remained ecstatic as they raced toward the table. A few, however, were less inclined to join them and seemed strangely quieter than the other students. No one would know until the day's aftermath, not even Kizuka herself, that they'd already been subjected to her budding Quirk.

"Kizuka, you know what to do, right?" The teacher said softly as she placed the cake directly before the birthday girl, candles aglow and flickering brightly. "Close your eyes, make a wish, and blow out the candles!"

Kizuka nodded her head fervently, knowing immediately what she wanted to wish for. She was hardly the oldest child in her preschool group, and plenty of the other children had already gone through their Quirk Parties, and those who weren't already born with their powers developed their Quirks shortly before, during, or after them. Some were mundane—but still cool—Mutant-type Quirks; other kids could transform into different animals; others still showed they'd inherited various Emitter-type Quirks from their parents.

Despite the variety in powers they'd received, Kizuka noticed one thing connecting them all together: the teachers had shown them all encouragement when it came to their Quirks, urging them to learn how to wield them correctly, and aside from the occasional scolding, the kids used their Quirks freely if not cautiously while under their care. To Kizuka, all she saw was the sense of freedom she believed came with one's Quirk. And that was her wish: she wished to use her Quirk as freely as her peers were able to. She was entitled to as much as they were, wasn't she?

And so she made her wish, running it through her tiny little head over and over again. Except she didn't close her eyes. She instead looked over the cake and candles, at one of the boys sitting across from her. It wasn't something she could describe in exquisite detail at just four years old, but she wasn't looking at him—she was looking into him. The unraveling of her party was as subconscious as it was swift. She merely grasped at the image that appeared before her, pulling it to the surface with typical child-like curiosity—

And then the other shoe dropped.

The boy erupted into bone-chilling screams, flinging himself from the table and swatting his arms wildly at things unseen to everyone else. The teachers all rushed to him in an instant, and the cheerful talk of the rest of the children abruptly dropped into a dreadful quiet as the scene unfolded.

Kizuka's eyes trailed up to her head teacher, and again, she inadvertently flipped her mind open like a picture book, pulling up any images she could find. This one was of snakes—she liked snakes. Like the boy, the squirrel-faced teacher shrieked and recoiled away from everyone else, leaping atop a desk and clawing at the wall in a vain attempt to escape something that wasn't really there.

The children's quiet dread devolved into open whimpering and uncomfortable cries. Their whines only drew Kizuka's attention to them, and she peeled their minds open one page at a time, dredging up their worst fears without even fully realizing the consequences of her actions. One by one the children either fell to the ground screaming or were racing around the room in a frenzy. The few adults present fared little better, as they, too, were subjected to the budding power of Kizuka's newfound Quirk. Tables and chairs were flung onto their sides, school supplies were launched the room with reckless abandon, and the cake—the birthday cake placed right before an unflinching Kizuka—was smushed long before she could blow out the candles, now extinguished after being smothered into the black frosting by a fearful child.

Amidst all this chaos, Kizuka remained where she sat, silently observing the anarchy unfolding
around her. By now, she knew—this was her Quirk. This was her Quirk. And she was excited at the prospect of getting to use such an exciting power whenever she pleased as her classmates could with theirs.

And so, among the cacophony of screams and weeping, Kizuka Yuuku silently smiled.

"This is unprecedented for this school!" The squirrel-faced teacher said in a fierce yet hushed tone to Kizuka's parents who hastily arrived when they received news of what had happened regarding their daughter.

Said daughter was sitting in the next room over, kicking her legs as she half-listened in on the emergency parent-teacher meeting and half-watched a television report regarding All Might that was being shown on the television across from her.

"You all have nothing to fear!" All Might exclaimed as he emerged from a chaotic scene of smoke and fire with multiple civilians on his back and under his mighty arms. "Because I am here!"

With the glint of his trademark smile capping off his heroic rescue, Kizuka burgeoned with excitement. She'd looked up to All Might for as long as her young mind could remember, watching gleefully as All Might used his powers day in and day out to rescue people and beat up villains.

With overwhelming public and government support, All Might used his Quirk constantly. Freely.

The life of a Pro Hero quickly became the ultimate form of freedom in the young Kizuka's mind. To be able to use one's Quirk with that level of public encouragement...that was her dream! To live life as a hero was to live life as a free person!

Her wild, childish aspirations were interrupted by a clearing of her father's throat, and Kizuka turned toward her parents, with her teacher standing behind them, looking down at Kizuka fearfully.

"Kizuka," her father spoke gently, kneeling down to her level, "do you understand what happened today? Do you understand what you did?"

"Yes, daddy!" Kizuka responded cheerfully, something none of the adults had been expecting. "Everyone got to see my Quirk today! It was super exciting!"

"N-no, Kizuka," her father said in an exasperated voice, "listen...you can't do what you did today ever again."

Kizuka's innocent, bubbly smile slowly dropped, replaced by a look of confusion and distress.

"You can't ever use your Quirk again."

Kizuka just couldn't understand. She didn't understand the severity of her actions the day when she turned four, and that lack of understanding persisted for the following two years, culminating in what would be the last time she would ever see her parents again.

Again, her parents were in a meeting room of sorts conversing with a suited, bespectacled man. Her father maintained a calm, collected visage, but her mother was openly distraught, weeping into her sleeve. The weeping, much to Kizuka's annoyance, was highly distracting, as she was once again one room over, half-listening in on their conversation and half-watching yet another news report about heroes, this time about the exploits of Endeavor.
"I understand this must be a difficult decision—" the suited man whispered.

"We just can't—" Kizuka's mother sobbed. "She's too much—"

"We've tried our best, but—" her father muttered dejectedly. "—nothing more we can do. Her Quirk is just—"

"I understand," the mystery man said. A sliding of papers. A clicking of pens. The deed was done.

"Yuuku?"

Kizuka looked up from the television to see the suited man approaching her with a cautious smile. He reached out to her with his hand, and his eyes were shielded behind black lenses. She almost instinctively peered into his mind, drawing forth whatever images and creatures appeared before her, but the man did not flinch in the slightest, confusing her greatly.

"Follow me, child," he said, and he turned around once her hand was in his. Kizuka looked up at the man curiously as he led her down the hall, one hand gripping hers and the other clutching both a small stack of papers and a cane, which he tapped against the ground with each step he took. She turned back toward the conference room, but her parents were nowhere to be seen.

The man led her out of that smaller office building and into a quaintly stylized garden before a much bigger building, spanning several floors high and many rooms across. To Kizuka, it was grander than the building they were just in, but it also seemed much older. There were various cracks in the brickwork, the ceiling seemed one storm away from collapsing, and not a single window wasn't caked with dirt and grime.

"Sir?" She asked, tugging at the bespectacled man's hand. "Where are we going?"

"I'm...taking you to your new home," the man replied guardedly.

It would take about two weeks for young Kizuka to understand and come to terms with the fact that this was a residential home for orphans or surrendered and troubled children with nowhere else to go. Her parents had surrendered her to the State.

Settling in to her new home was done out of necessity, not desire. And the one thing that remained constant in Kizuka's life that she despised more than anything was the continued abhorrence of her Quirk by the children and adults around her, and the continued demands that she cease using it no matter what.

Of course, these demands that had been met with childish resistance were now met with open resentment and defiance, and Kizuka continued to use her Quirk on anyone she pleased. It wasn't as if she had no control over what was once regarded as a terrifying, unstable Quirk; quite the opposite! Her years of studiously tormenting the other children allowed to reach an even deeper understanding of her powers.

"Interesting..." she muttered as she flipped through another of the children's minds. She had to make the most of every opportunity she had before they inevitably ran crying to one of the adults and she was punished by the blind man. Her powers didn't work on the blind man. It was infuriating. She hated him more than anyone else in the home.

Kizuka had come to name her Quirk Fearmonger, as it allowed her to peer into people's minds, see their fears, and conjure said fears before them as illusions only they could see.
That's right—fears. Kizuka came to understand fairly early on, much to her delight, that her powers didn't simply let her see one's biggest fear—she could see all of them, and pick and choose which ones to show before her victims at her leisure.

And what's more, she liked it. *Enjoyed* it even. And why shouldn't she? This was her Quirk, wasn't it? Quirks were never meant to be feared, they were meant to be used and embraced by everyone. Wasn't that what her parents and preschool teachers had always been prattling on about when she was younger, how one's Quirk made everyone unique and special in their own way?

So why was she any different? None of the other children were punished with solitary confinement in a dim, cramped room for openly using their Quirks. None of them were spanked or yelled at or cursed at or humiliated by any of the adults to the extent she was. None of the other kids were ostracized by their peers, avoided like a walking, breathing *plague* to be ridiculed and insulted and demeaned behind her backs.

None of the other kids were told their Quirk was 'evil'.

Of course, this mutual disdain only caused kids to provoke Kizuka from a distance, which in turn caused Kizuka to render them screaming and crying with her powers, which in turn ended with her in isolation for the evening with minimal dinner portions and a severe scolding or spanking.

And so, the childish resistance that grew into open defiance evolved once more into a simmering hatred for everyone around her in the home, adult and child alike.

*How dare they play with their Quirks without so much as a care in the world,* Kizuka would rage to herself night after night while in isolation. *How dare anyone use their Quirks freely...while I get stifled again and again!*

Noxiously enough, Kizuka's hatred alone was not was sustained her and kept her going; it was her hatred combined with her admiration for All Might and Hero Society. She never forgot her feelings of wonderment at seeing All Might, Endeavor, and numerous other heroes going out and using their Quirks against villains freely, all with the peoples' support to boot. It was a level of freedom she once envied, but now craved and openly hungered for.

She swore every evening that she was put into isolation that she would become a hero. And she would tolerate people obstructing her dream no more.

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Kizuka remained stagnant but persistent during her years staying at the residential home, clinging to her dream almost vainly until she reached her junior high years.

Events there took an...interesting turn, to say the least.

The children of the residential home had options when it came to public education. They could choose which junior high to attend so long as it was within proximity to their residence, or opt for a basic, online education. After some deliberation, Kizuka wound up attending Corellia Junior High over Aldera Junior High.

Unfortunately, she wasn't the only person from the residential home attending Corellia. And with them came the gossip, and with the gossip came her continued ostracization and isolation, which only served to fuel her hatred.

"Stay away from that girl—"

"She forces you to see your fears—"
"She has an evil Quirk—"

That last one was always enough to stoke her anger and cause her to lash out in retaliation. She was careless at first, lashing out at other children from the residential home who were already familiar with her and her tactics. This resulted in her ending up before her teachers and the principal on numerous occasions. As the months went on, Kizuka began to torment the other students in a more calculated manner, preferring to target those who didn't live at the same residential home as she did. She also began to choose more subtle fears, which didn't frequently result in her targets leaping up and yelling out in fright. In doing this, Kizuka could always hide behind a shield a plausible deniability, with each incident brought to a teacher's attention being forcibly dismissed as a 'he said, she said' scenario.

But that all changed during her second year at Corellia Junior High, when she met a girl by the name of Kyoka Jiro.

Kizuka hadn't thought of her at first—just a petite, quiet girl with elongated earphone jacks on her ears who didn't look too impressive in any significant manner. She'd mindlessly assaulted her mind with her subtle dislike of spiders and went on her way during lunch one day, preparing her usual excuse for when the incident was inevitably brought to teacher's attention.

Except it never came.

All Kizuka had to show for her deed was an uneasy wave from Jiro the next morning. No tears. No bitterness. No scolding from the teacher. No scornful gossip from the girl with the earphone jacks.

Kizuka was far beyond confused; she was outright floored. She didn't know what to think, didn't know what to feel, didn't even know what there was to understand. She found herself mulling over the lack of admonition the next day and the day after, wondering why Jiro never ran to a teacher to relay the uncomfortable experience Kizuka had surely forced her to endure. It was only spiders and bats she'd forced Jiro to see—things plenty of people feared to some small degree—and not what Jiro feared most, but she was confused by the lack of animosity nonetheless.

"Hey."

It was an awkward voice, and a quiet one to boot, but it was more than enough to snap Kizuka out of her confused musings. She glanced up and saw Jiro standing beside her desk, eyes averted as she twirled one of her fingers around an earphone jack uneasily.

Kizuka instantly narrowed her eyes in suspicion. "What?" she ground out a bit more forcefully than she probably should have.

"I hear what most everyone says about you," Jiro said quieter still. "Hard for me not to with my Quirk and whatnot...I just want you to know I'm not upset about what happened a couple days ago, alright?"

"...What?" Kizuka blinked as Jiro merely offered another uneasy wave and walked back to her desk and other friends.

Perhaps in another world, this incident proved crucial in steering Kizuka away from a hate-fueled fate. Perhaps it led her to appreciate the intricacies of proper Quirk usage and believe more firmly in regulation over rampant freedom. Perhaps it led her to walk a more proper path toward becoming a hero.

This was not that world.
In this world, as Jiro walked away from Kizuka to rejoin her friends, the Fearmonger girl instead narrowed her eyes in disdain, deciding then that Jiro was actually looking down at her, as if she wasn't even worth scorning.

In this world, Kyoka Jiro was not someone to be made into a friend; here, she was made into a target, all the more proper since Kizuka now figured she wouldn't rat her out like the other students would, and seemed intent on taking her slight, occasional torments in stride. Their relationship became all the more toxic as their second Junior High year dragged on, and Kizuka got to learn more about Jiro through her frequent eavesdropping.

"Wow, you're so skilled with musical instruments, Kyoka!" One of her insignificant friends would rain down praise on the musically gifted girl whenever she could.

"You'll definitely become a great musician or singer like your parents are," Another friend would pipe in, adding to Jiro's bashfulness.

"Y-yeah, but..." Jiro muttered, softly tapping both ends of her earphone jacks together.

"What is it?" Her friends asked simultaneously.

"I don't know if I want to become a musician or a singer after school..." Jiro confided to her friends as Kizuka sat nearby, listening in. "I...I really want to go to U.A after this and become a Pro Hero."

Kizuka nearly dropped her belongings as Jiro's friends all gawked over her scandalously, erupting into an endless procession of questions.

"What did your parents say?" One friend asked.

"They...said they'd support my decision no matter what," Jiro said, trailing her gaze to the floor. "They said that, but...I just can't help but feel I'd be disappointing them if I take the path I want."

Ah. Kizuka blinked in understanding. That explained Jiro's biggest fear: above the base, primal fears she'd used to torment her and the personal aversions to things such as nudity, the thing she feared above all else was disappointing her parents.

Her parents, which supported her decision no matter what. Kizuka broiled with envy: Jiro had a Quirk she wasn't shamed for and parents that hadn't abandoned her but instead supported her no matter what and wanted her to live freely. She had paths aplenty open to her.

The broiling envy burned over into a bubbling hate. She wanted to become a hero, live freely like a hero. More than anything, this is what she desired most.

If that earphone jacked loser wanted to become a hero, then she would strive towards it with even more passion than before.

"Kizuka, you...can't be serious."

It was just her and her homeroom teacher, sitting across from one another in a bleak conference room. It was just an informal parent-teacher meeting before the second term began (student-meeting
in her case), and official forms wouldn't be given out at Corellia until spring of next year, but it was still an opportunity for teachers to learn what their students were seeking for the future, and to help them wherever possible.

But this...

"I want to go to U.A," Kizuka repeated herself. "I want to become a Pro Hero."

"Kizuka, please be serious about this—" the teacher set his spectacles down. He kept his eyes closed, as all the teachers did whenever they spoke with her. He sighed in exasperation, but the girl would hear none of it.

"I AM being serious!" Kizuka screamed, rising to her feet in a rush of anger. "I WILL become a hero with my Quirk! And then I'll—"

"You stupid, stupid girl!" The teacher arose in an equally fierce show of anger, rising to his feet and towering over Kizuka, forcing the girl to step back in surprise. "All these years, and you still don't understand!? You cannot become a hero with that...that...evil Quirk of yours!"

The room fell deadly silent aside from the tense pants of teacher and student. Kizuka glared at the man furiously, sifting through layer after layer of his mind and conjuring absolutely every fear she could find, but...with his eyes kept firmly closed, he couldn't see any of it.

Her visage of fury became blurred behind a sudden veil of heavy tears. Kizuka uttered a sharp gasp as her body, mind, and spirit became wracked in a surge of weakness. She turned tail and fled the office without looking back, the teacher calling out to her regretfully. But she didn't—couldn't—hear any more of what he had to say, he was just another person who put her and her dreams down because of her Quirk, and she just had to run, run, keep running!

She burst forth through the front school doors into a haze of countless rain droplets, which quickly obfuscated her form from anyone who might've tried stopping her from fleeing the school. She could vaguely hear her name being called from the building as she sprinted from it, and she drowned it out beneath the sound of the rumbling storm overhead and the panicked pulsing heartbeats pounding against her sternum. Kizuka kept her face raised as she dashed through the rain, allowing all the water droplets that splashed against her face to mask her bitter tears.

I do not have an evil Quirk! Kizuka screamed in her head as she ran. I do NOT have an evil Quirk!

She ran with no destination in mind, and certainly no desire to stop if her legs could still move, running long after her clothes were thoroughly soaked and her hair became heavier on her head, condensing into damp, matted threads that clung to her shoulders and face.

Kizuka only gave pause as she crossed a small bridge that was adjacent to a vaguely familiar neighborhood park, one which she recalled visiting once or twice when she was younger. It was barren and empty, devoid of any activity due to the storm. She leaned against the bridge's railing as she caught her breath, glancing down at the turbulent waters below. The muddied banks of what was usually a calm and quiet creek appeared widened and gouged by the rapid floodwaters, rising until they threatened to spill over into the park itself. Kizuka leaned over the railing, staring into the torrent as the rain beat down on her body. It did nothing to calm her—if anything, the turbulence only resonated with her anger and bitterness.

The sound of a siren blaring out across the deserted streets stirred her into a second wind, prompting her to run off the bridge and dart across the road into the woods downstream from the park. She initially suspected that it was the police coming to snatch her out of her truancy and bring her back to
the school, but as she peered out from behind a copse of trees, she saw that the sirens were emanating from an ambulance pulling into the park, and not a police cruiser.

Still, she did not feel overly relieved. It may have been only an ambulance, but Kizuka was not willing to stick around to see if any police would follow. She turned and fled the scene, following the flooded creek and trying to get as far away from the park as possible.

She didn't want to be around anyone right now.

She ran along the muddy banks until her second wind expired, collapsing onto her hands and knees as she caught her breath. Even her anger couldn't keep her going; it inevitably morphed into a vitriolic lethargy, leaving her drained in the mud.

Kizuka just felt so damn tired—tired of the admonitions, the scathing words, the isolation, the trampling of her dreams. She slipped into a sudden case of the heaves, clutching her chest as she fell onto her side, wallowing in the mud as her body tried vainly to wretch. What was she even trying to vomit up? Was her body just trying to expunge itself of its despair? Her eyelids fell, and even in her vivid imagination, her dreams seemed no closer than they were in reality.

"Child..."

The voice induced a spasm that jolted Kizuka back into consciousness, and she jumped to her feet, glancing around wildly for the voice she swore she heard. An imperceptible tug roped itself around her brain, compelling her to approach the river's edge.

"Come closer, child..."

Confused but curious, Kizuka edged herself to river's edge, unable to explain what was compelling her to seek out this soundless voice echoing in her head. Inching as close as she could, Kizuka peered down the muddy bank, scanning it until she caught sight of a flash of red jutting out of the embankment.

She reached out for the object, again feeling compelled to seek this voice out. The object—a red tome of sorts—was barely within her reach. She held the book in her hand, feeling the marred leather and wiping away specks of the mud that it was caked in. There were no words on the cover. She gazed upon it curiously, inferring that it must've been deposited near the top of the bank by the violent floodwaters.

"Are you...speaking to me?" Kizuka asked aloud, half wondering if she was spiraling into insanity.

"You have done well in retrieving me, child," the voice spoke soundlessly, and Kizuka became aware that the words seemed to flow directly into her mind from the book itself. Her curiosity growing insatiable, she began carefully flipping the book open, careful not to rip any of the waterlogged pages off as she scanned through line after line of indiscernible text. "I was able to reach out to you, unlike the boy that preceded you."

"I can't believe this..." Kizuka muttered as she flipped through page after page while the voice spoke, eventually settling on one particular section depicting a large, intricate rune or symbol of sorts, which took up the entire page's width and length. There were triquetras and quadrilaterals and ovals, shapes combining into an elaborate design that absolutely boggled her mind. "How are you speaking to me?"

"This is my prison," the words flowed into her mind with much more clarity. "I was able to reach out to you because you gave me a voice to reach out with. The child before you did not. I have been
without a voice...for five years now."

A voice? From her? Kizuka wracked her brain trying to make heads or tails of this development. How could she have given this book—or whoever was trapped within it—a voice? She had just been lying in the mud, despairing over her dreams—

"Yes," the voice suddenly spoke up once more. "Your dreams. It was the power of your dreams that gave me a voice once more. Only a mortal with powerful aspirations such as yourself could accomplish such a feat. And how fitting, given one of my many titles..."

"Just...who are you?" Kizuka whispered.

"I am—" the voice paused for a couple seconds, "—the King of Dreams."

"Now tell me child," the King of Dreams continued, "what dreams do you have that are so powerful that it would restore even my voice?"

Now that gave Kizuka pause. She was silent for several moments, and the voice fell silent as well, an air of patience exuding from the rune, not demanding an immediate answer.

"I..." Kizuka began, "I want to become a hero."

Another moment passed. "A noble dream," the voice replied plainly, causing Kizuka to take a step back in astonishment. The response had been simple, without encouragement, but more importantly, without any disregard or contempt.

A dry sob escaped her lips, prompting Kizuka to slap a hand over her mouth to stifle any that threatened to follow. The surge of emotion was no surprise to her. After all, no one had ever responded to her dream like that before.

But that was not all that Kizuka desired.

"I want...to crush everyone that's looked down on me for my dream and my Quirk," Kizuka's lips twitched into a snarl as she dug her fingers into the book's marred leather. "Everyone who thinks I shouldn't have the freedom to use my Quirk freely and should just stay shackled by society...I want to grind them all into the ground."

"Not just noble, but powerful as well," the voice responded, and Kizuka couldn't help but feel that the King of Dreams was pleased by what she'd said.

"But it's pointless," Kizuka said lamentably. "Those aren't dreams I can accomplish the way I am now, and...I'm very much alone. I don't have anyone to support me in these endeavors. Everyone at my school and residential home—the students, the teachers—they all oppose me."

"What you need is a strong ally," the King of Dreams spoke. "Someone so powerful that they would be helpless to stand against them."

"Kizuka Yuuku," it continued, "I am willing to be that ally."

Kizuka nearly dropped the book, floored by this enigmatic stranger's proposition to help her of all people. She was so dumbstruck that she didn't even question how the voice knew her name when she hadn't yet introduced herself.

"However," the King of Dreams continued before Kizuka could interrupt, "there is little I can do while I remain imprisoned within this rune. And should you manage to loosen it enough for my
"I'll do it!" Kizuka cried out. "If you can really help me become a Pro Hero, then I'll do whatever it takes to free you! I swear, King!"

"Formalities do not suit you," the voice chuckled. "Please, call me...Nightmare."

"Nightmare..." The name certainly rolled off the tongue, though the name did strike Kizuka strange.

"Confused?" Nightmare said, as if picking up on Kizuka's befuddlement. "I feed off of nightmares more than just regular dreams. I cannot help it—it is merely my nature, the power I've had for as long as I can remember. And much like how there are those that conspire to keep you shackled, there were those that sought to keep me contained, unable to live freely. You and I are not so different in this regard."

Kizuka pondered over Nightmare's words, and the parallels between the two were striking. Would she eventually be thrown into a prison of her own as he was if she continued to defy everyone's wishes that she never use her Quirk again? Plausible deniability would only get her so far through school, after all.

"Then neither of us will be shackled for much longer," Kizuka swore.

"Excellent," Nightmare chuckled. "Free me, Kizuka Yuuku, and you will get everything that you deserve..."

Kizuka leaned against her U.A locker as she flipped through the wrinkly pages of the Somnum Exterreri. It had been a pain drying out each individual page of the tome, but preserving as much of the text as possible was going to be worth it in the end. Her knowledge of Sanskrit was rough—having only 18 months to learn—and there was so much more to decipher, but that would have to wait until after her ally was freed.

She turned to the page depicting the rune that kept her ally's full essence contained. She had roughly translated it out as the Rune of Niśā, or the Rune of Dreams. She had managed to finally loosen it over the last several weeks, and true to his word, Nightmare's essence was able to leak out of the book. He materialized as a shadow, latching onto certain targets at their choosing to maintain what meager strength he had before regaining it all after today's ritual.

She closed the book and slipped it back into her locker, snickering to herself at how well laid out her scheme was, how everything was finally coming together, and then some. She particularly enjoyed latching Nightmare onto Jiro and watching her unknowingly wither under his touch, and picking up Shinso was just window dressing at this point. He was impassive and unreadable, but he still seemed to be on board all the same. She would have the Youma twins—Ryou and Hyou—keep an eye on him and their back-up vessels all the same, especially if he were to try anything while the ritual was underway.

A bell dinged, sounding an end to the lunch hour as the students began filing out of the cafeteria and returning to their respective classrooms. Kizuka managed to slip into the crowd as she walked back to 1-D, bumping her shoulder against the white and crimson-haired boy she'd selected as her prime sacrifice since before classes even officially began.

Todoroki Shoto shot an uneasy glance at Kizuka after they bumped shoulders, and the girl responded with a knowing grin. The two continued on their way to their classrooms without sharing any words or bumping into each other again.
Endeavor's brat was only here at U.A because he was just that—Endeavor's brat. Kizuka had decided that he, among other students of the now infamous 1-A, did not deserve to be heroes more than she did. She would rectify this problem once and for all after classes today.

After all, it was just as she told Shinso: sometimes the only way to achieve one's dreams was to stomp out the dreams of those in their way.
An Astral Clash!

It had been a long weekend for Izuku. His following Shinso after classes and the unexpected eavesdropping of Kizuka's machinations with this 'Club Fear' gave him a lot to worry and muse over. Luckily, the hectic nature of the previous week seemed to ensure that he'd have little schoolwork to distract him over the next couple days. This gave him plenty of time for deliberation and recovery.

Izuku sat on the edge of his bed, inspecting himself up and down as the dimming veil that had been woven over his body faded entirely, its golden glow dissipating as the morning sun peeked through his green shades, shining upon the All Might posters plastered on his wall. Even on poster paper, All Might's smile seemed to glint brighter with natural light illuminating his face, greeting Izuku and spurring him into a brand new morn, energized for whatever the day had to throw his way.

And even with everything he knew from overhearing Kizuka's plot, Izuku still remained unaware of what this day was going to bring when all was said and done.

He took a deep breath and stretched; over 100 hours of straight rest on top of spending the weekend in his astral form preparing for today did wonders for the body, he guessed. Gently clenching his scarred hands and tensing his other muscles, Izuku truly felt revitalized, flesh and soul beating as one once more.

"Izuku?" Inko's voice sounded from the other side of his bedroom door, followed by the barest of knocks against the wood, "Are you up? Do you need any help changing into your U.A uniform?"

"I'm up, Mom," Izuku replied, "and I'm already changed. I feel good as new!"

He heard an audible sigh of relief from the other side of the door. "That's good to hear! Oh, and I have breakfast prepared on the table. Make sure you eat before you leave, Izuku!"

"I will! Thanks, Mom!" Izuku said as he heard his mother shuffle away from his door. As much as it likely relieved her to know her son's body had finally healed from the USJ incident, Izuku was equally relieved to hear his mother was relieved. Her stress seemed ceaseless ever since he'd come back from training at Kamar-Taj, and to practically hear the smile on her face...Izuku always wanted to see his mother smile more, especially after all she'd endured for him over the years.

Izuku frowned right then; his mother's expression was not likely going carry a smile by the end of the day, not with what he had planned. His thoughts invariably drifted toward the main focus of many of his musings over the weekend: the tome that was now in Kizuka's possession.

*The Somnum Exterreri*, Izuku thought gravely.

Almost instinctively, Izuku's hand twitched toward his right pocket, where his calling card for his sensei resided again. It had been returned to his body by All Might and Strange the day after USJ, and in the brief instant where his hand shuddered, he seriously considered summoning Doctor Strange at once.

But Izuku had also considered that his sensei had not yet fully recovered after his battle against the League like he had; Strange had, after all, taxed himself heavily not just during the fighting, but also in its aftermath during the reveal to Jiro, Kaminari, and Yaoyorozu, and also in constructing the recovery veil with Wong's help.

The fledgling Disciple couldn't help but be awestruck by his teacher's fortitude—even on his last legs, Strange always held himself high and did his best to not show any obvious signs of weakness.
Izuku also considered that, at least in his perspective, this entire 'Club Fear' fiasco that was beginning to unfold was a problem of his creation. He wasn't aware yet precisely how Kizuka came to possess the tome, but he knew all the same that it was in her clutches because of him—because he'd stolen it that fateful day. And because he'd stolen it, this spiteful, bitter U.A student with an axe to grind against the school and the hero course was going to attempt to inflict harm against his fellow classmates.

Because of him.

From what he could recall from his time at Kamar-Taj and the months afterwards, several magical tomes of power had been stolen from what was now Strange's personal library by Master Kaecilius and his Zealots, chief among his underlings being Ikiji. The only one to be returned from that incident was the Book of Cagliostro, but Ikiji had returned for it with the League last year, escaping with a dark ritual.

But the Somnum Exterreri hadn't been one of the tomes lost that day. No, that particular tome was lost only by Izuku's own self-perceived incompetence and thievery. He recalled the thinly veiled exhaustion of his teacher in the days prior to the Sanctum's return to New York, and the open display of disappointment from Wong who undoubtedly knew of the tome and its reason for being missing.

Because of him.

As far as he knew, his sensei was still searching far and wide for those tomes, juggling that task with personally training him for months on end. And Izuku had unwittingly added to Strange's workload by bumbling through the Sanctum on a silly dare. And now the tome he'd lost had shown up again on the premises of U.A of all places, practically within arm's reach!

_Easing the burden I ended up causing you is the least I can do, Sensei, _Izuku thought as he withdrew his hand from the calling card resting in his pocket. _I'll get that tome back for you before Kizuka can use it to harm my classmates, I swear!_
hateful was from the dark-haired guy he saw after Shinso gave his declaration, the one who was with Club Fear—

Izuku suddenly snapped his eyes upward toward the upper floors of U.A, scanning each window he could see, even though the impeccably clean glass exterior—coupled with the glare of the morning sun—made it impossible to see who could've been on the inside, looking down on the courtyard...and him, too.

Regardless, Izuku's instincts were loud and clear: whoever was keeping tabs on him was definitely inside, and likely above the ground floor where most students were still crowding. He tightened the backpack straps around his arms and rushed for the front entrance, weaving and pushing through the crowd as best he could.

"Hey, Midoriya! Your body's all healed up!" Kirishima's voice rang out through the crowd, but Izuku didn't stop to reply or swivel his head around to see where he might've been. He'd apologize later.

"Midoriya!" Iida's voice. "I appreciate your eagerness to get to class quickly but you shouldn't run—hey!"

Izuku didn't stop. He couldn't. His intuition and gut instincts were screaming in tandem as he wormed his way into the first floor hall of U.A that he just had to locate whatever presence was fixated on him so scornfully. He didn't know how, he hadn't connected any dots yet, but a heavy dread in his stomach told him that this, the enigmatic darkness lingering over Todoroki, and the machinations of Kizuka Yuuku—they all led back to the Somnum Exterreri.

And Izuku was determined to see this through by today's end, to retrieve what he had lost and to put a stop to Kizuka's traitorous schemes.

But the day was not going to be easy on Izuku, and neither were the morning crowds. He'd barely made it to the second floor, squeezing past torsos and avoiding elbows and nearly tripping over other people's legs more than once, before he saw the flash of white.

His guess had been correct, it seemed. The enigmatic white flash was bright and wispy, but it was heavily obscured by the throng of U.A uniforms moving up and down the hall, so Izuku couldn't identify any features. It was quick as well, hastily rounding a corner and disappearing without so much as a notice or glance from any other student present aside from Izuku. He'd been the only one to notice it, and he wondered why that was.

Pressing onward, Izuku forcibly shoved himself past another chokepoint of students as he rounded the same corner, groaning to himself as he briefly saw the white enigma already at the end of the hall, rounding yet another corner and vanishing from view. Again, no one reacted to it, and Izuku briefly wondered if this mysterious figure knew he was following it. Was it simply leading him on, hoping to use the sea of students to discourage his chase?

*If that's the case, Izuku thought as he kept to the wall, inching his way toward the nearest boys' restroom, then I'll chase it another way!*

Entering the restroom, Izuku slipped into a stall and locked the door behind him. Sitting down on the toilet seat, Izuku closed his eyes.

*Deep breath, Izuku.*

He reached inward and gripped at the spiritual contours of his body that he'd grown so familiar with
these past several days. As spirit pulled away from flesh, Izuku sensed his mind stirring as the pulsing in his chest, the rhythmic shrinking and expanding of his lungs, the bodily warmth of his physical form—all faded.

Izuku's astral body rose, and he glanced down at his physical self leaning back against the stall's wall with no threat of falling over, breathing peacefully in its sleep-like state. Ensuring that he was truly invisible as he phased through the stall door, Izuku floated out into the hall to resume his search for the enigmatic flash of white, hovering over the rest of the student's heads for a better vantage point—anything to get an advantage over this mysterious foe of his.

Nothing.

Izuku floated down the hall where he last saw the white figure and rounded the corner—nothing again. There was no quick glimpse as before. The figure had now become even more elusive, evading even detection, much less capture. Izuku stuck to phasing only through walls and lockers as he approached hallway corners, still feeling a bit conscious at the prospect of moving through a crowd of people or even letting a bunch of people move through him.

After several more minutes of cautious yet fruitless searching, Izuku sighed in defeat. He hadn't spotted the white figure again even after his tireless hunt, and he guessed he likely wouldn't see it again the rest of the day. Assuming that was that, he turned a 180 in the hall, intending to return to the restroom where his body was resting when something most startling occurred: he was grabbed.

There was no mistaking the sensation of two hands grasping at and clutching onto his legs. Before he could utter a simple gasp or even glance down, the two hands gave his body a vehement tug, dragging Izuku down to and then through the floor. Hands flailing in response to the unexpected touch, Izuku managed to reach up through the ceiling above him and hoist himself back onto the second floor. He instinctively flinched as his vision was suddenly filled with the quickened feet of U.A students hurrying to their homeroom classes, boots and heels phasing harmlessly through his astral face.

W-what was that? Izuku thought as he floated back above the crowd, eyeing the crowd wildly as he registered what just happened. He hadn't just been touched while in his astral state, he'd been grabbed and violently tugged by an unknown assailant. He recalled what his book on projection entailed when it came to astral encounters and combat: the only thing that could harm an astral body was another astral body.

That could only mean one thing: another user of astral projection was at U.A.

A veritable shiver ran up his ghostly back as the tingling returned in full force, compelling Izuku to turn about and face the white enigma that he now assumed to be his attacker. Too slow—Izuku perceived naught but a spectral blur before being slugged across the face by an astral fist, sending him reeling through several lockers.

Izuku quickly corrected himself as he phased out of the lockers, floating above the crowd and nursing the dull pulses of pain emanating across his cheek and jawbones. At least that was the same; whether it was his body or his spirit, pain still felt the same as it always did. He had little time to ponder that, however; he was too busy seeking out the location of his astral foe. Izuku whirled about, looking over each student still in the hall. They continued to walk past blissfully unaware of his plight and presence. And more distressing, the enigmatic ghost was once again nowhere to be seen.

He cautiously descended to the ground level and mixed in with the bustling crowd, weaving past people and avoiding overlaps with their bodies as best as he could.
Perhaps floating above everyone's heads only made me an easier target, Izuku reasoned.

All his reasoning was swiftly dashed upon the rocks as a pair of hands found his legs yet again, firmly gripping him in place. Instead of dragging him through the floor, however, they gave Izuku's leg a tug backwards, tripping and disorienting him. As he fell forward, Izuku caught a glimpse of two ghostly hands sticking out of the floor before sinking and phasing out of sight.

"I'm a bit underwhelmed," A vaguely familiar voice, loud and haughty, called out to Izuku, raising above the idle chatter of the flock of U.A students still moving about. "I expected better from someone with the same Quirk as me."

In his dazed state, Izuku could barely discern the streaks of white briefly flashing into view as his enemy moved amongst the student body with formidable agility. He'd hardly righted himself from the tumble the ghostly foe had just given him before its white fist phased straight through a passing girl's head, landing a ferocious blow across Izuku's cheek. Caught completely unawares, Izuku went flying from the surprise punch, yelling out in pain as he spun through a wall and into an adjacent classroom.

That seriously hurt...! Izuku bemoaned as he skidded to a halt in midair, nursing the second blow on his cheek that morning. Physical combat was never and could never be a specialty of his, and having your very soul punched was a pain even Izuku thought twice about quantifying. He spun himself right-side up—

And found himself staring face-to-face with a familiar figure.

The dark hair. The long bangs that drooped downward, covering his right eye. A left eye glaring with all the searing intensity of Strange's Seven Suns of Cinnibus. It was the boy he'd seen standing behind Shinso and later with Kizuka after the end of classes that very same day.

"Y-you! You're that guy from before...!" Izuku cried out.

"It's an honor for a lowly general studies student like me to be remembered by a prestigious hero course student such as yourself, Midoriya," the boy relied sarcastically. "I am Youma. Ryou Youma."

That's right, Ryou and Hyou! Izuku thought, recalling the twins he'd seen with Kizuka when she invited Shinso into their club. "You know me?" he asked.

"I made it my job to learn the names of all the 1-A students during the first week of classes," Ryou said, casually hopping from desk to desk as he circled Izuku like a wily fox about to pounce. "Although with you...I decided that today I'd get to learn a little more before our ritual. I just didn't expect to be so underwhelmed this early on. I thought you'd be a bit more adept at fighting in your ghost body. Surely you're not faking that exhaustion, are you?"

"How can you use astral projection?" Izuku asked, eyeing Ryou warily in case he suddenly went on the attack.

Ryou paused. "Astral projection?" he asked. "Is that what you call your superpower? A Quirk by any other name, I guess..."

A Quirk by any other name? Izuku thought. This guy...he can go into the astral plane with a Quirk instead of with magic!? Does he even fully comprehend what he's doing?

"Not that it matters, if what I've seen so far is any indication anyway," Ryou spoke again. "I just wanted to let off a bit of steam before the sports festival." He crouched down to attack again—
"Stop!" Izuku cried out, thrusting his hand forward to fend Ryou off, who floated to a halt with an annoyed grunt. "Stay back or I'll...I'll make myself visible in front of everyone in this classroom!" It was a baseless bluff, born out of panic as Izuku still racked his mind for a proper solution. Ryou seemed to understand that as well, since he responded to Izuku with a shower of condescending laughter.

"Go ahead!" Ryou laughed out. "You can make yourself visible, but I highly doubt you could force me to do the same! And what would you do then? Go running to the nearest teacher to tell them what I did with no real proof? It'd just be a 'he said, he said' scenario, and I would have all the plausible deniability I would need to stay out of trouble!"

Courtesy of you, Kizuka, Ryou thought back to the devious lessons Kizuka had taught him and his brother in the past week regarding punishment and how to avoid it.

"And you would do all this just for the chance to 'blow off some steam'?" Izuku asked. "I...don't know if I'm willing to believe that. Why are you really doing all of this, Ryou?" Izuku was prodding Ryou for answers, hoping he'd let something slip regarding Kizuka and Club Fear, hopefully without getting suspicious that Izuku already had an inkling about what they had planned.

Ryou's anger visibly diminished. His glare softened and trailed to the floor, his fist became lax and his offensive stance loosened considerably.

"You know, I thought at first you might be able to understand," Ryou said after several moments of terse silence. "Hell, I was hoping for it. But you can't. You're in the hero course—somehow—I don't think you can possibly understand what it's like to be told over and over that you can't become a hero with your type of Quirk."

Izuku felt his mouth hang open as he saw an all too familiar pain reflecting off of Ryou's sole visible eye. He wanted to interrupt, to tell him he did understand, but he let Ryou continue.

"And that makes it all the more frustrating since you and I have identical Quirks!" Ryou seethed, curling his hand back into a fist. "You can't even comprehend how lucky you are Midoriya—you and all the other wretched hero course students—to not know what it's like to constantly grasp at broken dreams!"

"But soon," Ryou raised his piercing glare back at Izuku, "our dreams are going to be made reality. U.A—no, society—will no longer keep our ambitions pressed beneath its thumb! We have the King of Dreams on our side, and once he's free...my brother and I will be, too. U.A, Japan, and then the rest of the world will have to embrace us as heroes and finally let us use our Quirks as freely as we wish, without judgment!" An evil smirk cross his lips. "They will have no choice but to accept us, 'evil Quirks' and all."

"That's why you want to become a hero!?" Izuku exclaimed, mortified. "To just...use your Quirk as you see fit? Is that really what you think being a hero is all about!?"

"Freedom is the true essence of a hero!" Ryou replied. "Endeavor, the Avengers...and especially All Might! They're all pinnacles...of freedom!"

"No," Izuku replied softly, shaking with anger at hearing Ryou use his idol to justify his actions. "You have no idea how wrong you are. If that's really what you view being a hero is like...then I won't allow you to join the hero course!"

Ryou's smirk ballooned into a full-blown sneer. "And as I said before, you've nothing but your meaningless word against mine. Cry to your friends, run to your teachers, there's nothing you can do.
You don't even have the slightest idea what's about to happen here in the school, do you? You're all alone, Midoriya." Ryou paused and snickered. "You'll go alone, and you'll fail alone. You're almost noble—!

Izuku interrupted Ryou's monologue with a quick jab, but his indignation quickly evaporated as the general studies student effortlessly caught his hand. He uttered a brief cry of pain as the hand was firmly squeezed. Izuku tried in vain to tug himself out of Ryou's grasp as the hand was lifted before the other boy's face, and he squirmed uncomfortably as Ryou inspected the numerous scars that remained visible even in his astral state.

"You couldn't throw a proper punch to save your life," Ryou said matter-of-factly before abruptly surging back into violence, striking Izuku across his face and chest with quick, successive blows. "How the hell did a weakling like you get into the hero course with a Quirk identical to mine!?

Ryou was suddenly upon Izuku, grabbing him by his shoulders and flinging him out of the classroom.

Izuku's astral form slowed down only minimally as it phased through the wall and spun back out into the hallway. He dizzily zoomed down the hall without stopping to right himself first, knowing he had to put as much distance between himself and Ryou as possible.

I don't think I can fight him one-on-one in my current state, Izuku thought as he kept himself raised above straggler students' heads. I'm still fairly new when it comes to astral projection, and if I was right about Ryou, then he's had the ability to traverse the astral plane with his Quirk since he was a toddler!

Izuku grunted and clutched at his chest as he flew. And I really am feeling increasingly exhausted. With the veil gone, I can't sustain my astral self for nearly as long. I'll have to return to my body soon, but I don't want to lead Ryou straight to it! I also don't know what all he can do compared to me. If he's not actually aware that he's going into the astral plane when he's using his Quirk, then he may not know everything an astral body can do! For now, escape is my best option—I just wish the rest of my spells weren't next to useless while I'm in this form!

As hezoomed over the heads of those in the hall, Izuku glanced back and nearly gasped as he saw Ryou on his tail, face contorted with rage.

I don't think I'm going to get anymore answers out of him! Izuku thought.

Desperate to lose Ryou so he could return to his body safely, Izuku suddenly dropped down into the crowd, phasing through numerous students in an effort to throw his pursuer off. He nearly regretted it, as the constant phasing through physical bodies felt...off. When he normally phased through another person, as he did with Tokoyami last time, he didn't really feel anything. But that had just been his arm, and now he was using his entire astral form. Moving through entire peoples' bodies with his astral one felt like moving through a solid smoke of sorts, and the sensation perturbed Izuku greatly. He mentally apologized to each person he phased through, noticing in his periphery how they buckled or shivered as he passed through them.

As he phased through the last group of students at the end of the crowded hall and rounded a corner in a flash, the peculiar sensation of being watched had all but faded. Izuku slowed to a halt to catch his breath, though he didn't lower his guard in the slightest—his eyes were still on the lookout for Ryou. As he gathered his bearings he turned around, taking in the large, imposing steel doors towering over him where he stopped.

Is that—?
It was. Izuku had stopped before the great steel doors of the U.A Development Studio. Its quaint yellow sign appeared tainted by a black soot, perhaps from a recent explosion of some sort. Izuku realized it had been almost a week since he'd last seen Hatsume—right before the USJ incident—and wondered how she'd taken the news. Had she thought about him? Had he worried her? Should he have at least gone to see her the day classes resumed?

*Snap out of it!* Izuku accosted himself, shaking his head to clear his thoughts. He instantly regretted it as a fresh wave of pain pulsed across his astral form. He grimaced, reaching up to gingerly touch where Ryou had struck him across his jaw and shoulders.

*Speaking of Ryou, did I finally lose him—gah!* Izuku's thoughts were cut off as he was barreled into from behind, the attack landing quicker than he could even register the tingling that usually alerted him to his presence.

"Found you!" Ryou yelled as he slammed into Izuku's back.

They both went flying into the doors of the development studio. The steel entrance offered a modicum of resistance to their phasing, dazing them both as they came out the other side and spun in the air. As Izuku whirled above the empty workstations lining the studio, he caught a glimpse of one that was being occupied.

One that had a flash of pink every time he caught sight of it.

*Hatsume!*

The pink-haired inventor was at her work station, conspicuously dressed in the standard U.A uniform and not her usual workshop attire. She was tinkering away at the red and gold goggles Izuku had seen her wear before, the same ones she'd used to bash in Brigand's nose several weeks prior.

"Hatsume!" Power Loader yelled as he peeked his head through the door leading into the classroom adjacent to the studio. "I may have given you permission to use the studio before homeroom class begins, but I expect you to not be late, understand?"

"I'll be in shortly, sensei!" Hatsume replied.

Power Loader eyed her for a minute before giving a grunt of acknowledgment and returned to the bustling chatting of Class 1-H, closing the door behind him.

Izuku and Ryou reeled through the air as Hatsume and Power Loader briefly conversed, and Izuku slowed to a halt halfway phased through a hydraulic press of sorts in the middle of the room.

Ryou recovered first, however, and helped push Izuku all the way through the press with a fist to his astral gut, punching him through.

Izuku could practically imagine the spectral spittle he'd be spitting out right about now if he could. He covered his abdomen with his arms as Ryou pressed his attack.

"How are you holding up, Midoriya!?" Ryou laughed spitefully as he grabbed Izuku by the shoulders and began spinning him around. "Me? I'm holding up great, thanks for asking!"

He gave one final spin before flinging Izuku across the studio, directly toward the work station occupied by Hatsume.

"H-Hatsume!" Izuku cried out as he spun toward her, and it seemed for a split second that she'd paused her work, as if she'd actually heard his cry.
Izuku's arms flailed as his astral body was thrown through her, and she very clearly tensed from the sudden chill from his phasing. As he phased through her, Izuku became acutely aware of that same solid smoky substance he'd encountered when going through the student bodies out in the hall moments ago. As he panicked and flailed his arms, Izuku did what he did not before and grabbed onto that substance as he passed through Mei's body. He'd grabbed...and pulled.

Mei's body quickly followed—or rather, her astral body did.

One audible gasp from Mei later and all the action in the studio came to a crashing halt. Ryou had been floating forward to deliver another punch to Izuku but remained frozen in midair, staring at Mei with wide, startled eyes, clearly surprised by this new turn of events.

Izuku scrambled to right himself after phasing through Mei, resting atop her work station with her goggles and work tools as he stared up at her with surprise that outclassed Ryou's. He glanced between his ghostly hands and the look of shock etched onto Mei's face, stunned by what he had apparently just done.

He had no idea he could forcibly remove other people's astral forms, let alone those belonging to people not trained in the mystic arts. His surprise and confusion quickly turned to panic—she couldn't stay out of her body for too long!

Mei let out a shriek as her body slumped to the ground, landing face up. Her eyes had closed and her breathing was slow but steady, and to anyone entering the room, it would look as if she had simply dozed off.

"What the hell!?" She screamed, looking first at her ghostly white hands and then up and down her equally phantasmal body, whirling about as she took her new appearance in. "Am I dead!?" She glanced up at Izuku and let loose another squeal. "Izuku! Are you dead!?" She whirled her head, catching sight of Ryou. "Aaah! You, too, person I've never seen before!? I can see dead people!"

"H-Hatsume, calm down!" Izuku flew into an open panic as he tried to explain what just happened to her, even though he could scarcely believe it himself. "I can explain!"

As Izuku tried to explain the situation to a justifiably spastic Hatsume, Ryou watched on quietly, trying to make some sense out of all this.

"How in the hell did you do that, Midoriya!?!" Ryou snapped out loud.

Izuku turned his attention away from Mei, who remained floating about the room, completely bewildered out of her mind as she gawked down at her physical body resting below. "I-I'm not completely sure myself!" Izuku replied.

"Not sure...?" Ryou asked as he began to shake with rage. "Not sure!? Are you even taking this seriously, Midoriya!?" He flew forward in a frenzy, fist drawn back to slug Izuku with a wrathful
Izuku was ready this time, however, and crossed his arms over his face to block the brunt of the punch. He weathered much of the force behind Ryou's punch with his block, and didn't go reeling or flying back as he had before.

"Stop!"

Ryou and Izuku paused as Hatsume cried out indignantly against Izuku's attacker. She caught both of them off guard by barreling into Ryou, grabbing onto his waist as she tried to force him away from Izuku.

"Get...off of me, you wretch!" Ryou yelled as he knocked her back with ease, following up the knockback with a savage blow across the head that sent her ghostly form sprawling toward the floor.

"Hatsume!" Izuku screamed, watching in shock as Mei's body was savagely struck. His horror-stricken eyes slid to Ryou and something within him...snapped. Izuku's brows scrunched with uncharacteristic anger and he snarled, lunging at Ryou.

No, Izuku would never be the best at physical combat, despite being fit. No, he couldn't throw a strong punch as Ryou noted earlier.

But he didn't need to rely solely on his fists to strike Ryou.

Ryou had hardly turned back toward Izuku before his head abruptly jerked upward from a kick to the chin. He recoiled with a loud groan, and before he could fully recover Izuku jammed an elbow directly into his gut, nearly causing him to buckle. His ire not yet satisfied, Izuku grabbed Ryou by the head and lifted it up, glaring at his pained expression before sending him sprawling with a headbutt, one which he immediately regretted.

"Ow...what was I thinking?" Izuku chastised himself as his anger faded and his rationality returned as he shakily floated over to Mei's side. *Nobody wins with a headbutt...*

The blow sent Ryou spiraling down to the floor. He uttered a groan as he gripped at his forehead, rocking back and forth and cursing Izuku repeatedly until the pain dulled enough for him to get back up. But when he got back up to pay Izuku the pain he'd just inflicted tenfold...he was nowhere to be seen. The girl's ghostly body was gone, too. He scanned the room, but it was seemingly bare of all life and activity aside from the girl's unmoving physical body. He hovered over it for a moment before electing to focus on Izuku instead—the girl was little more than a distraction, and she wouldn't catch him off guard a second time.

"Midoriya..." Ryou grumbled as he flew straight toward the nearest wall, phasing through it to stalk the halls for his prey once more.

Determining they were safe for now, Izuku turned his focus to Mei, who he held onto as he inspected her astral self. She was still shaking, rightfully spooked from this entire ordeal. Izuku could hardly blame her, and he felt incredibly guilty for unwittingly dragging her into his fight.

"It's alright, Hatsume," Izuku spoke softly as he tried to comfort his friend, though he couldn't tell if he was doing any good considering he needed quite a bit of comforting himself, and the school day...
hadn't even officially begun yet! He took Mei by the hand and began slowly leading her back to her body. Izuku noted that the entirety of her soul was slightly fluctuating and felt agitated, as his was, though where their hands had connected was smooth and felt serene by comparison. "It's fine now."

"Oh, you sure seem certain about that!" Mei snapped back in a teasing manner, but she didn't resist Izuku's guidance. "Has any situation with you ever been 'fine' since I first met you at last year's Stark Expo? Will there ever be a time where you don't make me constantly question everything I thought I knew about the world? You, Izuku Midoriya—" she jabbed a finger into his face, "—are a constant enigma, one that I'll figure out eventually, mark my words!"

Izuku stayed deathly quiet and gulped, his soul feeling even more agitated than before. It emanated a slight reddish glow as he hurriedly nudged Mei's soul back into her body. Mei's eyes snapped open, but she made no attempt to move immediately. She remained on her back, staring straight up at where Izuku was floating, now unseen.

"I may not be able to see you anymore, Midoriya, but I can still feel your hand," Mei said playfully. Izuku looked down and flew back after realizing his ghostly hand had indeed remained around hers, even after he'd guided her soul back into her body. "S-sorry about that!" He stammered as he made himself visible before her.

Mei chuckled as she picked herself up, patting dust off her back and straightening out her uniform. "I think it goes without saying that I deserve some answers."

"There's been a lot of that going around lately..." Izuku muttered, and he had a feeling that wasn't going to change anytime soon either. "I'll tell you what I can, but not now." He held up a hand as Mei moved to say something in pretest. "I really have to return to my own body soon, Hatsume! Find me during lunch and I'll explain! I'm sorry...I really have to go now so I'm not late for homeroom. Wouldn't be good for the class rep to be tardy!"

Izuku offered Mei a timid wave before going invisible once more, but Mei could still feel his presence hovering about—he was lingering. A bristling tingle reminded Mei of an iciness that also lingered. She glanced down at her right hand, which Izuku had been holding. It still shivered, and she could still feel some remnant of Izuku's chill that had been touching her. The chill wasn't off-putting to Mei; it felt rather pleasant like his eldritch embers in its own way.

Mei grabbed the red and gold goggles she'd been tinkering away at before Izuku came flying through her body and slid them over her eyes to inspect her work. She let out a soft gasp and quickly pulled them off, staring out across the empty studio before slowly sliding them back on. She had briefly seen Izuku's spectral self as he phased through the studio doors, and the room was littered with a similar wispy, white substance that was shrinking until it faded entirely. Mei quickly raised and lowered her goggles repeatedly, as if to confirm what she was seeing. Were her goggles detecting trace amounts of energy? Was it astral energy that had been given off by Izuku and his attacker. As she set the goggles back down at her work station, Mei recalled how after Izuku phased through her body, he stopped himself atop her counter space and lingered there for several moments. Had some magic from his soul become imprinted onto her goggles as he remained overlapped with it, imbuing it with the ability to now see astral energy?

Mei let out a louder, more audible gasp as her train of thought reached its inevitable destination. Magic and technology can be combined!!
certainly didn't want to confront him again, let alone lead him back to his own body. He bristled as the dreaded tingling suddenly returned, and he sensed Ryou approaching his location. His surprise spiked yet again as he rounded a corner and caught sight of a familiar face.

Tokoyami?  

Indeed, Izuku's classmate and fellow Defect was naught but a few feet from where he was floating. Tokoyami was leaning up against a locker and staring down contemplatively at something in his hand. Was he reading something?  

The tingling intensified. Izuku had to do something—go somewhere—before Ryou caught sight of him and resumed his attack. He could simply phase into a locker or another room and wait for Ryou to pass, but he felt considerably drained as he was, and waiting it out would waste precious time needed to get back to his body.  

But another idea sprouted in Izuku's head. He looked over at Tokoyami and realized he could still return to his resting body undetected. He also felt confident Tokoyami would accept his apology with what he was about to do.  

He flew into Tokoyami's body and nestled within it. It felt cramped, not completely dissimilar to the sensations he'd felt rapidly phasing through multiple people, but Izuku guessed it was to be expected with two souls now occupying the same body.  

"Tokoyami," Izuku spoke into his friend's mind as he shuddered from the unexpected possession.  

"Midoriya?" Tokoyami whispered aloud, his eyes darting up and down the hall incredulously as his thoughts went entirely off the rails.  

"Shh, not out loud!" Izuku said. "To make a long story short, my astral body is now briefly residing within yours, and I'm speaking directly into your mind. I'll explain afterwards, but for now...remain calm. Do whatever it was you were doing before I interrupted."

Tokoyami remained silent as he registered Izuku's instructions. Shedding off as much shock and bafflement as he could, he leaned up against the locker once more and stared back down at the piece of paper in his hand.  

Izuku stayed completely still as, sure enough, Ryou's astral form floated by. Looking through the periphery of Tokoyami's eyes, he could see that Ryou looked especially frustrated at having failed to find him again. Ryou glared at Tokoyami contemptuously before continuing on his way, hopefully back to Class 1-D and out of Izuku's hair for the remainder of the school day.  

"Alright, Tokoyami," Izuku said as he released a huge sigh of relief, "now I need you to go into the boys' restroom a couple halls over where—"

Tokoyami blinked as Izuku's voice suddenly cut off. "Midoriya?" He thought, hoping his classmate could hear him.  

"Tokoyami..." Izuku spoke with an air of caution. "Where did you get that card...?"

Tokoyami blinked again in confusion as his attention was drawn back toward the card he'd received mere minutes before Midoriya's intrusion. It was an invitation of sorts, one that peaked his interest greatly.  

It read, 'You are hereby invited to attend the first meeting of U.A.'s first horror-themed literature club: Club Fear!'
"Midoriya," Tokoyami addressed Izuku as the lunch period began with the end of Cementoss's class. He perched himself atop Izuku's desk and looked down at him expectantly with his arms crossed as the other 1-A students began filing out. "You swore me an oath to answer all of my inquiries during our lunch break. Please begin with the circumstances that led to my possession earlier this morning."

"Before any of that, I need to ask you a more urgent question," Izuku said in a hushed tone. "Where did you get that Club Fear invitation?"

Tokoyami raised a brow, recalling how jittery Izuku seemed to get this morning when inquiring about the card. "This was gifted to me by Todoroki," he answered, continuing even after Izuku responded with widened eyes. "He believed such a clique would catch the combined interests of Dark Shadow and myself. He was correct to reach such a conclusion. I was told to meet the one named Hyou Youma in the 1-D chamber once afternoon classes had concluded."

_Hyou Youma?_ Izuku mused over Tokoyami's words. _Ryou was the one that attacked me, so that must be the twin brother who I saw last week, too. But the invitation came not from them, but Todoroki..._

Izuku cast a sideways glance over at Todoroki, who remained sitting at his desk, face angled down, and lips mouthing words seemingly to himself. Tokoyami, too, looked over at him as he whispered incomprehensible words quietly but furiously all the same. Izuku notices a perk in his right ear as his lips stop moving, as if something unseen was whispering back to him. Izuku unconsciously shuddered; there was definitely an unsettling presence about Todoroki—had been since Aizawa's test—but it seemed more palpable than before, it was definitely different and darker than what he'd felt when fighting Ryou.

Todoroki suddenly glances up and glares at Izuku and Tokoyami, who both swiftly turn their attention back to each other instead.

"This invitation he conferred upon me may have indeed peaked my interest, but I am equally curious into his degraded nature," Tokoyami quietly confessed. "If you would be so kind as to supply the answers that I require to satisfy this curiosity, Midoriya."

And so Izuku related all that he knew—and also _could_ say—to Tokoyami, beginning with the events transpiring the day classes resumed, leading up to his eavesdropping of Kizuka's schemes, and how she intended to force certain selected 1-A students to drop out so they could take their place before the Sports Festival. Naturally, he left out all mention of the tome and all mentions of magic.

Tokoyami's face remained stoic and unflinching, but his hands had clearly curled into fists, shaking vengefully. "A thousand curses upon such dishonorable plotters," he seethed. "And to think I was going to grace their so-called club with my illustrious copy of the 'Complete Works of Edgar Allan Poe.'"

"Um, Tokoyami?" Izuku asked. "I thought you'd just received the invitation this morning?"

Tokoyami narrowed his eyes. "I do not require a reason or an invitation to bless the halls of U.A with exquisite and timeless literature. Now what more do you know of these schemes?"

"Unfortunately, not much," Izuku conceded. "Even when I unintentionally eavesdropped on them, Kizuka stayed fairly vague. She never explicitly explained _how_ she was going to carry this out—something about a 'King of Dreams'—and she only mentioned Todoroki directly by name. I don't know who else she intends to involve."
"I see," Tokoyami said, rising to his feet. "Then I will alert Aizawa-sensei."

"No, wait!" Izuku hissed, reaching out and grabbing Tokoyami by his arm. "I don't actually have any recorded proof of their plans! If we alert any teachers and have them questioned, it'll just be a 'we said, they said' scenario."

"What do you mean?" Tokoyami asked.

Izuku sighed, exasperated. "This morning one of them attacked me in the halls. He has a power similar to mine that lets him split his soul from his body. He was the one who caused me to seek refuge inside your body before homeroom," Izuku explained. "He told me while we were fighting that they could use plausible deniability to avoid any sort of trouble I try to get them into since I don't have any proof of what they're trying to do. They would simply bide their time and wait for another opportune moment before the festival, but I want to catch them red-handed and stop them all at once!"

"Hmm," Tokoyami nodded his head in understanding.

"I need a way to record proof before I try to infiltrate their meeting after classes today," Izuku continued. "Luckily, they don't know that I know about their plans yet, and I know someone who can help on the recording front."

"Are you sure that infiltration would be the wisest course of action, Midoriya?" Tokoyami asked. "After all, there are plenty of other factors that need to be accounted for...such as your true, primary reason for wanting to infiltrate this clandestine gathering."

Izuku tensed as he saw Tokoyami's perceptive eyes boring into his, as if daring him to disagree.

"...I won't lie when I say I have a personal reason for wanting to do this aside from protecting my classmates," Izuku said, looking down. "I want—need to—do this because this is all my fault."

He didn't look up to see what Tokoyami's reaction was. "It's really hard for me to properly explain, but...I caused this whole 'Club Fear' mess nearly two years ago and it's something I absolutely have to fix, even if I have to do it alone—"

Tokoyami's hand slapped down onto Izuku's shoulder, cutting his words off. "Not alone."

Izuku looked up. Tokoyami's normally stoic face was now displaying a small smile brimming with trust and confidence. A movement of shadow along his abdomen caught Izuku's eye as well, and he saw Dark Shadow peering out of Tokoyami's body and flashing him a thumbs-up.

"We got your back, bro! From one Defect to another!" Dark Shadow chirped. "Now let's get some grub!"

"Tokoyami," Todoroki's voice cut through the camaraderie like an icy knife through melted butter. Both Tokoyami and Izuku turned toward him as he stood up from his seat and approached the two of them. "Will you be coming to the first Club Fear meeting after classes today?"

Izuku and Tokoyami share wary glances. "I will be," he answered as nonchalantly as he could.

Todoroki said nothing in response, merely offering a nod and passing them on his way to the classroom door.

"Excuse me, Todoroki," Tokoyami called out to him before he could leave. Todoroki paused and turned his head just enough to glance back at Tokoyami. "Forgive me if this seems like prying...but why are you joining Club Fear? You don't particularly strike me as a fan of literature, let alone..."
horror-based literature."

"You are correct, I'm not," Todoroki replied. "But it's something that my sister recommended that I do."

"Your...sister?" Tokoyami inquired.

Todoroki raised his left hand and looked down at it dejectedly. "My beloved sister has been guiding me along my destined path for awhile now. Soon—with the help of her and Club Fear—I'll be rid of my wretched left half forever."

On that note Todoroki departed, leaving a bewildered Tokoyami and Izuku behind.

"I'm definitely not going to let that happen..." Tokoyami heard Izuku mutter. He glanced down to see his classmate and fellow Defect shaking as he had been moments prior, though not with anger and indignation. No, Izuku was shaking in determination, his body brimming with resolve.

"We're going to put a stop to this today, Tokoyami," Izuku said, eyes fixed on the doorway Todoroki had just departed through. "I won't allow Kizuka to use my mistake to torment our friends any longer!"
Chapter Summary

Izuku and Tokoyami, with a bit of aid from Hatsume, initiate their plan to infiltrate Club Fear and put a stop to Kizuka's schemes. But how will they adapt when Shinso and the Youma twins throw a couple wrenches into their already tenuous plan?

The bell signaling the end of afternoon classes rang out as the students of 1-A were depositing their hero costumes back into their individual compartments. With U.A being U.A, hero course students did not have to bear the responsibility of cleaning their costumes as they did their standard uniforms, and the school did that for them. It mattered little to Izuku, for the disorganized rush of students trying to return their dirtied costumes all at once (much to Iida's chagrin) gave him enough time to slip his green Cloak of Levitation back into his backpack (much to its chagrin).

"Sorry, Iida," Izuku thought consolingly as his stern friend gave several strained farewells and departed with a slunk after unsuccessfully trying to manage the classroom chaos. *Normally I let everyone up row by row as you prefer, but I needed it to be hectic today.* He threw his backpack over his shoulders and felt the cloak punch through the fabric.

All Might had given a hasty farewell and congratulations for the day's performances the moment the bell had rung before zooming out of the classroom, leaving only a trail of dust in his wake.

"All Might sure left in a rush," Asui said aloud.

"He must be rushing to get all his grading done," Mina added, joining Asui as they departed the 1-A room. "He's new to teaching yet he's so adamant about doing his best for us as we are for him!"

Midoriya and Kirishima, lingering at their seats, overheard Mina's speculation and doubted them, though neither was aware the other was thinking the same thoughts. It was far more likely that All Might was rushing to the teacher's lounge before he reached his time limit.

Bakugo wasted little time with sticking around after that, sending obligatory nasty glances to Izuku and Todoroki before leaving with a huff, with Kirishima trailing behind him.

Izuku looked askance at the rest of the class: Shoto was still seated, as were Jiro and Kaminari. Uraraka was hovering over the latter's desk, and Tokoyami remained his seat as well, eyes closed, patiently waiting for Midoriya to be ready for their clandestine infiltration.

Shoto and Jiro were next to leave, the first rather briskly, with an air of uncharacteristic impatience in his step, while Jiro departed rather ambivalently, as if uncertain of her own destination.

Izuku stood back up as Shoto left the room, and Tokoyami mimicked his moves with eyes still closed. As the two approached each other to converse quietly, Kaminari and Uraraka left for their ill-fated meeting with Club Fear.

"Ooh, I'm excited!" Uraraka said in a bubbly voice that nearly made up for the thinly-veiled apprehension that lingered on Kaminari's face. In her arms were several books of varying thickness. "A literature club! I wonder what it'll be like? You like literature, Kaminari, are you excited?"
"Y-yeah, yeah!" Kaminari gave a halfhearted response to Uraraka's cheer. Unlike her, he carried no books, though Uraraka seemed more than eager to share. "Should be fun..."

"And then afterwards, we can go for some mochi like we talked about earlier!" Uraraka said. "I know of a place with some real cheap stuff—"

Kaminari's face reddened considerably as Uraraka droned on in her excitement, leading him out the classroom and toward the 1-D room where the supposed literature club awaited—and where Kizuka had lain her trap.

Shortly after they had departed, Izuku and Tokoyami made their exit as the last 1-A students to leave, unaware of the former duo's destination. They had few if any instances to converse throughout the day, as they were not seated next to each other in class and they could not openly discuss their plans to foil Kizuka during lunch when they were surrounded by their friends, though Izuku did manage to formally introduce Tokoyami and Hatsume. They had precious little time to iron out their plan before the Club Fear meeting began.

"Todoroki is nowhere in sight," Tokoyami observed, his keen, perceptive eyes glancing about the throng of departing and lingering students alike for the familiar crop of perfectly split red and white hair. "He vacated the classroom with a restive gait." His beaked mouth became tight. "If he hurried to the wretches of this Club Fear, then we may have even less time than we originally thought, Midoriya."

"Yeah, I agree," Izuku said, mirroring Tokoyami's grim countenance. The festering dread hung in the air like a bad omen throughout the day, a tenseness so palpable and suffocating that it could probably choke Izuku if he so much as willed it.

But Izuku was not going to tolerate the seeds of terror sown by Kizuka or her cohorts any longer. He knew the risks were great—Tokoyami had brought them up himself—but Kizuka was not waiting any longer so neither would he. Todoroki would be saved, Kizuka would be stopped, and the Somnum Exterreri would be returned from whence it came.

Izuku's conscience demanded it.

"The device you spoke of earlier," Tokoyami said, "Do you believe it could be finished now under such short notice?"

Izuku gulped hard. "If anyone could do it, then Hatsume definitely could."

"So let me get this straight," Hatsume addressed Izuku and Tokoyami in an otherwise barren development lab, her attention focused squarely on the red and gold goggles at her work station as she spoke. "You overheard last Friday that this Kizuka Yuuku formed a club—Club Fear—as a way to kick out select hero course students and wiggle her way into their place. Then this morning you found out that one of Kizuka's cohorts—Ryou Youma—could separate his soul from his body like you could and attacked you." She threw a sideways glance at Izuku. "A fight which led you both to this very lab, by the way."

Tokoyami turned to look at Izuku as well, and the boy offered only a mousey chuckle.

"Aside from those two," Mei continued, "you know of two other members of Kizuka's little club: Ryou's twin brother Hyou and that Shinso guy. You don't know their plan beyond this vague 'kick out 1-A students and take their place' scheme, you don't know their Quirks besides Ryou's, and you don't have any proof of their plot to show to any of the staff."
Mei finally turned around and sighed, leaning against her work station and looking at Izuku with arms crossed. "Midoriya, what exactly are you working with here?"

"Not much," Izuku conceded with a sigh of his own. "You pretty much summed it all up."

Mei turned to Tokoyami. "And you're joining him in this infiltration scheme of his?"

"Against my more clearly honed instincts," Tokoyami replied. "Despite my reservations and the obvious risks of going into such a situation effectively blind, Midoriya is right about needing proof of their...illicit activities. Without it, they can employ plausible deniability to their hearts' content and avoid any real consequences from the teachers. The fate of Todoroki and perhaps other classmates are resting squarely on our shoulders. We have no choice but to make our move today because Kizuka is going to make hers whether we interfere or not."

"That's why I asked for your help on such short notice right before lunch, Hatsume," Izuku added. "It's also why I brought this—"

Izuku plopped his backpack onto the nearest table and unzipped it, only to have his face immediately assailed by the sentient fabric stuffed within. He let out a string of muffled yells as the cloak clasped to his face and coiled around his head, tugging him this way and that until Izuku finally lost his footing and fell to the floor as he fought vainly to force the vengeful cloak off his face.

"Oh my gosh, you have that cloak with you again!" Mei immediately began gushing over the sentient cloak, remembering fondly when she had first inspected it months prior at the Stark Expo. She dropped all pretense of worry and ran to Izuku's side as he tussled with the cloak. "Lemme see it! Lemme see it, lemme see it, lemme see it!"

Tokoyami and a peering Dark Shadow could only stand aside in utter confusion at the scene playing out before them.

Another minute had hardly passed before this comedy of errors finally ended. The cloak removed itself almost hesitantly from Izuku's face and floated silently beside him, but not before giving his cheeks a painful pinch with its bottom tips.

Izuku winced and nursed his cheeks, giving the cloak a disdainful look before turning back to a mesmerized Mei with a huff. "So...do you have a recording device ready for us, Hatsume?"

"Eh?" Mei blinked, her enraptured eyes still zooming in on the now placid cloak before she managed to snap herself out of her bewitched state. "Oh, yes! In fact, I do!"

She motioned for both Izuku and Tokoyami toward her work station, brushing her goggles away and directing their attention to a smaller, slimmer device resting on the tabletop. "I give you..." Mei snapped her fingers. "My 56th invention: the Centicam!"

With the snap of her fingers, the slender device unfurled itself, sprouting a multitude of incredibly thin legs spanning the length of its centipede-like body. It was perhaps a foot total in length, no more than an inch wide, and its 'head' was composed of a single spherical lens. Izuku, Tokoyami, and even Dark Shadow leaned in to get a closer look at the device, wowed by its appearance.

"The Centicam is exactly what it sounds like: a centipede camera!" Mei exclaimed with an excitement that could only stem from showing off one of her babies. "It's a mobile camera unit designed to squeeze into tight spaces that can capture footage in visible light and infrared as well as audio! And when you tap right here on its forehead..."

Mei tapped the insect-like robot right atop its head. A shudder ran down the length of its body before
its entire form broke apart into many individual segments, revealing an additional spherical camera lens on each section that was hidden when the pieces were all connected. All in all, there were about a dozen separate pieces, each with its own camera lens and operable legs supporting it.

"And when split apart like this..."

"You can capture footage from all kinds of angles!" Izuku finished Mei's sentence, absolutely ecstatic. His elation somewhat faded, however, when he noticed the individual segments all bumping into each other haphazardly and falling over.

"Hmm, seems their independent motor functions need some fine tuning..." Mei muttered, jotting down notes.

Tokoyami remained impressed, even with the revelation that they wouldn't be able to use the Centicam at maximum efficiency. "You said this was your 56th invention?" he asked. "Classes only began last week. Have you invented that many devices in such a short span of time?"

"I wish!" Mei said. "No, I've been inventing things since before starting U.A; I even attended last year's Stark Expo and met Midoriya there—"

Mei suddenly bit her tongue before she accidentally revealed too much, realizing Tokoyami was likely not privy to Izuku's secrets as she was.

"You've been to the Stark Expo in the States?" Tokoyami asked Izuku with a raised eyebrow.

"Y-yeah, it's a long story..." Izuku said sheepishly.

"Anyway, all you need to do is keep the Centicam hidden on your person or tuck it away into an enclosed space," Mei forced the conversation along by hastily reassembling the device and thrusting into Tokoyami's hands.

Tokoyami's eyes narrowed marginally but he didn't question the sudden segue, abrupt and suspicious as it was to him. He let the Centicam crawl into and curl up in his pocket.

"All audio and visuals the Centicam captures will be streamed straight back to me," Mei informed them. "And I'll compile it into the proof you need to show Power Loader and Principal Nezu."

**Power Loader?** At the mention of the head of the Development Studio, Tokoyami glanced about them, remembering that the studio was barren of anyone else, even its head teacher. "Why are you the only support course student currently present?"

"Oh, I have free reign of the studio once afternoon classes are over, so long as I'm out before sundown!" Mei said with a frisky grin. "After all, I'm the only student among the three support courses working on any extra projects for the upcoming Sports Festival. So long as I don't 'cross any lines again'—" Mei made sarcastic finger quotes as she said this, "—Power Loader said he'll keep tolerating my presence."

Izuku cocked his head. What had she meant by 'cross any lines again'? And what extra projects was she preparing for the festival?

"Besides, with the footage you collect, I'll be able to show off the capabilities of one of my babies to Power Loader," Mei said nonchalantly as Izuku nearly fell over by her sudden crassness. She blinked at Izuku's reaction. "What? It's a win-win!"

"You're going to take advantage of our situation in order to show off to Power Loader!?!" Izuku cried
There's no interest like the self-interest... Tokoyami thought.

"It's only fair given your last minute request alongside what you put me through this morning!" Mei retorted. "In fact...I say you'll still owe me after all this. So how about it Midoriya?" Mei flashed him a demure smirk. "After you curb stomp Club Fear, you'll help me put the finishing touches on my babies, right?"

"T-thanks for the help, Hatsume!" A flustered Izuku exclaimed as he hurried out of the studio, dragging a bewildered Tokoyami behind him.

"...Was she flirting with you?" Tokoyami asked aloud, turning toward Izuku only to find he wasn't paying attention to him whatsoever. He was instead arguing with his floating cloak once more, a sight Tokoyami found to be equal parts perplexing and disturbing.

"—I know you don't like it, but you can't be seen out in the open since you're technically part of my hero costume!" Izuku hissed as he dangled his unzipped backpack in front of it. "I can't get in trouble before we even get started! I'll make it up to you later, I promise!"

The cloak did not respond with words, though it appeared to Tokoyami that Izuku understood its silent response well enough. It shuddered, shook, and bobbed in a language only Izuku seemed to decipher before ultimately resigning itself to the pack, folding itself gently and neatly into its confines, with Izuku muttering a softer apology as he zipped it up.

Tokoyami turned away from Izuku before the boy could realize he'd been staring, thoroughly puzzled by the seemingly sentient cloak. He'd wondered about it ever since the Battle Trials, but the more he thought about it, the less and less it seemed like the 'highly experimental tech' Izuku had always described it as being.

A sharp chill blew past Tokoyami just as he'd decided to file the issue away for future consideration, snapping him back to reality. The blast of cold blew from behind a door he'd just walked past, a door leading into the expansive halls of U.A's restricted maintenance rooms.

"Midoriya!" Tokoyami called for his friend, waving him over to the door.

Izuku approached as he slung the backpack over his shoulders once more, shivering as he neared the door. Sure enough, a visible chill was emanating from behind it, oozing out of the bottom, top, and side gaps. The hinges were frozen over, likely from the inside. Izuku reached out to give the doorknob a jiggle, but to no avail—it wouldn't budge. Not even Dark Shadow, with all its strength, could wrest the door out of its frigid imprisonment.

It was clear to both Izuku and Tokoyami that Todoroki was responsible for this. But why had he frozen it from the inside? What was he even doing in the maintenance rooms to begin with, and how had he gotten in there?

"We should hurry," Izuku said quietly.

"I agree," Tokoyami concurred, reaching down to feel the Centicam curled up in his pocket as he walked alongside Izuku toward the 1-D room, perhaps a bit faster than before. "My role for this 'infiltration' of ours is to remain simple, correct? I meet Hyou Youma as planned and record their meeting with the Centicam."

"Using Dark Shadow to physically intervene only when or if necessary," Izuku added.
"And what of your role?" Tokoyami inquired.

"It would be counterproductive for me to physically be at the meeting with you," Izuku mused aloud. "Ryou already sought me out for a fight this morning, and if he sees me there, it could tip him off that we're somewhat onto their plan. I definitely want to avoid a fight if possible, so I'll build on what I did before homeroom today: I'll hide my body somewhere secure and go astral for recon. If I'm right, and Ryou's astral powers are identical to my own, then he can't be at the meeting and be using his Quirk at the same time. So long as I'm careful and distant, I should stay safe. The less overt I am, the better we'll be."

"Hmm," Tokoyami hummed dubiously, thinking the plan over. All he could think of were the unaccounted factors he'd mentioned to Izuku earlier...as well as all the possible ways this could go wrong.

"Well, I certainly agree with you there."

Tokoyami and Izuku's eyes snapped forward, catching sight of a familiar crop of wild, messy, indigo hair. Standing before them in the middle of the otherwise empty hallway was the very guy who'd declared war on their entire class.

"Up to no good, hero students?" Shinso asked impersonally.

"You're...that Shinso guy...!" Izuku exclaimed while Tokoyami took a defensive posture.

"Figures you'd try to meddle with Club Fear," Shinso said, lazily scratching a finger into his ear as he addressed Izuku and Tokoyami. "If you know what's best for you, then you won't get involved."

"As if we would just stand by while Kizuka tries to undermine our friends," Izuku retorted, glaring at Shinso. "You say we shouldn't get involved, but why did you? I remember that declaration you made against us...I remember how sincere and determined you sounded! I don't think you'd willingly help someone like Kizuka, not if you were as serious about joining the hero course as I thought you were!"

"Of course I wouldn't help Kizuka," Shinso replied. "And I'm as serious now as I was then about joining the hero course." He leveled his gaze directly at Izuku, his lethargic eyes now suddenly brimming with resolve. "That's why I'm going to be the one who stops Club Fear."

Izuku and Tokoyami were visibly taken aback by this new declaration, casting glances at one another as they processed it.

"I intended on doing this ever since she invited me," Shinso explained. "As if I was going to ruin my chances at joining the hero course by joining a damn cult—"

"This is great!" Izuku exclaimed suddenly and excitedly, and it was Shinso's turn be taken aback. "We can cooperate and stop them together!"

"Wrong," Shinso responded harshly, smirking a little as Izuku's excitement deflated. "You see, I think Kizuka Yuuku is a damn nut case, but she was right about one thing: why should I wait until the sports festival to get into the hero course?"

Tokoyami's eyes narrowed and Izuku felt his heart drop into his gut.

"Stopping Club Fear in the middle of their so-called ritual and forcing Kizuka and her little cohorts to confess to the principal should be more than enough to get me into 1-A or 1-B," Shinso said with a small smile before turning away from Izuku and Tokoyami. "And you needn't worry—I promise not
to let any of your friends get hurt."

"Wait, Shinso—!" Izuku cried out before his body suddenly became loose and limp, his surprised expression morphing into a blank and empty look.

What's...going on...?

"Go into that bathroom across the hall and sit in an open stall," Shinso ordered. "Stay out of my way, will you?"

Completely subjected to Shinso's will, Izuku silently obeyed. He made a sharp 90 degree turn toward the restroom and calmly walked to the door.

"Midoriya!?!" Tokoyami exclaimed, rattled by his friend's abrupt change in demeanor. He angrily whirled back to face Shinso again. "What have you done to him—!??"

Tokoyami's hostile stance suddenly fell into a limp one as well, his expression equally blank like Izuku's.

"Go into that bathroom across the hall and sit in an open stall," Shinso repeated without ever turning to look back at Tokoyami or Izuku. "You both can wait there until I've stopped Club Fear."

With that, Shinso continued his walk toward the 1-D classroom to fulfill his own agenda, leaving a thoroughly brainwashed Tokoyami and Izuku in his wake.

I-I can't control my body...! Izuku panicked as his body moved on its own, carrying out Shinso's directive. He watched helplessly as he slowly walked into the boy's restroom, with a controlled Tokoyami right behind him. His struggling was in vain, as Shinso's will had imposed itself over his own, detaching Izuku's mind from his body and shackling it into place.

Some kind of...brainwashing! Izuku realized as his body entered into an open stall and promptly plopped down on the thankfully closed toilet lid. His body leaned backwards, squishing his backpack between his body and the commode, a position that his cloak was none too fond of if the sudden thrashing was any indication. This must be Shinso's Quirk!

Tokoyami soon followed suit and entered the stall next to Izuku's, taking a seat and remaining otherwise still and silent.

Izuku saw that Shinso had them stay out of the way in general, and not just his way. Was ordering them into the restroom just Shinso's way of keeping them safe? It was hard to tell with that demeanor of his. Still, Shinso now had to be stopped alongside Kizuka. There might not have been any outward malice in Shinso's words or motives, but Izuku wasn't about to let the fate of his friends—and that of his mistake—rest solely on Shinso's shoulders. He had to find a way to free his captive mind from Shinso's brainwashing!

Let's see...Shinso's Quirk prevents my mind from having any control over my body. Izuku thought as he continued to struggle, searching for any possible angle to break free of Shinso's hold. It allows for complete domination of someone's mind...

A revelation.

...but does it allow for control of the soul?

Izuku ceased his struggling and instead capitalized on his tranquil immobility, drawing himself inward as he channeled the personal energies flowing through his body. With the forced stillness of
his captive body, it took only moments for Izuku's soul to separate from his flesh. He lingered over himself, spinning and stretching as he saw for sure that he had complete control over his astral self. He was right—Shinso's brainwashing had no effect on one's own soul.

He phased his head through the stall wall and spotted Tokoyami's still captive body resting within, presumably with Dark Shadow shackled as well.

"Sorry, Tokoyami," Izuku muttered as he pulled back. "At least you'll remain out of harm's way here." He cast one final glance at his own body before departing—or more specifically the squished cloak thrashing from within Izuku's backpack. He felt a pang of guilt for coaxing it back into his pack, and he was sure to be in for some pain when he returned to his physical form.

_Dwell on that later, Izuku_, he told himself as he phased through the restroom wall to chase after Shinso.

Not one minute after Izuku departed, the restroom doors creaked open.

Izuku could soar far faster than he could walk when he was in his astral form, and soar he did, straight for the classroom with a conspicuous '1-D' sign plastered on its door. He phased right through it with no hesitation, spotting Shinso walking toward a closet door near the back of the room. 1-D was otherwise empty, with no sign of Kizuka, Todoroki, Ryou, or his twin brother. None of his other classmates were here either, which pleased Izuku immensely.

*Good, Izuku thought. * _Looks like I got here just in time._

"Stop!" Izuku shouted and materialized all at once so Shinso could see him.

Shinso predictably whirled about, staring up at Izuku's wispy, spectral appearance with no small amount of surprise.

"Wait—what—why—" Shinso stammered. "How is this possible? How are you free of my Quirk?"

"Your Quirk allows you to dominate the minds of others," Izuku responded, "but you can't touch the soul!"

Shinso seemed to test Izuku on just that, approaching him and cautiously waving a hand through his astral body, pulling back and rubbing it to ward off the otherworldly chill.

"Tch," Shinso clicked his tongue. "Are you still trying to meddle and stop Club Fear? I told you I would take care of that. How useful can you be in that state, anyway?"

"I can take care of myself!" Izuku retorted. "And besides, you won't be able to stop me, so you'll have no choice but to accept my offer of help!"

"...Fine," Shinso said with a huff, realizing how fruitless his desire to go about this alone had become now that Izuku was seemingly immune to his Quirk. "Follow me."

Shinso directed Izuku toward the closet door at the back of the class, a narrow door sandwiched between columns of shelves. The door swung open with an audible creak. Izuku peered in from behind as Shinso flipped a light switch, a lone bulb illuminating the clutter within. Shinso, however, ignored it, entering and directing Izuku toward the very back of the untidy storage room.

A shelf. A bare shelf spanning nearly the entire width of the small room, and behind it a door. The
shelf is sticking out slightly, and the door is barely cracked open, suggesting recent usage. Shinso
swung the shelf open, forcibly shoving any litter in its path out of the way, and then the door.

On the other side is a semi-narrow corridor, dimly lit with a slight yellowish glow whose illumination
barely touched all corners of the passageway, leaving much of it darkened. The walls and bits of
ceiling that Izuku could make out clearly were covered pipes, panels, and vents; a pair of ladders
were barely visible deeper in, one leading up...the other down.

And clinging to the metal floor were small specks of frost.

Todoroki, Izuku correctly surmised.

"This door was a sealed, unused entranceway into U.A's labyrinthine maintenance rooms," Shinso
explained. "The maintenance rooms are all connected from here all the way to the roof...and all the
way down to the basement," He motioned toward the steel ladders going straight up and straight
down. "Kizuka discovered this door early last week and decided then and there that their so-called
'ritual' was going to be held somewhere in here."

"Ritual?" Izuku asked aloud. Shinso had mentioned it briefly during their earlier confrontation, but
he hadn't elucidated it before commencing with the brainwashing, and this morning Ryou had also
mentioned a ritual in passing before attacking him again.

In both instances Izuku hadn't the time to request clarification.

And he wasn't going to have time for it now either.

"Shinso!"

"Shinso, you here already?"

The first voice Izuku immediately recognized as being Ryou's, and he instinctively went invisible
upon hearing it. The second voice was nearly identical to Ryou's albeit slightly higher pitched—
definitely his brother Hyou.

Shinso gave no discernible reaction to Izuku abruptly fading out of view, maintaining his typically
stoic visage as he exited the cluttered closet and reemerged into the 1-D classroom to greet Ryou and
Hyou.

"Yeah, I'm here, why are you—" Shinso suddenly stopped short, clearly caught off guard by
something.

Izuku, rendered invisible, was startled even worse.

Those were Hyou and Ryou's voices...but it wasn't the Youma twins who'd entered the room.

It was Tokoyami and Izuku's bodies.

"Shinso, nice to see you, friend," Ryou's voice spoke, though it was Izuku's lips that moved. The
green eyes that Izuku recognized as his own soon locked onto precisely where he was floating
seemingly unseen, and in his shock he failed to register a familiar tingling sensation that warned him
of this particular danger. "Hold still, would you, seems there's a pest hovering over your shoulder."

Before he can even process those words and react, a powerful, dark mass zooms past Shinso and
slams into Izuku's astral body, gripping him in a solid, shadowy vice. Dark Shadow is fully emerged
from Tokoyami's body and has Izuku's spectral form securely bound between its lightless claws.
Izuku utters a pained yell, reappearing before Shinso's eyes as Dark Shadow gives Izuku's astral form a painful squeeze.

_Dark Shadow can touch my astral form...!?_ Izuku could hardly register this new realization before being thrust toward the ground; a familiar face was looking down at him.

_His_ face.

"Oh, I'm going to enjoy this," Ryou's voice emanated from Izuku's body's lips once again, green eyes perusing over his scarred hands before setting on the captured astral form of Izuku. Izuku winced as he saw his own face twist into a malicious sneer that just _didn't belong._

"Hello, Midoriya," Ryou said tauntingly. "Anything you can do...I can do better~."

Tokoyami had been seized by the brother...and Izuku's body had been possessed by Ryou himself.
Crashing Club Fear, Part 2

Chapter Summary

Having thrown a wrench into Tokoyami and Izuku's plan to infiltrate Club Fear unwittingly, Shinso attempts to continue onward. If he can brainwash Kizuka, then her plans will surely fall apart, right? It's just as easy as getting her to respond to him...right?

"Oh, I feel as if I'm hero course material already."

Ryou let out a haughty laugh as he continued to lord over Izuku's captive spirit. He looked over the body of Izuku that he possessed, grinning with unveiled amusement as his eyes wandered, frowning with contempt only when he laid eyes on the numerous scars crisscrossing Izuku's hands.

All the while, Izuku vainly struggled against the mighty vice of Dark Shadow's claws. He grit his teeth and squirmed to no avail, and with each jerk of his spirit's torso it seemed the Hyou-possessed Tokoyami silently bid his enthralled Quirk to tighten its grip on Izuku evermore.

Amidst his squirming, Izuku felt many soft tremors rumbling out of Dark Shadow's form. He ceased for a moment and noticed then that the enigmatic Quirk beast's eyes were contorted and narrow from something akin to pain, its shaking directed not at Izuku, but rather the person controlling Tokoyami and it.

"S-sorry—" Dark Shadow quietly rasped out to Izuku. "Sorry, Midoriya—"

"You were foolish to think you could conceal yourself from me, Midoriya," Ryou's chastising voice drowned out Dark Shadow's sorrow. He plopped Izuku's backpack onto the desk beside him; aside from a barely discernible twitch of movement along the seams, Izuku wondered why his cloak had fallen still.

"I suppose I should give you some credit for effort," Ryou continued. "You simply didn't know what I know now: that our Quirks are not quite as identical as I once believed."

"What are you saying?" Izuku choked out.

"I don't leave a body behind like you do," Ryou informed him with a sly smile, and Izuku could scarcely believe his ears. Not leave a body behind? Wasn't that the entire idea of traversing the astral plane, that your soul had to be separate from your body in order to do it?

"Don't believe me?" Ryou asked, perhaps seeing the incredulity in the eyes of Izuku's soul. He phased his astral arm out of Izuku's physical body, letting it fall limp, and slowly waved it before the boy. Sure enough, within moments, instead of flesh giving way to spirit as Izuku was accustomed to, the inverse occurred, and spirit gave way to flesh. Ryou's hand and arm slowly became corporeal, as if his body was materializing from out of his soul itself.

"I don't believe it!" Izuku groaned out. "Your body and soul literally become one when you shift into the astral plane!?"

"There you go with that nonsensical lingo of yours again," Ryou said offhandedly as his astral hand phased back into Izuku's body. "Yes, I suppose that's one way to describe my Ghost Body Quirk."
"And you have Tokoyami possessed as well!?" Izuku demanded to know, shifting his eyes over to his enslaved friend.

"I have taken your body as my own for the time being," Ryou said. "My brother Hyou has taken the body of your classmate."

Izuku eyed the possessed Tokoyami with surprise, and Hyou responded by twisting the normally impassive face of Izuku's friend into one of malice, equaling that of his twin brother. Could the twins possibly have identical Quirks?

"I see the gears in your head turning," Hyou spoke with a smirk, his voice nearly identical to Ryou's save for it being of a slightly higher pitch or two. "No, my superpower can possess people, but I do not have Ghost Body like my brother. My Quirk is simply called...Hijacking." At this, Izuku watched in revulsion as a pair of arms seemingly sprouted out of his friend's shoulders, and a head and neck followed out of Tokoyami's own. The boy's face was indeed nearly identical to that of Ryou, all except the hair—his long, dark bangs drooped over his left eye, mirroring that of his twin brother, whose hair covered his right. "I can morph my physical body into the bodies of others, hijacking control and bending them and their powers to my will."

Several things seemed to click in Izuku's mind in that moment. He recalled his eavesdropping of Kizuka's words to Shinso at the end of last week, how they all had Quirks that were useless for fighting against robots in the entrance exam, and that they were 'evil' to boot. It all made sense now: Shinso's Brainwashing, Ryou's Ghost Body, and Hyou's Hijacking couldn't affect robots, only other people! And seeing them all in action, Izuku didn't doubt that their powers could be perceived as 'evil' by others, and even in spite of his current predicament, Izuku carried a great deal of sympathy for them.

This revelation certainly answered the questions Izuku had regarding Ryou and Hyou's possessions, but it still didn't explain the glaring problem currently squeezing his spectral diaphragm. How could Tokoyami's Dark Shadow Quirk possibly touch and even harm his soul? Did it also somehow exist on the astral plane as he did now?

"Hyou, you bagged yourself a special one this time," Ryou commented to his brother, patting Dark Shadow on its head as it too struggled as vainly against Hyou's control as Izuku was against it. "For it to be able to interact with both physical objects and souls...this superpower would have taken Tokoyami far in life if he had been fortunate enough to not get in our way."

"Thank you, brother." Hyou replied. "I don't think I'll tire of this one as easily as I have ones in the past."

Izuku grit his teeth—this time in anger. He could hardly stand to listen to these twins denigrate and lord over Tokoyami's will and keep his Quirk captive as well, as if it wasn't fully sentient and undeserving of such treatment, too.

"Well, let's not waste anymore time, shall we?" Ryou turned toward Shinso, who remained guarded and silent as the scene between Izuku and the Youma twins unfolded before him. Ryou, in Izuku's body, gave Shinso an unreadable smile, and Shinso responded with an unexpressive look. "We can go along and descend to the basement to meet up with Kizuka. Hyou can handle Midoriya and join us before the ritual is complete and the staff catch wind that something's afoot."

Shinso remained still after Ryou spoke, as if he were weighing his options. His plan from the beginning had been to use his Quirk on Kizuka and stop whatever it was Club Fear had planned; he'd only wished Kizuka had divulged more than she had about their scheme. He had to tread carefully, even though he had not been attacked by the sentient shadow and it still seemed he carried
Shinso's eyes flickered toward Izuku's who returned the stare. In those brief moments, an unspoken agreement was forged between them that Shinso should continue on, to stop Kizuka once he had the opportunity.

Also in that brief moment, at least from Izuku could decipher, there appeared to be an unspoken apology in Shinso's seemingly expressionless eyes as well.

Shinso nodded to Ryou and turned away without a word, making his way back into the cluttered closet toward the uncovered entranceway into U.A.'s labyrinthine maintenance rooms. He reached the ladder near the end of the dim corridor and, giving the 1-D classroom one last glance, descended.

Ryou looked askance toward Izuku's writhing soul as Shinso disappeared from view, baring Izuku's teeth in a sadistic grin. "The wild card is out of play now," he whispered to Izuku before he began to walk after Shinso. "You're not the only one who thought walking in blind was a good idea."

No, Shinso...!

Shinso didn't truly have their trust after all. Izuku didn't know why or how, perhaps Shinso had slipped up somehow over the weekend or perhaps it was during their earlier confrontation, but the brainwashing boy's treachery had been laid bare for all to see it seemed.

"Shin—ah...!" Izuku tried to cry out a warning of some kind, hoping his voice could reach to Shinso before he descended too far along into whatever trap was waiting for him down there, but at that moment Dark Shadow gave another vicious squeeze of his chest, rendering his speech indiscernible beyond a pained gasp.

"This is going to sound rich coming from me, Midoriya," Ryou began, "but I wonder if a soul can bleed?" He turned to address his brother. "Squeeze him until he pops ectoplasm, Hyou! I'll be back after squaring away everything with Kizuka. Ta-ta."

With a final condescending wave, Ryou departed after Shinso, leaving Izuku to a presumably grisly fate. A dark limb covered the boy's mouth to silence any screams as his very soul began to be slowly crushed in the enthralled Dark Shadow's baleful clutch.

Barely a minute or two had passed for Shinso between descending to the dimly lit basement level and Ryou catching up to him with a light jog. The maintenance rooms were silent, save for the rushing hiss of air conditioning in the vents, the whir of fans and covered circuitry, and the odd clang among the intricate piping system running the length, width, and height of the school. Izuku's pained groans could not be heard down here.

And Shinso much rather preferred that to tolerating the temporary company of the malignant asshole wearing Izuku's body. He was practically counting down the minutes to when he had Kizuka brainwashed and this whole affair ended.

"Good thing we were there to stop Midoriya from using you to pull off any mischief," Ryou said a little too sweetly for Shinso's liking, giving him a slap on the back to boot. "Heck, for all we know he might've been planning to possess you. And we might've been none the wiser if we hadn't arrived when we did! Not to mention you brainwashed them, making our jobs that much easier."

Shinso uttered a grunt as Ryou gave him a slap, sensing it was more half-hearted than hearty. He shrugged it off and gave only a nod of acknowledgment before continuing on, trying to maintain his
focus and composure. It was important for him to stop Kizuka first before their little 'ritual' took off, mainly because he was still in the dark about what this ritual even entailed. He had pressed for answers the day he'd been invited, but she'd kept him thoroughly at arms' length since the beginning, which he found strange since she sought him out for membership into her little cult, not the other way around.

I guess it doesn't matter, Shinso thought. Whatever half-baked plot they've got up their sleeves, it'll all fall apart once I have Kizuka brainwashed. She need only respond to me once, same for Ryou.

A snap of cold shudders Shinso out of his thoughts. Strange...there were no air conditioning vents nearby. Kizuka came into sight, her body and hair outlined by the corridor's yellow glow, as he and Ryou rounded the next corner, and Shinso was immediately put off by her for some reason he couldn't quite place. She'd been slowly pacing back and forth, alone among the labyrinthine corridors, with neither that strange red book she'd been showing off to him or any of the other 1-A students he knew she'd lure down here anywhere to be seen.

Why is she here? Shinso thought of Kizuka's sudden appearance. I thought she'd be further in...

"Just you two?" Kizuka suddenly called out. Her voice was without surprise or suspicion, yet seemed to demand an answer all the same.

Shinso maintained his composure and silence as he anxiously prepared to spring his trap. She needed to respond to his words for this to work.

"Hyou will be here shortly with Tokoyami's body," Ryou explained as succinctly as possible, catching Shinso off guard a second time by continuing to walk toward and then past Kizuka until his form was visible in the corridor no longer; he seemed to disappear into the depths of pipes and ventilation.

Blinking, Shinso became aware that Kizuka's eyes and attention were laid squarely on him; not once had they drifted to Ryou as he passed her by.

"Are you ready, Shinso?" Kizuka asked, putting her sharp teeth on full display with a cattish grin.
"By this day's end, our entry into the hero course will be all but secure. It will be our first step toward true, genuine freedom."

"...I am," Shinso replied quietly. This was it, was all he could think. Now she need only respond.
"Are you?"

Kizuka gave a soft hum. "I am—"

Shinso tensed as he mentally moved to activate his Quirk, attempting to use her meager response to impose his will over her mind. There was a pregnant pause in Kizuka's sentence.

And a pallor of dread descending upon Shinso's visage as he realized his brainwashing failed. Nothing had changed in Kizuka's demeanor or posture, nothing to indicate she was under his control, and indeed, trying to activate his Quirk on her felt like firing a gun with no rounds in it.

"—but you aren't." Kizuka finished her statement, her grin as disingenuous as it was seconds before.

Visibly startled now, Shinso again tried to activate his Quirk. Again and again he tensed and released, and Kizuka was no closer to becoming brainwashed than the first time.

"Shinso, Shinso, Shinso," Kizuka chided the indigo-haired youth, "I knew this betrayal was coming and I'm still disappointed."
What? Shinso dared not blink as Kizuka taunted his plan now dashed upon the pipes surrounding them.

"And to think I was truly sincere in my invitation to you last week," Kizuka sighed. "But you just had to stick to those pesky convictions of yours and play the hero when you're not even in that course yet, didn't you? I offered you freedom, and you chose to be a slave to your morals."

"It doesn't take much pretending to be a hero to show that I'm more hero course material than you are," Shinso hissed.

"And look at where your pretending led you," Kizuka retorted. "Your oh-so clever attempt to manipulate me, backfired because you didn't truly understand the scope of my Quirk."

"Your Fearmonger Quirk lets you see and project peoples' biggest fear!" Shinso said, his voice now slightly raised as his composure slipped.

"Wrong," she corrected in a cool manner. "I can see and project ALL of your fears, from the chiefest of your phobias to the most mundane of your miserable little insecurities. And what was one such fear that I found while I was flipping through your mind like a child's picture book?" She drilled her eyes into his. "You feared, no matter how slight, of what might happen should your attempt to brainwash me fail."

Shinso took a step back, his blood running bone cold as the realization dawned on him that he'd been had from the start.

I was talking to an illusion of hers all along! Shinso realized. An illusion born out of the fear she mentioned? No wonder my Quirk failed to work! That must be why Ryou kept walking and didn't stop, he also knew what I was planning and led me right into the trap!

As the false Kizuka illusion faded away completely, a frigid mass of ice rushed out of the dimness, overtaking Shinso's body as his guard was utterly dropped. Shinso could do naught but yell out in surprise as he found himself suddenly pinned to a wall behind columns of ice, reaching from ceiling to floor with intermittent gaps like prison bars.

The form of Shoto Todoroki strode into view, his expression as stolid as Shinso's was minutes prior.

"Hey!" Shinso barked as he struggled to breach his icy confines. "Let me go!"

What last dash of hope Shinso still possessed was being spent on the chance that Todoroki actually responded to his demand in a verbal manner.

That hope was wasted. Todoroki responded with little more than an empty, uninterested glance. Placing his hand against one of the columns of ice, Todoroki looked on as the gaps slowly became filled and Shinso was visible no more, obscured behind thick, glacial sheets.

From within his icy prison, Shinso could barely make out the red half of Todoroki's hair...and also that he was suddenly no longer alone. A dark, humanoid shape materialized above his being, as if it were radiating from out of Todoroki himself, and leered down at Shinso, frightening him greatly.

Shinso let out a panicked yell as dark tendrils slithered through the ice unhindered and coiled around his unfrozen abdomen, and all at once he was set upon by a great draining sensation. He yelled to no avail, and he knew it, too: from beneath the thick ice, his voice would sound muffled and
indecipherable, rendering his Quirk unusable.

Aside from yelling to an audience of none, Shinso could only languish and contemplate how badly his plan to go about this alone blew up in his face.

Kizuka's ears perked as the faint mesmerizing rasp of her wraithlike ally's voice loftily bounced off the walls and ceilings around them, filling the corridor of their ritual with sweet whisperings of praise and promises to come.

"You did well, Shoto," the feminine voice would say. "Your sister is proud of the terror you instilled in that traitor."

Sure enough, it was Todoroki who strolled into view, with the phantom-like guise of his sister Fuyumi hovering over him, its lips close to his ear. Kizuka grinned; with Ryou by her side and their sacrifice here and ready, the only one not present was Hyou.

They could finally begin.

The stretch of corridor Kizuka had chosen was near the center of the basement, practically as far from any pathways down as could be. One might think this corridor would be even dimmer than all the rest, but it was actually lit aglow by a dismal luminescence. Levitating before Kizuka, with pages splayed open, was the red tome—the Somnum Exterreri. The page she had the tome turned to had the imprisoning rune keeping her ally at bay on full display, a series of intricate arcs and crisscrosses that pulsed with an otherworldly light.

Chanting an incantation under her breath, Kizuka began her work with all the knowledge she had gleamed since acquiring the book. The Rune of Niśā glowed brighter still, the ink forming its arcane shape seemingly lifting off the page it was etched on and dripping onto the concrete floor in thick, viscous globs. The enchanted ooze quickly spread out into many different trails, all inevitably linking back with one another as the seal was recreated in an enlarged form on the floor.

A disheartening cry shattered what quiet peace Kizuka was enjoying in the first steps toward her perceived freedom. Thoroughly annoyed, Kizuka rolled her eyes toward the source of the interruption: an ensnared Uraraka, bound tightly by dark, ethereal thorns wrapping firmly around the length of her body. She stood off to the side beside an equally entrapped Jiro and Kaminari, each covered by dark vines of their own. The books she had brought to indulge in the lie that was Kizuka's literature club lay scattered around her as she fought uselessly against her spectral bonds, unable to bring her hands together to use her Quirk. She alone struggled, for Jiro and Kaminari were completely enraptured by whatever trance Kizuka had weaved over them, leaving only her to display some form of defiance against their captors.

"Stop this, please!" Uraraka cried out to Kizuka. "Why are you doing this!? Let us go!"

With a groan, Kizuka stomped over to Uraraka, cupping and squeezing the hapless girl's cheeks between her fingers to shut her up. "If you insist on crying, then I insist that you cry to yourself quietly!" she hissed to her. "Stew in your own misery without subjecting us to it, will you? Your whining is ruining my big day!"

Kizuka slowly gazed back toward the pulsing rune on the floor, the one that had literally oozed out of her tome. The swirling vines keeping the three 1-A students captives grew longer still, reaching out in a frenzied flail toward the great rune and connecting to it as shadowy sinews keeping a larger, more dreadful mass intact. Immediately Uraraka groaned more weakly than before, and her body wobbled as some foul essence flowed from out of her being and into the rune.
"Feel any better?" Kizuka asked her tauntingly. "That drain you must surely be feeling—that's all your fear, despair, and hatred flowing out of your very being and into that rune. The total sum of all of you and your friends' negativity will fill the seal to its breaking point. So do as I said: please stew in your own misery for us, will you?"

But Uraraka's defiance had not yet been snuffed out. With Kaminari at least by her side, she felt some semblance of hope that they may yet escape. With that glimmer of hope, the dark vines surrounding her wilted ever-so slightly, and her eyes caught sight of a familiar form dimly illuminated in the gloomy glow of the rune.

"Midoriya!" She cried out to the boy with that unmistakable tuft of wild, green hair standing a ways off.

In her misplaced hope, however, she knew not of Ryou's deception until it was too late.

Uraraka saw what she thought was Izuku turn toward her with a briefly inquisitive eye, before an uncannily wicked grin sprouted on the boy's typically innocent face. He squished his own cheeks together, mocking what Kizuka had just done to her. "Gosh, Uraraka!" Ryou cried out in a voice that mocked Izuku's. "What are the odds of seeing you down here? I'll save you in a jiffy!"

And as he leaned back and laughed derisively, joined by Kizuka's snickering, Uraraka knew immediately that the person before her was not the Midoriya that she knew. Such condescension and mockery did not fit that boy at all, and to see it exhibited under the guise of her classmate roused in her yet more anger, letting it flow into the rune unwittingly.

"Y-you're not Midoriya!" Uraraka stammered angrily. "What have you done with him!?

"Oh, the real Midoriya?" Ryou pondered playfully. "I suppose my brother's already popped your friend like a grapefruit by now."

Uraraka shuddered in disbelief. Midoriya? Killed? It couldn't be...she could scarcely believe that Midoriya, who was bar none one of the best of her class with his Energy Reign Quirk—a Quirk that could open up _portals_ for crying out loud!—could have fallen like this imposter said!

But even as she cast Ryou's words aside as obvious deceitful lies, Uraraka's resolve wavered, her defiance cracked. The dark, sinewy vines that wilted from the glimmers of hope radiating from her soul grew thick and sharper than before, rejuvenated by her growing despair.

"T-Todoroki..." Uraraka weakly muttered, but her enraptured classmate showed her no heed or care. His eyes remained firmly fixed on the pulsing rune before him, his ears blocked all other noise aside from the spectral voice of his faithful sister. The phantasm remained hovering over Todoroki's body, its arms draped over his shoulders and across his chest as it continued to whisper softly into his ear. All the while, his gaze stayed blank and vacant.

Kizuka watched the rune glow ever darker as an additional dark thread slithered out of the dim corridor behind her, latching onto the seal. _Likely the one attached to Shinso in his icy tomb_, Kizuka thought with no small amount of pleasure. _We are on the brink now._

"Your brother Hyou is taking his sweet time," Kizuka said offhandedly to Ryou. "I thought he would've finished and been down here by now."

"Hyou has Tokoyami's body and Quirk hijacked," Ryou said with a shrug. "He also has Midoriya's soul in his clutches. Let him have his fun."
"Izuku Midoriya..." Kizuka rolled the name off her tongue, looking askance at the body Ryou stole. "Hard to believe there was someone in the hero course with a Quirk nearly identical to your own."

Ryou frowned and clenched Izuku's scarred hands into fists. "Don't remind me."

"Hyou can have his fun, so long as he does not underestimate that boy," the once raspy voice whispering sweet nothings into Todoroki's ear spoke in a deep and menacing tone. The white-haired ethereal visage of Fuyumi Todoroki dissolved as it lifted itself from the boy's body. The white hair blackened into a nebulous haze, and the fair sisterly face morphed into a grim, white scowl with deep, sunken pits for eyes.

"Izuku Midoriya is the student of the man who bested me nearly six years ago," the shade informed them. "The man who has kept me tethered to that accursed tome: Stephen Strange!" The shadow swirled angrily at the utterance of that name. "Possessing his body may mean little if your brother is careless and allows his soul to roam free before it withers from prolonged separation!"

"Why did you not enthrall him yourself if you believe he poses such a risk?" Kizuka asked.

"I dare not challenge a practitioner of the mystic arts in my current state," the shadow replied. "I cannot be assured of my victory until after the sacrifice. Only when the seal keeping me tethered is broken and I have a new corporeal form to derive everlasting sustenance from will I feel confident in meeting Strange's disciple in battle."

"And beyond even that..." the 'King of Dreams' continued. "I sense a certain...resistance in this boy. He is not so readily afflicted by fear and despair as one might expect. That is why the student of Strange must not be underestimated!"

Kizuka's gut twisted with vehemence; she could not stomach the thought of being unable to bring anyone down to their knees with her power, let alone someone like Izuku Midoriya, someone even her benefactor seemed to regard as a possible threat. And if Izuku was truly a possible threat...

She would demolish his so-called resistance and break him.

"And what better way to break him than through the second part of our plan?" Kizuka asked aloud, turning her attention back toward the captive 1-A students. "What better way to break him than through the despair of his own friends?"

"If the Quirk that Hyou has hijacked is truly as strong as you say it is, then he should have no problem holding his own against these three," Kizuka continued, looking over her captive audience devilishly. She strolled over to Uraraka, squeezing her cheeks yet again. "Hear that, 'hero'?" she asked. "Not only did your friend fail, but now you'll have to fight the one who killed him!"

The dark vines shifted in shape, willed by Kizuka's malevolent words and will. Their thorns receded into their stalks, and their sinewy bodies grew thick with scales that glistened even in the gloomy dark of the rune's glow. The ends of the vines swayed back and forth until they split open, and twin fangs protruded from the new opening. The vines had morphed into blackened serpents that hissed and bit into the captured students' bodies, phasing inside and injecting their darkness to cloud their minds and souls further.
"—not dead," Uraraka groaned out as she endured Kizuka's torture. "Midoriya...not dead..."

"Whatever lets you sleep at night, dear," Kizuka replied, lifting Uraraka's head up so she could see with her own eyes the last shred of defiance fading entirely from the girl's. She took a couple steps back, looking over the thoughtless drones now standing at attention before her.

"Oh, I can't wait for tomorrow's headline," Kizuka spoke with glee. "It'll be something like this: 'Stress of Heroics Too Much For Students After USJ Attack? Multiple 1-A Students Expelled After Caught Brawling After School!'" She gave Ryou a knowing smile. "You're not going to hold back either, are you?"

"Of course not," Ryou said.

"Their fight will supply the last bit of despair—"

"KIZUKA!" A panicked scream rang down the corridor, echoing of pipes and ventilation. It was Hyou's voice. "RYOU! THEY'RE COMING—!"

The voice of Hyou suddenly cut out before it could finish, and the corridor fell back into silence as the lingering echoes slowly faded. Kizuka was rooted where she stood, rendered still by surprise and newfound uncertainty. The shadow was stoic and silent, perhaps contemplating that its words were not taken seriously and that Izuku had indeed been underestimated.

In stark contrast, Ryou seemed amused, almost happy even. Perhaps this sudden change in events would allow him to satiate his desire to fight and prove himself over Izuku once more. He would take Hyou's mistake not as a failure, but as an opportunity to be seized.

"Let him have his fun, huh?" Kizuka used Ryou's own words against him. "And 'they're' must mean Hyou has lost control of Tokoyami and that he's also free. Change of plans then! Ryou, we'll lure them down here—"

"No."

"What?" Kizuka blinked, unsure if she had heard him right.

"We'll stick with the original plan as much as we can," Ryou said, his eyes—Izuku's eyes—peering headlong down the dim corridor with a glint of excitement in them. "I want to meet him head-on. I'm going to settle this once and for all. I want to see—want to know—just what makes him hero course material."

You somehow overcame my brother, Midoriya? Ryou thought, excited at the prospect of getting to fight his self-proclaimed enemy yet again. That's fine. But now you'll have to overcome me!

"Let's go," he said aloud, addressing the 1-A thralls as he pointedly ignored Kizuka's protests. Ryou, in Izuku's body, led the controlled Kaminari, Jiro, and Uraraka down the dark hall, in the direction of Hyou's screams of warning.

"Why are you letting them go?" Kizuka whirled on the King of Dreams, who held true ultimate sway over their captives.

"Let the fodder pay out their role," the glaring visage replied. "Let us play ours. Do not lose focus just because something is not going according to plan completely."

Right, Kizuka reminded herself. The ritual.
The shade melted into the seal on the floor, preparing for its imminent freedom as it donned once more the affectionate voice of Fuyumi to call out to Shoto.

"Shoto," it beckoned the entranced boy, who had remained silent and still since arriving, closer and closer toward the Rune of Niśā, until, step by step at last, the prodigy's feet were approaching closer to the center.

So close... Kizuka could practically feel her skin crawling with impatience as she walked beside Shoto to help guide him toward the center. Heroics and Freedom are but a hair's breadth away. Once the despair of their fight seeps into this seal, it will surely break, and Kizuka Yuuku will be held back by society no longer! No one will deny the freedom that I deserve!

And just as she reveled in the fate she believed she was fast approaching, Kizuka also reveled in the lies she whispered into Todoroki's ear as he reached the center of the rune, her chosen sacrifice and source of everlasting sustenance for the King of Dreams.

"It won't be long now, Shoto," Kizuka snickered to him. "As promised, you will receive that which you most desire: to finally be rid of your father's wretched half that lies within you."

"You will finally be able to become a hero."

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