read between the lines

by realfakedoors

Summary

Quirkless as the day he was born, Izuku is determined to become a hero and takes the Yūei entrance exam. With the highest written exam score in over a decade, he is offered admission to General Studies, Class 1-C. The editor-in-chief of the school paper approaches Izuku after finding his misplaced notebook and asks if he would like to become a staff writer. Urged to turn his Hero Analysis journals into a column, he agrees, with the caveat he can go by a pen name.

The column is a success, quickly amassing a huge following, and it becomes a mark of social pride in the Hero Department to be featured in an article by "Deku."

Izuku has, at the same time, developed a very inconvenient crush on a very pretty, very unapproachable student in 1-A. That's not really a problem, since Izuku is basically invisible to a guy like him anyway.

Well... it wasn't a problem, until Izuku accidentally publishes a huge confessional op-ed piece, broadcasting his feelings for the world to read.
Meanwhile, poor Shōto is dealing with his asshole father and just wants to eat his cold soba in peace.

Tododeku. Minor Shindenki, Kiribaku, Momojiro, Erasermic. Just fluff & an AU canon rewrite!
Go Beyond! Weekly

Chapter Summary

Izuku joins the staff of the school newspaper. What could possibly go wrong?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

There were people in this world who were lucky, others that were unlucky.

And then, there were people like Izuku Midoriya.

Izuku’s life would most aptly be described as, “such a catastrophic series of misfortunes, it really wasn’t even measurable in normal, human terms.” Other descriptors with greater accuracy include ‘walking trash fire’ or ‘unironically stumbling through this mortal coil’, but he tried to keep a positive outlook in spite of the difficult hand fate had dealt him.

But, man. If fate didn’t make it really hard on him sometimes.

Take his second day as a Yūei student, for instance. It wasn’t the first time Izuku nearly died, but it was certainly his most mortifying example to date.

It had been unusually warm for early April, and the sky provided a brilliant blue backdrop with rich rays of sunshine lighting his path to school. He was a little uncomfortable in his uniform, sweating on his walk from the train to the front gates, and he had to resist the urge to groan when he was stopped at the last crosswalk before the entrance. Missed it, just by a few seconds. Air conditioning was only a few dozen more paces away, but he was stuck on the other side of the street.

Naturally, it was the perfect time for a villain to attack.

A street or two over, some sort of bomb went off, and in a heartbeat all hell had broken loose. The resounding soundwave made his ears pop and, like a cauterized wound, the air itself blistered with a surge of scorching heat that followed a half-second later. The ground shook and people, cars, even buildings were all unsettled. Around him, a few pedestrians, some students, and adults dressed in their work clothes all staggered, gasps and shouts and honking horns swelling and filling the air in a cacophonic swirl of sensation. Nearby, strangers latched onto each other or random poles and fixtures in an attempt to keep their balance.

Except Izuku, who was instead knocked into as opposed to grabbed onto, and he went sprawling face first into the swerving traffic.

He remembered looking up at the silver frontend of an average sedan, the windshield too dark to see the driver, the clouded glass of the headlights dull in the morning light. In retrospect, Izuku could appreciate that it was strange that he could recall so many details, considering it all transpired in perhaps one or two seconds, but that was probably on account of the adrenaline. In any event, his heart leapt in his throat, hands flying to his face in instinct, praying to All Might that his Mom’s health insurance would cover whatever happened to him, air seizing in his lungs in an
infinite moment of fear.

He imagined that his body would end up badly mangled, his blood would decorate the front of the car like some sort of really macabre modern art, and he would be late for his second day of school? Maybe the car would just kill him at that rate. Holding his breath, Izuku waited, and then—

…

…

Umm. Aren’t I supposed to die now?

But the crash never came. The broken bones, fractured skull, internal bleeding—everything he’d been bracing for—all stopped.

Or, more accurately, it froze.

Izuku blinked, not trusting his eyes even as he gingerly lowered his hands, exhaling a puff of frosty air as he studied the surroundings. Blue-white crystals covered everything, all the cars in the immediate vicinity, including the one coming right for him, completely stilled. Even with the blinding sunshine overhead, a shiver ran from his fingertips to his toes, chilly as he pulled himself up on the sheet of ice that blanketed the streets.

Errantly, his mind took the time to notice that, wow, it was beautiful. A surreal sort of urban chaos crossed by a mystical, winter wonderland.

And then, the sun blotted out, and Izuku had half a mind to wonder if death had come back to claim him for cheating it one too many times in his fifteen years. When he looked up, he thought, well, if this is dying, then maybe it’s not so bad.

“Are you alright?” A rough, urgent voice asked, and Izuku nearly forgot he was barely on his hands and knees in the middle of the street. Before he could catch his breath, a hand was helping him to stand, and Izuku’s body acted on its own, reaching to hold onto the mismatched-temperature fingertips. He was almost fully upright when his feet slipped on the ice, falling face-to-chest with the poor guy who was just trying to help him.

A page of his notebook flashed conveniently in the fore of his mind:


Some personal notes he told himself to add later:

Beautiful, husky voice. Heterochromatic eyes. Body manifests different temperatures, following the same pattern as his quirk.

It wasn’t the first time Izuku had seen him. Indeed, between his fame, prominent facial scar, and distinct hair, Shōto Todoroki was quite hard to miss. Whether it be television, from across the lunch hall, or during the very first few when that Izuku had noticed 1-A engaging in some outdoor training from the window of his own classroom, Shōto Todoroki was no stranger to him.

But this was the first time he’d ever seen him up close, and he couldn’t have cared less about quirks, or fame, or class rank in that exact moment.

His eyes.
One was the color of an ocean under sunlight, the other was dark like a subdued storm, and both were fixed on him.

Oh. Right. Izuku had been asked a question, and instead of answering, he was still smushed up against his savior’s chest, peering up at his face like he was some kind of unfairly attractive god.

“Nhg… s-sorry?” Izuku eventually answered, though he said it like a question. (Honestly, he was just proud of himself for managing to form words in that exact moment.)

Todoroki helped him back onto the pavement without slipping, leaving him with a few parting words, “As long as you’re safe, don’t be sorry.”

Without waiting for a response—not that Izuku would have been able to provide one—he turned and slid back across the street with the poise and grace of an Olympic skater, muscles tensing in his back, right arm, and legs as he propelled himself with practiced ease. At almost the same time, the emergency first responders were starting to arrive. With the traffic safely stopped and no one else in any apparent danger, Todoroki resumed his easy pace, walking towards the front of the school. He passed the main gates as ambulances and police cars and EMTs filed in around Izuku, who had taken to watching the other student walk steadily in the other direction.

And that, as they say, was that.

It was the day Izuku learned what it was like to behold the sparkling morning sea and the dark rust of a nighttime rain at the same time, that he should plan to get to school a bit earlier in case of villain attacks, and how it felt to fall maybe, just-a-little-bit in love.

After an admittedly rough first few days, Izuku was thrilled for his classes to really get going. His homeroom, Class 1-C, was overseen by Ectoplasma—it was a bit jarring to see the intimidating hero in a button-down shirt and sweater vest, and more than a little disconcerting when he looked right at you with white, pupiless eyes, but Izuku didn’t mind. If it meant that he would get to learn lessons about heroism from one of the Pro’s themselves, Izuku wouldn’t complain even if it was taught in an entirely different language.

It took about three full lessons for the dust to settle, the overwhelming sense of newness to Yūei calming a bit as Izuku fell into a rhythm.

It was near the end of the first week that he, nose buried in his notebook and effectively not watching where he was going at all, ended up running headlong into someone while walking down the hallway, scattering both of their belongings all over the place.

“Oh, oh no—I’m so sorry!” he felt his cheeks run red-hot, diving down and quickly collecting both of their things into separate piles. His hands were shaking when he passed the books back to the person across from him.

“H-Hey, that’s okay!” A female voice reassured, and Izuku was relieved when he looked up and didn’t see any source of anger or annoyance in the girl’s gaze. If anything, she looked a little bemused, her long ashen-blue hair a bit disheveled, but she appeared just fine otherwise. “It happens to the best of us. I’m clumsy sometimes, too.”

“A-Ah, yeah,” he chuckled, almost coughing on his nerves. “Sorry, again.”
“It’s really no problem,” she repeated, accepting her books from Izuku and holding them over her chest. “Are you… okay? You look a little shaken up.”

There was something about her steady, calm tone that actually did help Izuku to gather some of his anxiety into a large inhale, letting it out slowly from his nose. He felt considerably better, and nodded.

“I, yeah, I’m okay. Thank you!”

The bell rang just before the nice moment could become awkward, so they both ducked their heads and kept moving along their way, she, presumably, to a class, and Izuku towards the lunch hall.

It was early enough in the school year that most of his peers were still on the free trial version of their respective friendships, testing each other’s company out, so lunch was a bit of a mess. People traded seats and friends and food with reckless abandon, and Izuku just considered himself lucky if he didn’t have to sit next to a complete stranger.

Uraraka, the nice girl from the entrance exam who saved him from falling flat on his face, waved to him from across the dining area. Politely, Izuku waved back, hoping his apologetic smile would suffice as an explanation for his choice not to sit with her—she had been incredibly kind the few times he’d run into her since, but she was seated mostly with other 1-A students and it made his hands shake to imagine trying to talk to them.

Also, importantly, Kaachan was seated at the same table, a couple seats away, and Izuku had enough near-death experiences for one week. He’d take his chances sitting with a stranger over the certainty of getting his face blown away by his former classmate’s rage.

That was how Izuku ended up almost alone, not squished between anybody, but seated across from a boy he recognized from his own class, who, quite frankly, also intimidated the hell out of Izuku but at least it was just one other person instead of being surrounded by new faces on each side. Hitoshi Shinsō spoke very little in class, gaze constantly fixed between a glare and muted disinterest. He had bags beneath his eyes, papery pale skin and an indigo mop of hair that was even messier than his own, and he seemed almost purposefully committed to not making friends.

...Which, right now, was the most Izuku could hope for in the nightmarish social requirements of a high school lunch period. Wordless, Shinsō raised a brow as Izuku sat down his tray.

“Sorry,” Izuku muttered. “I can tell you want to be left alone, but there’s nowhere else to sit. I won’t bother you.”

As promised, Izuku didn’t speak again, and Shinsō didn’t comment or ask him to leave. It was the closest Izuku had to a peaceful moment that day as the pair ate in silence.

That peace was short-lived, of course, because as soon as Izuku finished eating, he dove into his book bag to retrieve his notebook so he could finish the additions he’d been making to his civilian profile to their homeroom teacher. Except, his search became frantic, and then he was checking every pouch in his bag, under the table, even lifting up his tray, eyes wide and only slightly manic.

Just short of taking off his clothes and searching the sleeves, Izuku sighed. It was gone. Clearly. And if that wasn’t bad enough, he blinked through the fresh prick of tears in his eyes, because—because of course this would happen to him. And of course he would cry about it, why the hell would he expect differently?

He climbed back into his seat, pushed his empty food tray to the side, and crumpled over the table,
arms and head both flat against the surface.

Unawares, Izuku began muttering to himself, thoughts spinning in rapid succession.

“Are… you, erm… okay?” Shinsō asked after a while, and Izuku had half a mind not to answer—he knew his classmate’s quirk just as well as Shinsō knew he was quirkless—but, honestly, Izuku was so done that he couldn’t even care. Shinsō couldn’t have worse luck than him, so maybe he’d be better off letting someone else run his life for a change.

But All Might wouldn’t give up or complain...

Sighing, Izuku lifted his head, and his spirits. “Yeah, I’m okay. It’s just been a long morning, and it looks like I misplaced my notebook. My fault.”

For a few seconds, the two held each other’s gaze. Izuku wasn’t sure what it would feel like to be brainwashed, and unconsciously he realized his muscles had tensed, as if testing the possibility, waiting to see what Shinsō would do.

When nothing proceeded to happen, Izuku furrowed his brow and pulled out another, strictly academic, notebook and a pen.

“Does your quirk work if people don’t verbally respond?” he asked. “Does a shrug count? Or a noise of assent or dissent?”

Shinsō leaned back a bit, eyeing Izuku’s poised pen with distrust. “Why?”

“I—oh, right. Sorry. I like to learn as much as I can about other people’s quirks, and yours seems like such a complex, multifaceted one. I need to start a new notebook now that the other one is gone anyway. Might as well start now.”

Deadpan, Shinsō looked Izuku in the eye. “You know I could make you leave, right now, don’t you? You responded.”

“…Obviously?” Now it was Izuku’s turn to lean back. “I figured if you didn’t want to tell me, you’d use your quirk to send me away anyway, so it’s not like I had anything to lose by asking.”

“Oh.” That seemed to surprise his indigo-haired classmate, and Shinsō paused for several seconds. “Um… well, verbal responses only. It has to be something I can understand, but not necessarily the same language… like, I know si means yes in Spanish; if someone said si to something I asked, I’d be able to use it. If they said something more comprehensive than that, I wouldn’t be able to know if they were responding to me directly, so it wouldn’t work.”

“Wow.” Izuku watched the other with rapture as he explained, his own eyes wide, before his attention honed in on the fresh page of his mathematics notebook. In seconds, his hand was a blur, jotting down his own truncated version of Shinsō’s description, scribbling questions into the margins beside each bullet point.

“What’s the point in writing this down?” Shinsō remarked as Izuku began to label each characteristic appropriately—he would come back to reorganize the mess a bit better later. “My quirk is just straight-up brainwashing. Do you really care about small shit like that?”

“What?!” Izuku’s mouth fell open. “Of course I care. There’s so much nuance to a quirk like this, something that requires a recipient in order to activate. That’s pretty rare in itself, and the fact that it’s conditional is huge. There are so many ways you could use something like that to help people!”
It was hard to tell by the way Shinsō wore an expression of perfected disinterest, but Izuku would have sworn, for just a moment, there was a sort of flicker in his eyes. Some sort of recognition, perhaps.

“...Alright. What else do you want to know?”

After that, Izuku would hesitate to say he and Shinsō became friends, but there was definitely something like friendship there. They didn’t really talk in class or in the hallways, but they would walk to class together on occasion, and Shinsō didn’t turn Izuku away when he continued to sit with him at lunch or asked him questions about his quirk. He didn’t actually seem to mind, and Izuku tried to dial back talking so much when it was apparent Shinsō wasn’t in the mood.

That was how his few days of Yūei went: Izuku made a not-really-but-sort-of friend, acquired a disgusting amount of affection for someone he barely knew, and lost one valued, treasured notebook.

Yeah, that sounded about right.

As far as Shōto Todoroki was concerned, Yūei was a nuisance.

Don’t misunderstand; Shōto didn’t mind the facilities themselves, his classmates were—well. He cringed, thinking of Kaminari’s loud laugh, Mineta’s disgusting claims towards his female classmates, Bakugō’s awful attitude. His classmates were… erm, tolerable. The academic material was challenging and engaging.

But it didn’t feel like school. Or, at least, it didn’t feel like how Shōto imagined school was supposed to feel. Yūei was just another box on his father’s checklist. Another thing for his old man to lecture him about, to criticize him for, to drill into his head about improvement and goals and status.

Shōto couldn’t care less about his father’s ambitions. It had been nearly a decade since he’d bothered finding pride in his father’s agenda, and like hell would he start caring again now, when it was more present than ever. If anything, Shōto would say his compliance up to this point was simply out of spite—a nice, private fuck you to his father everytime he made no attempt to hide his disdain through the whole thing.

Begrudging. That was a nice word for it.

Unfortunately, that also meant the days dragged by. There was little time for Shōto to do anything he wanted to do, his schedule for each day already rigidly set forth.


The only time he wasn’t living off the routine was in the small gaps—while he rode the train into Yūei, laying in bed on his phone before he would sleep, lunch breaks. Those were the few times a day that he felt a little less like Enji Todoroki’s Son and just, Shōto. Brother to Fuyumi, Tōya, and Natsuo. A fifteen-year old who, honestly, liked cats, manga, and cold soba.

To that end, Shōto lived primarily in the flicker. The breath of a second between a heartbeat. He
hardly bothered entertaining friendships at school because there simply was not time, not when his days were already preprogrammed.

He wasn’t an isolationist by choice. In fact, he considered Yaoyoruzu to be his friend—they’d effectively grown up together—and he didn’t mind the company of his classmates during activities, but all of that was shrouded by the knowledge that they were moments spent on borrowed time. If there was ever an opportunity he could catch his breath, Shōto was usually too busy enjoying it for himself then sharing it with other people.

So he trudged through the itinerary, if only waiting so he could live in those shallow bursts, but there was no sense of balance. The time he spent merely existing, meeting the minimum obligatory standards set forth for him, was exhausting and far outweighed the time he spent enjoying himself.

In general, Shōto was a fairly private person. He couldn’t possibly possess the foresight to know if that was a byproduct of growing up under the limelight, or if he’d have ended up this way no matter what, but the reality was the same without the Freudian analytics: Shōto did not care much for the company of others.

Meeting new people almost always followed the same pattern. It was the way their eyes lingered, just for a second, just for a beat too long over his left eye. They would smile politely and say whatever they wanted to say to him, all the while pointedly, unnaturally, avoiding looking at his scar again after that.

He didn’t quite understand it. Was it pity? Fear? Sympathy? None of those were things Shōto wanted to be associated with him, but he was even less interested in slogging through a conversation about how he’d gotten the scar and why the last thing he wanted was people’s pity.

Anytime he encountered someone after that, it depended on what they wanted from him. He was self-aware enough to recognize that he was essentially famous, having done nothing to warrant the attention besides being born to the Number Two hero, and that came with an array of consequences for his social life.

It probably wouldn’t be so bad if he just had to deal with his father and the social dysfunctionality that was Class 1-A, but things were not so simple. The reach of his surname extended beyond his home and that single classroom, and never was it more apparent than when he would deal with the lunch breaks.

Everyone at school watched him. He could feel it, could sense eyes on him when he made his way to class, walked down the hallway, went through the motions of training with his classmates. There was even a pattern he’d learned from observing people observing him; the way their chatter died as he passed, the way heads lifted or turned and the chorus of giggles or obnoxious rancor would pick up again.

He was, and always had been, a spectacle; his father made sure of that as he grew up, and secured for Shōto that he’d never go a day in his life without being the subject of unwanted, unwarranted attention. News media. Other students. People on the train or at the park while he went for his morning jog.

God, if he didn’t hate it. So Shōto tried to tune it all out. He ignored the random people who would fawn for his attention, declined the excessive amount of social invitations extended to him by anyone who was not Yaoyorozu or his siblings, and refused to play into the fabricated ideal that he was following in his father’s footsteps with any amount of intention.

The most frustrating part of it all was the assumptions. His peers, even his teachers, largely acted
like they knew him because they thought they knew what someone like him would be, but how could they? He was just a normal student trying to do his best academically and work towards becoming a successful hero on his own terms, not the expectations set forth by anybody else.

But it’s not like he could undo all that. Resigned, Shōto went through the motions. He attended school, dealt with the whispers and pointing fingers and riotous amount of hooting and hollering that went with being a hero-in-training and a celebrity, all while constantly trying to fight back the headache of whatever he would have to do next on his agenda. Shōto tolerated it all, and then went home to deal with his father.

Rinse and repeat.

He was tired. Monotony was somehow comforting and suffocating, because he knew he could handle it, but it’s not like he was enjoying himself. Living felt a little too much like surviving, but that also wasn’t unusual for Shōto. In fact, that was a good subheading for the entirety of his life to date.

Exist. Survive.

*Rinse and repeat.*

As the first week of school yielded to the second, Izuku began to develop a routine, from which some patterns started to emerge.

For instance, Izuku started to show up to school about fifteen minutes earlier than he used to.

Between 8:20 and 8:22 AM, Monday through Friday, Izuku swore Yūei felt just a little bit different. The air tasted a little sharper, the sun beat a little more harshly, the grounds smelled of grass and growth rather than the urban cityscape surrounding the school. In those two minutes, the world was *brighter*, if he had to pick a single word. More present. More real.

The General Studies Department had their classes mostly indoors, for both practical reasons and so they didn’t get in the way of the Hero Departments frequent outdoor training. As a result, Izuku made it his habit to sit outside, soak in the sunshine for a bit before being stuck inside all day. Sometimes, this would include dragging a begrudging Shinsō with him, if he could get his indigo haired companion to agree, but most days he sat alone on a stoop near the front doors, working on whatever hero write-up he had in progress at the time.

Just because Shōto Todoroki *also* happened to arrive at the school grounds promptly at 8:20 and would enter the building around 8:22 was merely a coincidence.

A lovely, smart, talented, totally *out-of-his league*... coincidence.

It wasn’t like Izuku had never liked someone before. He even had developed a little bit of a tiny crush on Uraraka during the entrance exam and then the first few days of school, but that had mellowed out into a more stable, platonic friendship.

This was—well, it was much different. Decidedly *stubborn*, if Izuku were being blunt about it.

Why did he even bother? Sometimes Izuku genuinely wondered; maybe it was just the effect of
being saved by someone, of directly owing Todoroki his life from the second day of school? Maybe lots of girls and other guys just couldn’t help themselves, the quiet and immutable distance that separated someone from Todoroki made him that much more irresistible? Unobtainable? Izuku didn’t know, but it was certainly frustrating.

Because, it wasn’t that Todoroki was just any one thing—he had an incredible quirk, he was a smart student, the prodigal son of the Number Two hero, and so pretty it made Izuku want to die—it was that Todoroki was all of those things. He felt completely unreachable, existing in a totally different plane than people like Izuku.

Most days, Izuku would just watch from the side, stealing a glimpse and trying not to literally sigh like a lovesick girl in a shojo manga. Sometimes, when he plucked up the courage, Izuku would look up, straighten his posture and really try to catch Todoroki’s eye.

*Say something. Talk to him! Introduce yourself.*

It would be really easy, too. Izuku even had an easy-in, if he could only take that terrifying leap. He told himself that if Todoroki ever made eye contact with him, that would be the deciding factor, the determining moment, and he knew exactly what to say:

*Hey, thank you for saving my life. I never got to tell you that because I’m too awkward to function most of the time, but I appreciate it a lot. Also, I think I might be absolutely in love with you.*

But Todoroki never looked his way.

And maybe Izuku was a masochist, because this ritual—it hurt. Watching him brush pass, eyes focused, feet moving forward, there was just an air of perfection that carried him wherever he went, made Izuku’s fingers twitch with the urge to chase after his echo.

But, people like Todoroki don’t really see people like Izuku. They were just there. Even if his eyes were to somehow travel to the side and hold Izuku’s gaze, he doubted Todoroki would ever really see him.

Even so, even so, Izuku’s stupid, fickle heart was having none of that. Logic didn’t matter. He couldn’t analyze his own feelings *enough* to ever understand them, deconstruct them, memorize the pieces-parts.

And so, everyday, 8:20 to 8:22 AM, Izuku sat outside. Waiting.

*Hoping.*

It was on one such day that something changed for Izuku, the last day of the second week of class. It wasn’t any part of his morning routine; the *I’m-only-enjoying-the-sunshine-I’m-not-in-denial-about-my-feelings* part of his day remained decidedly unchanged.

No, this particular incident came about halfway through their lunch break.

Izuku was exiting the dining hall with Shinsō when a friendly, vaguely familiar face appeared. Izuku was certain she was an upperclassmen, at least second or third year, if only because he didn’t know her from his own cohort.

“Hey! You’re Izuku Midoriya, right?”

Even though she said his name, Izuku still checked behind him; the girl was much too pretty and much too excited to be talking to the likes of him.
“Me?”

Shinsō snorted and started to walk away, and before Izuku could bother to ask him to wait up, the girl was stepping in front of him to keep his attention. “Yes, you, silly!”

“Um.” Tersely, he swallowed the lump in his throat. “Yes, h-hi. Did you… need something?”

“I do, actually!” She grinned knowingly, and snapped up his wrist. “Come with me.”

OhmygodwhatdidIdoImgoingtodieIdontknowwhereweregoingisthisaprankIwonderif—

Before his thoughts could spiral into an outright panic, Izuku was led into the classroom for—1-K? That seemed like an odd place for her to take him, considering she was certainly not a first-year and, he thought a bit unfairly, she didn’t seem like the kind of person to end up in the Management Department. That seemed like he was stereotyping… and maybe he was? But, there was just a certain feel the Management Department people had to them, and this girl did not have that at all.

The room was empty, oddly. She walked to the desk in the front of the room and picked up a thin composition notebook from the teacher’s unoccupied desk.

“This is your’s, isn’t it?”

“Oh—yes! It is!” Izuku broke into a wide smile, leaping forward and taking the well-loved pages into his hands. He’d been keeping this one for over a year now, had rescued it from Kaachan’s explosive fingertips and a koi pond, and had sincerely mourned its loss. The newer notes he’d been keeping would be an easy transfer compared to rebuilding all of his existing notes. “Thank you so much. Oh, man, I really owe you.”

She smiled, but her face remained strangely serious. “You’re welcome. If you’re willing to hear me out, I think I might know exactly how you can repay me.”

Surprised, Izuku flipped closed his notebook and began tucking it into his bookbag, securely this time.

“S-Sure! Of course.”

“Well,” the girl rubbed her hands together, vaguely like a cartoonish super-villain about to unveil their masterplan. “Let me start by saying, I’m Nejire Hado, a third ye—”

Izuku accidentally interrupted her by letting out a squeak of surprise. Of course he knew her once she said her name—she was Nejire freakin’ Hado! As in, Nejire “Member of the Big Three” Hado! Nejire “More Accomplished Than a Large Number of Pro-Heroes” Hado!

And she was here, alone, talking to him?

Izuku felt deeply disoriented, the vertiginous sensation of falling making his brain move off-rhythm with his body; he was awestruck, dumbstruck, and starstruck, all at once.

After about thirty full seconds, Izuku managed to refocus on her face, observing the patient, if not exasperated, tilt of her smile while she waited for Izuku to get ahold of himself.

Face stained pink, he flailed his arms in front of his face in embarrassment. “I-I’m so sorry, Hadosan! P-Please, co-continue.”
“Well, judging by your reaction, I guess I can be brief in my introduction. In addition to being a part of the Big Three, I’m also the Editor-in-Chief of the school paper, Go Beyond! Weekly, and I would love if you would consider writing for us.”

Izuku’s mouth fell open, his thoughts grinding to a halt between the mixture of surprise and disbelief. Surely, he must have misheard her?

Bouncing around the room, Nejire settled at one of the computers lining the walls; unlike the other departments, all the classrooms for the Department of Management were well equipped with all sorts of technological odds-and-ends. (Not the same odds-and-ends that came with the Support Department’s territory, but rather, software and hardware designed to help them run statistical models and the like.)

She clicked through a few web pages while continuing to speak, humming to herself. “I didn’t mean to pry, but when I ended up with your notebook, I was trying to find out who it belonged to and I was curious, so I’m sorry about that. It was almost addicting to read, though! You’re, like, a professional at documenting this stuff, Izuku. I don’t even think you realize what kind of observational talent you have.”

Again, Izuku thought to speak, but any memories of how to form words in Japanese evaporated right from his tongue. Instead, he just stared at the projector as it displayed her search query on the board.

“I was the junior editor last year, and now I’m running the show. I really want GB!W to be successful this year, and my big problem with the old way was… well, it was just, sort of, blah? No student outside of Support really wants to read about, ‘the high prices of costume materials’, if we’re being realistic. I want something that appeals to everyone, and I want to write articles that really push our writers—and our readers—to engage with the stories. It’s hard competing with social media, but I don’t want to give up the print medium, either. We can do both. I think doing a column where you do a deep dig of different students, just like you do in your notes, would be the exact sort of thing that gets people talking.”

Once she found the screen she’d been looking for, Nejire spun around and fixed him with a bubbly, glowing smile that went entirely unnoticed by Izuku; he was too busy trying to understand what he was looking at to pay her much mind. An unpublished page on the school paper’s dedicated website, the image on the wall was simple: a light gray background with some striking, minimalist font boxed at the header of the page.

*Hero Analysis! Weekly:*

*Izuku Midoriya*

Everything beneath it was blank.

“So, what do you think?! Will you do it?” Nejire pushed when he continued to gap like a fish out of water.

Izuku chewed his lip, looking quickly from the screen, to her eager expression, and then down at his shoes. He gripped the straps of his bookbag nervously.

“I don’t know… this is so nice of you, Hado-san—”

“Please, call me Nejire.”

“Um, N-Nejire, then. I really, really appreciate the offer, but I don’t think I’m the one you should
be looking for. I just scribble down notes, there’s not anything actually to my method. I don’t think I could construct them into thoughtful pieces to contribute to your paper.”

“Well,” she rested her hands on her hips. “Can I at least insist that you seriously consider it?”

That retort was not what Izuku expected, and he flustered. “Wah—but I—”

Some of the natural brightness surrounding her dimmed, eyes sharp like a needle. “Listen, Izuku. You don’t have to do it. But you decided without really giving it a proper chance—I think you would be a great asset to our team. It’s not everyday someone with your kind of attention to detail comes around, and I think you’d make for an excellent writer with some practice. Why not just give it a try?”

“I…” Izuku squirmed under her gaze, and he pretended to look at the screen again as a distraction.

He just needed to think this through, that was all.

On the one hand, Nejire was right: Izuku recognized his own hyperfixation on quirks was not exactly normal. (Okay, maybe it was borderline neurotic.) But, the idea of writing about quirks for his own interests and studies, and to write with the knowledge that his work would be reviewed—and critiqued—by an audience? That was completely different, and it made his heart pound painfully against his sternum to imagine it. Something that would be consumed by not only students, but potentially faculty? He felt desperately inadequate, horrific memories of the practical exam resurfacing, making his stomach roil.

But, then again… even though he failed the practical spectacularly, it didn’t mean he didn’t deserve to be here. Everyday at a place like Yūei was history in the making, and there wasn’t a single second that went by in which Izuku wasn’t grateful that he got to see so much of it firsthand, even without a quirk. If he was going to watch from the sidelines by some genetic happenstance—if the universe had already decided for him that he could never become a real hero—Izuku had promised himself he would commit to contributing whatever he could with what skills he did have.

Why couldn’t that be his words?

Throughout his childhood and into young adulthood, he had heard a lot of different sayings about the so-called power of words; somehow, the pen was both mightier than the sword, but, unlike sticks and stones, those same words also somehow couldn’t break his bones? How can it be that words endure, even when colors fade and temples crumble, but at the same time actions speak more than they ever could?

It all sounded very convenient, if you asked him. That words worked in your favor when you were the one using them, but if anyone else used them, they were rendered totally ineffective.

No, Izuku could think on multiple occasions where words had hurt him much more than a fist or a quirk used against him.

“I’m sorry, Izuku. I wish things were different.”

“It's not bad to have a dream young man, just... make sure your dreams are attainable, realistic. Understand?”

“We regret that we are not able to offer you admission to the Yūei Highschool Hero program.”

If Izuku had to make an educated guess, the real power of words came with their adaptability. They were tactical when one knew how to use them; whether offensive or defensive, it could take
as little as a single word to brighten someone’s day, ruin their self-worth, convince them to do something good, or sway them towards the path of evil.

And if that could be accomplished with just one word, imagine what the right person could do with a well-said sentence? A speech that reached millions? A three-word assurance that promised that everything would be okay: I am here!

“You know what?” Izuku took a deep breath and turned to Nejire, who met his eye with a glint of interest in her steely-blue gaze. “I’ll do it. I can do it.”

She struck a pose, fist pumping into the air with an almost-cheer. “Yes! I want you to write one right away—the sooner I could get your column to print, the better.”

“Okay!” Izuku bit down a smile, heart hammering in his ears with some of her borrowed enthusiasm. Was he really going to do this? He was insane. Definitely, totally insane. “Okay… Oh, um. One other thing? Would it be… erm, possible to not use my name? Like keep it anonymous? I j-just, I’d want the focus to be on the heroes, not me.”

Tapping her chin, the third year absently began to close out of the web browser. “Hmm. Well, I’m willing to be flexible since this is sort of a special case, but I do think it would be helpful for you and for our team if you start to join us for weekly briefings. We wouldn’t be able to keep you fully anonymous. The staff would want to meet you, but if you don’t want to draw attention to yourself—how would you feel about, like, a pseudonym?”

“Um.” Biting the inside of his cheek, Izuku considered that offer. He supposed it would make sense that it couldn’t be completely anonymous, but a fake name would be better than brazenly printing his own name at the end of each article. “Yeah, okay. A pseudonym should work. Let me think about one and I’ll get back to you?”

“Perfect. As for other details to keep in mind: our deadlines for submissions are Mondays at 5 PM. The print editions are made available as soon as we can get them to the press room on Tuesday morning, usually around 8 or 8:30. Then, we upload the articles the next day at noon, so there’s a bit of time for people to buy the print edition if they want it—sort of like early access?”

“Okay.” He scratched the back of his head, glancing over his shoulder as a nervous habit. “And what day are the meetings?”

“Friday, right after school. That way, we can talk about what worked and what didn’t in the previous week’s print, and that way you can hit the weekend with some momentum for Monday’s deadline. Make sense?”

“Yes. I think so.”

Nejire approached him, patting Izuku twice on top of the head like a puppy. “We do ramp up our reporting for special events like the Sports Festival and the School Festival, so you may be asked to do other pieces besides just your usual column. Will you be okay with that?”

“Oh! Sure.”

“Ah, and of course! Our advisor is Present Mic-sensei, so if you can’t find me, you can always go to him and ask any other questions.”

Geez, Izuku almost forgot to breathe. He’d been going to school here for two full weeks now, and it still made his nerves jitter to remember that almost the entire staff were Pro-Heroes. Just, wow.
“Now get going back to class. I may be a third year, but I can’t exactly get you out of class scot-free. Go, go!”

Nodding jerkily, Izuku tightened his grip on his bookbag and made for the door. He paused, just a second longer, and looked back.

“Thank you, Nejire! I won’t let you down.”

“That’s what I like to hear. I’ll email you some other details, so keep an eye out for it!

“Got it. See you!”

“Bye,” she giggled. “Try to hang onto your notebook this time!”

A little red around the ears, Izuku smiled in return and took off down the hall, just shy of jogging the rest of the way to 1-C so he wouldn’t be marked tardy. Thankfully, when Nejire had caught he and Shinsō leaving lunch, they’d been planning to walk around outside for a bit and had some extra time to spare.

On his way there, Izuku’s mind piston, the past ten minutes on a rapid-fire replay in his head.

Looking back, in a way, was this not exactly why he started to keep his journals in the first place?

If Izuku could do nothing else, he wanted to at least write the legacies of the heroes around him, document every amazing aspect of every person lucky enough to be born with a quirk, scribble and sketch costumes and special moves as accurately as he could. If words on a page—including these —were each a star that patterned the night sky, then Izuku wanted to be the person who mapped the constellations. He wanted to name every one of them after a hero.

It was an appropriate analogy, wasn’t it? Heroes were that stubborn glimmer, something that disrupted the ink of a midnight sky, bright no matter how overwhelming and dark things seemed. They inspired hope, gave people something to look up towards when there was nothing else.

The encounter he’d had the Spring before he took the entrance exam, that whole thing with the Sludge Villain, “saving” Kaachan, meeting All Might—that had been a fluke. A fluke that had gotten his hopes up, but a fluke nonetheless.

Maybe it was that hope—false hope?—that had driven Izuku to try to become a hero anyway. With all the research he did, he really should have known better.

With startling accuracy, Izuku could recall the day he received his letter from Yūei, informing him that he’d been denied entrance to the Hero Course; it had been a bracing experience for him. He had been gearing up for the eventual rejection since he was four years old, really. Told himself he would accept the results no matter what happened, no matter how slim a possibility it was that he could become a hero. It didn’t really help. No amount of preparedness could have dulled that particular brand of disappointment, the sort of thing that makes your heart feel like it was being squeezed by an unrelenting vice, that made his cheeks flood hot with shame and embarrassment.

It’s not like he hadn’t seen it coming; Kaachan had been telling him for almost a decade how Izuku would never be a hero. People without quirks just don’t become heroes. It was too dangerous, and he’d effectively just get in the way of the heroes if he tried to impose himself upon a rescue or a fight with a villain. No amount of support gear, strategy, or physical strength could change that.

But, he could at least do something. That’s why I’m here now, he thought with a small smile as he turned the corner into his classroom, Shinsō shooting him a half-hearted wave.
It’s not like Izuku had been completely rejected from Yūei. He’d just been denied entry to the Hero Course.

“The highest marks on the written exam in over a decade…? Izuku, this is amazing, I’m so, so proud of you!” He remembered his mother cheering, at the same time crying big fat tears. “I know you wanted to get into the Hero Course, sweetheart, but this is a huge accomplishment. And look at this scholarship offer…”

It was arguably the first stroke of luck he’d had since the day he was born. And now, Nejire being the one to find his notebook, giving him this opportunity to write for Go Beyond! Weekly—maybe he was encountering just a little bit of luck all over again?

He was going to do this! Write for the school paper. Go Beyond! Weekly wasn’t a hugely popular thing, but it would be a nice opportunity for him to step outside his comfort zone, and, who knows?

Maybe it could turn into something with a minor following?

One day, after lunch and before lessons resumed, there was a small change in the tedium of Shōto’s usual routine.

Analytics for heroes was a tried-and-true sport, something he’d read a hundred times over in the course of his life. No matter the metric, Shōto had seen it, heard his father growl about how he continued to score beneath All Might. To that end, Shōto wasn’t exactly interested when Shoji brought the new column for the school’s paper (which, he was embarrassed to admit, he didn’t even know existed prior to that conversation) to the classes attention, loudly followed by the curious inquires of Sero and Kaminari. In theory, all it sounded like was more statistics, more ways to track progress, more ways to improve. Another tool for his father to hold above his head, another reason for Shōto to disappoint him.

And then, Ojiro read the article out loud before the start of class.

“Have you ever taken a breath so deep it makes your lungs hurt? Where your shoulders shrug up involuntarily, and your chest aches and falters? A chasmic breath so wide it leaves cracks all the way to your skin? Imagine that feeling. Try taking that breath, right now, if you feel like you can handle it.”

Aizawa-sensei had not yet arrived, and the room was deadly still. Shōto heard, almost sensed, several people around him all breathe in.

“Did you falter? Did it hurt? Are you confused?”

“Whoa,” Kaminari muttered, glancing around. “This is, like, freaking me out.”

“Shh!” Uraraka waved a hand his direction before gesturing to Ojiro. “Keep going.”

“Now, imagine feeling that, every second of every day. Imagine having a weight nettled between your ribs that is almost asthmatic; sometimes, it’s easy to maintain, and other times, even a doctor might not be able to save you.
“That’s the brute force of will Fumikage Tokoyami must embody, everyday, to tame Dark Shadow, to work with his quirk in a symbiotic relationship.

“Dark Shadow appears to be sentient in its own right, and while it often manifests in the shape of a creature with a beak and miasmatic feathers, the limitations of the Shadow seems that it may take on nearly any shape depending on the power—factors of this are apparently the amount of light present at the time the quirk is active.

“Given the specific titular nature of Tokoyami’s quirk, it likely mirrors the host’s physical appearance, hence being a ‘shadow’ rather than a fully autonomous creature that merely shares the host’s body. While the extent and degree of Dark Shadow’s abilities are unknown, there are likely emotional and mental triggers that correlate with the shadow’s effectiveness; to anyone who risks engaging in combat with Tokoyami, they must not view the entities as separate, else they will quickly lose their fight. They are two parts of a whole, in which Tokoyami is the primary cognitive presence and Dark Shadow acts as his complement.”

Shōto, and almost everyone else, turned to stare at their classmate named in the article. He’d never realized—never thought about Tokoyami in these terms before. The article wasn’t even over, and already, Shōto was captivated, impressed and a little dumbfounded by Tokoyami’s constant composure while dealing with such a… a… comprehensive quirk. Like breathing, Dark Shadow was not something he could simply turn off, he could not choose to do without.

Unconsciously, Shōto’s left hand tightened into a fist.

Ojiro continued reading.

“Consider, reader, for every breath you fight for, Fumikage Tokoyami has already won that battle a dozen, a hundred times over. He is a veteran in mastering and managing his quirk, and those who have to struggle to take in the hard, deep breaths that make your solar plexus roil or that make your head swirl with vertigo—he has already surpassed you.

“And doesn’t that beg the real question—how are you going to catch him?”

Bakugō was on his feet before anyone had so much as a chance to blink, tearing the paper from Ojiro’s hands and blowing it to pieces with his palms.

“Fuck that fucking bullshit—if there’s anybody you’ve got to catch up to it’s me.” Bakugō slammed his fist down on Tokoyami’s desk, fingertips sparkling. “Got it?”

A brow raised, Tokoyami did not flinch, but he did watch Bakugō’s hands skeptically. “I don’t know why you’re telling me. It’s not like I wrote it.”

“Well, who the fuck did? Who interviewed you, huh?”

“Bakugō, sit down,” Iida demanded, arms snapping up and down as he motioned towards the blonde’s desk. “As a staff editor, I can assure you the new writer did not interview anyone. This was a product of his own observations.”

“Bullshit,” he retorted, throwing himself back into his seat and glaring at anyone who dared look his direction. “There’s no way some rando knew that much about someone’s quirk without drilling them. Who the fuck is it?”

“I don’t know,” Tsuyu pointed out, pressing her index finger into the corner of her mouth. “I would check the name but you just destroyed the paper.”
Shōto swore he saw the veins pop in Bakugō’s forehead, but before Tsuyu could incur any violence by the hothead’s hand, Uraraka crossed her arms and knowingly cleared her throat.

“If you must know,” she said, returning to her own seat and brushing past Bakugō. “A friend of mine is the writer. He’s trying not to draw attention to his own name, so the focus is on heroes like Tokoyami, so he’s publishing under the name Deku.”

Almost immediately, Bakugō’s demeanor visibly shifted. His hostility simmered for just a moment, realization dawning on him, before his hands began to crackle malevolently and he practically leapt towards the door. “That little piece of shit—I’m going to fucking KILL HIM.”

“No—” another voice stopped him, this one low, apathetic. “You’re not.”

Aizawa-sensei stood on the other side of the door as Bakugō froze, half a second from bowling right into him. Everyone who wasn’t already properly seated rushed to order, and their teacher observed Bakugō skeptically for a moment.

Shōto, meanwhile, was just confused. Uraraka had plenty of friends, so he wasn’t necessarily surprised to learn that she knew the author of the story, but Bakugō’s response seemed absolutely disproportionate.

“Sit down, Bakugō. If I hear you’re harassing any of the students on the writing staff for the paper, I won’t hesitate to take corrective action. Do I make myself clear?”

The blonde looked like he was trying to debate if it was worth killing his teacher to—deal with whatever he was dealing with. Eventually, with an amazing show of restraint, the teenager audibly growled and threw himself into his seat.

“Fucking Deku, who gives a shit what he thinks anyway?” he said, the steel-rubbed razors of his voice more deadly than Shōto had ever heard him. “This article is bullshit.”

Aizawa-sensei did not bother acknowledging the outburst, and class proceeded as normal thereafter.

Well, as normal as possible, anyway.

Shōto, for one, was having some difficulty focusing, and judging by the way he noticed several people sneaking glances towards Tokoyami, he wasn’t the only one.

That wasn’t an analysis at all. Not the kind Todoroki was used to hearing. There were no… statistics. Nothing quantitative, nothing measurable, nothing that concretely pointed out his strengths and weaknesses. It was borderline diagnostic.

The whole thing was—well, it was weird. But things at Yūei were always a little strange, and Shōto’s attention was always drawn a little too thin, so he brushed off the little nagging curiosity as just that; an oddity, a one-off something-or-other to be forgotten by the next day.

Frankly, he had a little too much on his plate to be concerned with than the likes of the school paper anyway.

By the time the second article came, there wasn’t a print copy to be found. Apparently, the press room sold out within two hours.

“I heard it was Ibara Shiozaki?” Mina gossiped, not-so-subtly, while the class waited once again for Aizawa-sensei to arrive. “Seriously, no one was able to get their hands on a copy? Lame.”
Shōto, loathe though he was to admit it, was irritated as well. After hearing what the author had to say about Tokoyami...

Slouching over her desk, Jirou’s earphones lazily tapped on the surface. “I saw Nejire Hado in the hallway this morning. She’s the school’s top editor or whatever, and, apparently this is, like, the biggest boom they’ve ever had with sales. Honestly, she looked ridiculously happy.”

“That’s amazing!” Uraraka beamed, before turning to Iida. “Deku is so talented, I’m really glad he ended up joining the writing staff.”

The room went very still, eyes and ears shifting to measure Iida’s response.

He fixed his glasses pointedly. “Yes, he is a very competent student and writer.”

“I bet he just joined for the babes,” complained Mineta, before sighing and grabbing his heart. “Nejire Hado, an actual goddess. Plus Kendo and Kodai? When girls have a body and brains, ahh...”

“That’s about enough out of you,” Kirishima kicked the back of his chair, not hard, but enough to startle him.

Unlike last week, Bakugō had nothing to say on the subject. There was still a distinctly murderous aura that radiated off him in the interim, but he vehemently seemed disinterested in anything pertaining to the article.

The third installment came out the following Tuesday, and Shōto heard *Go Beyond! Weekly* doubled their units to make up for the surge in readership.

It still wasn’t enough.

It was the perfect storm, really, because the Friday just before had been the incident at the USJ, and all eyes were on Class 1-A for their run in with the League of Villains.

The article’s subject? None other than Katsuki Bakugō himself.

This time, Shōto had his own copy to read, having managed to secure one before they sold out.

*There are truths, and then, there Truths.*

*I knew from the first time I witnessed Katuski Bakugō’s quirk that he would become an incredible hero. That was a truth, self-evident, like the way the sun rises even on an overcast day; just because you don’t witness it, you don’t doubt that it is true. You can feel the sunshine in your skin and bones.*

*That is how it feels to see Bakugō’s quirk in action. You can visualize the feeling of the hairs on your arms, scorching right off.*

*But Bakugō is not just his quirk—he is not defined by the degree of the explosions he creates, the damage he can cause, the lives he could save. The Truth of Katsuki Bakugō is all about his momentum.*

*It makes sense, if you’ve ever had the pleasure of meeting Bakugō; he is a spit-fire, down to the nitroglycerin that runs from his pores, but it would be a mistake to think that he is just a flame that will burn out. Like his quirk, he becomes stronger the longer he fights. His sweat collects, and he is able to focus that into a series of increasingly powerful explosions, the heat of which will only*
cause him to sweat more. That is another truth to Bakugō; if you do not defeat him quickly, there is little chance you will defeat him at all.

Complacency is not an option for the likes of Bakugō, and stagnation would mean failure. He is ruthless, tactical, deceptively strategic and has a variety of applications for his quirk in his arsenal. With it, he can effectively fly, fight at a distance, destroy enemies at close range, evaporate water, and set the world on fire.

The Truth about Bakugō is the most terrifying part about him. The most incredible, inspiring, immutable thing about him. There is no upper-limit, no ceiling, no goal too high. If Katsuki Bakugō becomes the number one hero in the world, he will break the sound barrier so he can become the number one hero in the solar system. And then the star system, and then the universe beyond.

The Truth is, Bakugō is someone who will stop at nothing to achieve greatness. And that, too, is somehow self-evident.

“Holy shit, Bakugō,” Kirishima muttered, the room deadly quiet. Even Iida did not complain about the use of profanity, reading the same article over Uraraka’s shoulder.

“Fucking piece of shit—doesn’t know what he’s talking about. If I become the best? I will become the best, there’s no fucking if about it!”

Of course, Bakugō couldn’t just accepted the words for what they were, had to take fault in everything, but it seemed by lunchtime the entire school had read the article.

“Oh my god,” gushed Hagaruke to Mina as their class was dismissed at the end of the day. “GB!W’s freakin’ website is down they’ve gotten so much traffic. And Bakugō’s article isn’t even posted yet.”

After that, all bets were off. The Hero Analysis! Weekly column was a huge success, and no longer could Shōto avoid it even if he wanted to. It quickly became a distinct part to the Yūei experience, students clamoring and anticipating and speculating over next week’s article.

Given Shōto’s feelings for gossip, he tried not to engage very much beyond appreciating the well-written installments and opportunity to learn more about his classmates. But, before long, that too became something else for Shōto’s father to ruin.

It was a Thursday, and Shōto was returning home from his piano lesson. He stepped through the door and before he could even take off his shoes, those familiar grey-print pages were being held out to him. This week’s feature in the Hero Analysis! Weekly was Nejire Hado herself, her school portrait smiling pleasantly at him while half-crushed in his father’s flaming fist.

“You haven’t been featured in this column yet.”

Hello to you too, Dad.

“Yes,” Shōto said flatly.

The lack of response on his part didn’t seem to please his old man. Testily, he asked, “Why not?”

“I suppose you would have to ask the writer that question.”

“Yes, but even amongst your peers, you’re not being noticed. This sort of thing has a ripple effect, Shōto.”
Irritated, he exhaled through his nose, trying to keep his temper in-check. “Okay.”

“Shōto.” Endeavor grit his teeth. “This shouldn’t even be a conversation we have to have. If you would just use—”

“I have homework to do,” he interjected, brushing by his father without so much as a second-thought.

On his way to his room, Shōto passed Fuyumi in the hallway. She sent him a barren smile, one he’d seen many times before—I’m sorry you have to deal with this, it said.

I know, he replied in their silent exchange, sliding the door closed with a sharp snap.

Shōto wished that would be the last time he would ever have to hear about the stupid column from his father.

If only he were so lucky.

“Hey, Midoriya,” fingers snapped in his ear. “Wake the hell up.”

“Nnnn,” he complained, waving a hand half-heartedly. “Go on without me.”

Shinsō snorted, and Izuku could practically hear him rolling his eyes. “Don’t make me use my quirk, dude.”

“You wouldn’t,” Izuku challenged, dully turning his head to one side with a lopsided smile. For just a beat, the two stared each other down, Shinsō’s turning into more of a glare and Izuku’s more of a test of wills. Izuku knew Shinsō really did not like to use his quirk in situations with such little stakes, though, so he was fairly confident that he’d be fine.

“Maybe not,” his friend sighed eventually, running a hand through his messy indigo hair and turning away. Izuku couldn’t help but idly think about how at least one of them should really invest in a comb.

“I guess I’ll just have to explain to Nejire that drawing in your notebook was more important than showing up to staff meeting.”

That perked Izuku right up, suddenly wide awake. He’d sooner die than disappoint her. “I’m coming!”

Izuku stretched his arms and closed his notebook, a half-scrawled diagram worked out of Mashirao Ojiro from 1-A’s tail. He had about sixteen questions he’d like to ask the guy if he had a chance to during one of their upcoming lunch periods, all of them outlined in fine detail in his notebook.

Rubbing at the bags lining his eyes, Izuku caught up with Shinsō in the doorway. “I don’t know how you always stay up so late, Shinsō. I hate it.”

“Years of practice,” answered the other boy with a shrug as they exited the 1-C classroom. “Did you stay up for your story again?”
Sheepishly, Izuku scratched his cheek and nodded. “Yeah. I just really wanted this next week’s to be perfect.”

“You say that every week.”

“Is that a bad thing?” Izuku huffed, slightly chagrined. “I have standards.”

A single, dark purple brow raised at that. “Implying I don’t?”

“W-no! You know that’s not what I meant,” backtracked Izuku immediately.

“I’m kidding. Lighten up.”

Izuku had to bite his tongue at any attempt to further apologize; they’d just reached the 1-K classroom, and he could hear the light chatter of the rest of the staff beyond the door.

After the unprecedented growth in their readership, Nejire expanded the staff to include a few new faces, and Izuku managed to convince Shinsō to be one such face. He didn’t put up much of a fight when Izuku mentioned they needed someone to take photographs, especially during the upcoming event season. The guy had a thing for cameras, apparently, and was eager to get his hands on the fancy lenses and tripods and other equipment that meant very little to Izuku.

Now, their staff was a little more fleshed out: Nejire was Editor-in-Chief, and Iida was her junior editor; from Class 1-A they also had Koji Koda and, on occasion, Uraraka would tag along. She didn’t really do anything overtly productive, besides providing the occasional moral support, but Nejire found her positive presence to be a creative boon and allowed her to stick around for their meetings.

From Class 1-B, they also had Class Representative Itsuka Kendo and Yui Kodai on as staff writers, and Manga Fukidashi, who used to cover all the graphic design and photography, now was able to do a weekly comic.

The staff was still quite small for the operation, but Izuku preferred it this way. He was comfortable with Uraraka and Iida, and Koda was even more quiet than Shinsō. Nejire was infallibly kind, even if she still intimidated him to the point where Izuku desperately felt like he might need to start checking his blood pressure for health reasons, and the three from 1-B were all great team players. Present Mic-sensei started to join the meetings with more regularity after the influx in readership, and Nejire couldn’t seem to be happier.

Sometimes, Izuku wished he’d insisted on publishing anonymously. His social circle had expanded to definitively include Iida and Uraraka, who had been more “fringe friends” than anything before, and most of the student body only had a vague sense of who he was. (“Deku is that short kid with the messy hair in Class 1-C, I think?”) On occasion, some people would stop him to talk about the articles or even complain about how he wasn’t including something, or that he spent too long focusing on 1-A, or that he featured too many women and not enough men, et cetera.

You can’t please everyone as a writer, Nejire had told him early on. Be true to yourself and the rest will work itself out. Plus, if anyone gives you a hard time, I could always talk to them for you!

If Izuku’s memory served correctly, she then proceeded to crack her knuckles… menacingly.

All in all, it was working out… okay. He still wasn’t used to dealing with that strange moment of recognition, where he would meet eyes with someone by accident and, instead of looking away, they would smile or even wave to him.
Honestly, the biggest surprise was that Kaachan never materialized out of thin air to violently murder him, so Izuku was counting that one as a win.

“Okay! Sports Fest is in a couple of weeks, team,” she said, clapping her hands together and bringing the room to attention. Shinsō tapped his fingers along the desk, gaze narrowing as they listened. “We’re going to need everyone pulling extra weight. Iida, in addition to editing, I’d like one article from you for the Tuesday print. I know you’ll be busy with your own festival stuff, but in addition to running the standard, we’ll be running a special op-ed on Friday.”

“Understood, ma’am!” Iida gesticulated in his very Iida-like way. Uraraka caught Izuku’s gaze and rolled her eyes, at which he barely managed to stifle a laugh.

“Again, just call me Nejire, not ma’am. I’m, like, two years older than you. I’m not your Mom.” She pouted, crossing her arms and glancing towards the door. Present Mic stepped outside to take some sort of phone call.

“As for the rest of the staff: I’ll be doing a piece for each print. Midoriya, I know this is asking a lot, but do you think you could do your regular Tuesday piece, and then two smaller pieces reflecting on some of the highlight matches from the Fest?”

“Yes! I can take care of it.”

“Excellent.” Nejire let out a big breath of air. “Koda, Kendo, I’d like you to do an article each. You can choose who does what, but I want one special on the Fest and one regular article. You can submit ideas to me if you need to workshop anything before that Monday.”

The two writers shared a quick smile and a nod.

“Kodai, we can talk about what will work with your schedule, but ideally I’d love a piece from you for each edition. We can talk more as the time gets closer.”

The 1-B student nodded her understanding.

“Lastly, Shinsō, Fukidashi, I don’t need a ton from either of you. The regular comic for Tuesday from you Fukidashi, and then, if you wouldn’t mind tag-teaming with Shinsō on the Sports Fest. Between the two of you, we should get plenty of photos. Since there will be other, big name outlets there, there will be plenty of opportunities for photo ops, so you won’t have to really ‘hunt anyone down’ as far as getting the victory pictures and what not.”

“Got it,” Shinsō affirmed, and Fukidashi responded with an enthusiastic, “!’’

“That’s all I’ve got as far big picture stuff goes—just trying to stay ahead of things. Okay, phew!” The young woman did a quirk twirl in place, as if it would serve to re-energize her, and switched subjects. “Let’s talk this week. What’cha got for me?”

One by one, they all ran through their weekly assignments and how they planned on tailoring things over the weekend. Those who had drafts, like Izuku, brought them and Nejire or Iida went through them with their ever-ready red pens.

For this week’s print, Izuku was particularly nervous. He really did stay up much later than he normally would because—well—this wasn’t just some student he was covering.

This week he had decided to feature Shōto Todoroki, and the very thought ratcheted his nerves up to the nth degree. He could tell from the way he was writing that something about it was off, but he had rewritten this piece about ten times already and just needed to have something to show for
“Um, Deku?” Uraraka cleared her throat as she read over Iida’s shoulder. “Do you have a crush on Todoroki?”

The question took him so off-guard he literally fell out of his chair.

“W-What! N-No, no of course, n-not! Haha. Ha why would you—even think that?”

“He does,” Shinsō hummed from a nearby PC, not bothering to look away from whatever photo-editing software he had queued up. “He sits outside every morning to watch him enter the building. It’s pretty gay.”

“Shinsō!” Izuku hissed. “You’re supposed to be my friend!”

“Friends don’t let their friends lie,” he retorted simply, and before Izuku had the opportunity to throttle him, Uraraka was beckoning his attention again.

“Well… if you do or don’t is your business, but I was just going to say, you miiiight want to tone it down a little on the, um, admiration in your article. This reads almost like a love letter.”

“Noooooooo,” Izuku, still on the floor, curled into the fetal position. “I can’t publish this! Maybe I can fix up my draft for Yaoyorozu, that would work…”

Iida shuffled the papers in his hands, uncannily like a news reporter. “Midoriya, running from your feelings isn’t going to help! Why don’t you talk to Todoroki?”

“Please stop,” he groaned, hiding his face in his hands for good measure. “I’m begging you.”

“Well, if you’re not going to do something about your crush—”

“Not a crush!”

“—then I will definitely have to recommend you revise this. Some of the content is up to par with your usual material, but as Uraraka suggested, some of it is… a little, er, passionate.”

Clearing her throat, Uraraka read, “…I ask myself why he keeps such a commitment to refrain from using the left-side of his body. One hand’s fingertips burn hot against the skin; does he not feel them? Is it a quirk hidden like a horizon, always half-in darkness, half-in light, is it bound to always be as enigmatic as the wielder? Or is it we who are shrouded, curiosity-bitten to wonder what mystery keeps half of his potential untapped?

“Even with these limitations, a gentle revelation occurs: if Shōto Todoroki is so impressive with only half his power, what can he achieve were he to unthaw his fingertips, to not just exist in the silver-lined imprint of ice, but to embody the gold-tipped wings of sunlight, of fire, of the same vices that befell Icarus? Okay, Deku, I love you, but this is like reading freakin’ poetry.”

Wishing he could spontaneously combust, Izuku yelped and sat up on the floor when two sharp heels clicked near his ear.

“Something wrong?” Nejire asked, her tone equal parts amused and worried. “Usually Midoriya on the floor means All Might just walked in, but I don’t see him.”

“No! Nope, nothing wrong, nope nope, not at all, don’t worry!” Izuku flapped his hands back and forth, shooting a beseeching look at Iida and Uraraka. They both shrugged when Nejire’s gaze
flickered their way.

“...Well, alright. Let me know if you want me to look over anything.”

He scrambled back into his seat and leaned in towards his friends across the table, face red enough to warrant alarm. “Please, help me.”

Iida tapped his chin, spinning his pen between his fingertips. “Well, I can tell you some of this is excellent, I think we can dial back in some places and maintain most of the piece.”

“Eh, but then that will sound choppy. One of the reason people like Deku’s writing so much is that it flows. If you just go in and cut and cut and cut, it won’t really feel like his writing anymore.”

“I feel like Uraraka’s right,” he mumbled, covering his eyes with a hand. “If I’m going to write about Todoroki, I don’t want my emotions messing things up, but I still want to give him a fair review.”

Shinsō leaned back, both brows raised. Izuku was surprised to find he had been listening.

“So why don’t you separate it out?”

“...What?”

“If you don’t want to be disingenuous, write exactly how you feel. Write all of your feelings out, and then, once you feel like you’ve said everything you would want to say, open up a new document and write your analysis. Once your emotions are all out of the way, you might be able to think more clearly.”

There was a pause, Iida and Uraraka nodding along. “I don’t hate the idea, actually. What do you think, Deku?”

“I-I mean… I could, I guess. Do you really think it will help?”

“I think it will be better than comparing him to a golden-winged Icarus,” Iida noted with a small smile. “Why not try it? If you need, I can look over it again this weekend.”


“Wow, thanks Shinsō, you’re such a good friend, what a great idea,” muttered the indigo-haired teen as he returned to his computer, and Uraraka and Izuku both laughed.

Once the meeting ended, Izuku collected his draft, red ink running like freshly spilt blood over his current work-in-progress. Shinsō departed quickly, citing some social thing going on with his family, while Uraraka and Iida waited for him in the doorway.

“Midoriya, can we talk? I just need a quick favor.”

The inflection of Nejire’s tone was uncharacteristically serious, and all at once the wires pulling his nerves taut all snapped. He looked up from his book bag and she was scrolling through her phone, biting her thumbnail.

“Um, sure!” With a quick glance to Iida and Uraraka, Izuku waved them off and mouthed a quick, “I’ll catch up with you guys later.”

“How can I help, Nejire?”
“Ah, well,” she lowered her phone, sighing and tacking on her familiar smile. “I’ve just been trying to work something out with Tamaki and Mirio, but there’s this thing coming up that we all have to do at the start of next week. We’ll be out of the city for a few days and I just wanted to make sure you have everything you need to publish on Tuesday? I didn’t mean to single you out, but since the column is such a big deal now…”

“Oh-Oh! No, of course, I understand completely.” Izuku nodded readily. “I can submit it to the press room myself on Monday. Do you want me to make sure everyone else’s stuff is in on time?”

He could see the stress practically melt off Nejire’s shoulders. “Could you? That would be a huge help. I just don’t know if I’ll have cell service or what and if I just knew it would be taken care of that would really, really help.”

“Oh my gosh, of course. Nejire you’ve done so much for me, this is the least I can do. I’ll handle it!”

“Thank you, Midoryia,” she ruffled his hair and tucked her phone into her pocket before gathering her bag. “I really appreciate this. I’ll see you next Friday for staff; I probably won’t be back before then.”

Scratching his cheek, Izuku ducked his head. “Okay. Have a safe trip with the others.”

“Will do,” she offered a quick thumbs-up before exiting the room, and Izuku felt his chest swell, not for the first time, with gratitude.

An only child, the closest thing Izuku really had to a family outside of his Mom was Kaachan, who felt sort of like his brother when they were younger. He did have some very, very fuzzy memories of some cousins near his age from when he was still a child, but most of Mom’s family disowned her after she had Izuku and his father disappeared. A quirkless kid and no husband didn’t exactly do great things for the “family image,” apparently.

Nejire was—maybe like a sister? He liked to think so. There was a distance between them in her seniority and sheer ability that would have felt glaring were it almost anyone else, but she had a way of making him feel comfortable and not once had Nejire ever treated him differently for not having a quirk.

This next edition was his chance to pay back some of her kindness, even if a small amount, by making sure everything goes to print smoothly. That way, she could focus on her project without worry; it was literally the least he could do.

“Thank you, Kendo!” Izuku chirped happily, standing at the door to the press room at 5:30 PM, Monday. She tossed him her flashdrive and told him the file name, to which he nodded and waved her off. His own train was leaving soon and Kendo had been running late—she texted him and apologized, but Izuku assured her it was fine. He would be cutting it close, but if he jogged to the station, there wouldn’t be any issue. Fukidashi and Koji already submitted their pieces, and Shinsō sent Izuku the photographs over the weekend. With some help from Iida on Sunday, they put together a rough template so Izuku had been able to just drag and drop the remaining stories and images without any hassle.

With Kendo’s submitted, everyone was accounted for… except, well, him. Izuku popped his own
flash drive into an open PC and imported the text for the file he’d been working on into the template, hit submit, and rushed out the door.

On his way, Izuku was stopped at a crosswalk, so he sent Nejire a quick text.

*All taken care of! Print should be good to go by 8 tomorrow. Hope you’re having a good time!*

And just like that, it was done. Easy. No problem whatsoever.

...But this is *Izuku Midoriya* we’re talking about. So when all hell broke loose, he wished he could say he was even surprised.

...The article started a little bit like this:

*To put it in no uncertain terms, Shōto Todoroki may be the most beautiful person I’ve ever seen in my life.*

Chapter End Notes

on the one hand: wow I have so many WIPs I should really work on those
on the other: but you haven't written any tododeku before now's your chance
guess we know how that worked out??

*come say hi on tumblr! my ask box is always open, and I accept prompt requests! (*˘̥ancia ˘̥*)
Words Matter

Chapter Summary

Shōto reads THE article, and Izuku must face the consequences. Meanwhile, the faculty decide how they will handle the newspaper to avoid such mishaps in the future.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Shōto had a sense that something was off.

He wasn’t quite sure how he knew, simply that he did. Perhaps it was just instinct, honed by years of his father’s rigorous training, but there was no way of knowing for certain.

At school, there were no clear signs: it wasn’t as if there had been a water main break and the grounds were flooding, or menacing storm clouds were moving in and casting the world in shades of grayscale.

If anything, it was just an unsettling case of absence… Because nothing was happening.

And at a place like Yūei, silence was as conspicuous as a smoking gun.

That was how Shōto felt when he entered the building Tuesday morning. His footsteps sounded too loud, the fluorescent lights seemed especially lackluster, the gazes of his peers lacked in some of their usual subtly. He was accustomed to everyone watching him, but usually they at least pretended to look away when he walked by.

It had become part of his Tuesday habit to go to the press room and buy a copy of the paper, not that he was very unique in that regard. Most of the school did, too. There were always a few clumps of students here or there, huddled together in the hallway as they shared their own copy of the GB!W.

So let it suffice to say that Shōto was quite surprised when, at 8:25 AM, there was a sea of people in the hallway. This was not a small gathering of friends, chattering over a paper; Shōto had to imagine that someone had tried to shove the entirety of the student body into the end of the hallway.

What’s more, they were all quiet.

Completely.

Silent.

Todoroki stopped about ten paces short of the fringe of the crowd, not particularly interested in trying to work out what the hell was happening with so many people, and he figured whatever was going on would resolve itself. He could ask Yaoyorozu to borrow her copy, or just wait until the print went on the website tomorrow.

But then, he made his way to 1-A, and the room was a comparative fucking circus.
His first instinct was to look for Iida, who would never condone this sort of misbehavior, but he and Uraraka were both missing. Kirishima, Sero, and Kaminari were all speaking without any regard to volume whatsoever, while Ashido, Hagakure, Tsuyu, Ojiro and Tokoyami all sat close together, discussing something in hushed voices. Jirou, nearby, was squishing Mineta beneath her boot, and Koji watched on awkwardly while the so-crushed hero whined. Jirou just ground her heel in a little harder. Sato and Yaoyorozu were both sporting different sorts of frowns—one confused, the other concerned—and reading the week’s paper at their respective desks

Before Shōto could do much but raise both brows, trying to let the sensory overload of the state of his classroom wash over him, Bakugō was shoving a copy of the paper into his chest, pushing him back slightly through the door frame.

“Here you go, Prince Charming. Have a fucking field day with that loser.”

Shōto rolled his tongue in his mouth, biting down the urge to throw back a punch. Instead, he took a step into the classroom, all while Bakugō laughed and went to sit in his desk, legs kicked up with his usual amount of social tact.

“What are you talking about?” he snapped.

All at once, his peers stopped what they were doing—words were left half-said, glances became tense, postures turned rigid.

Voice half-muffled by Jirou’s boot, Mineta squeezed out, “Todoroki, are you gay?”

“Alright, that’s it.” Sero stood up, rolling up his sleeves, readying the tape embedded in his elbows. Mineta began to wiggle, but Jirou was not budging.

Shōto was just confused. “...What is it?”

While Jirou and Sero dealt with a struggling Mineta, sealing his mouth shut and sticking him against the wall, everyone else remained quiet. Well, except Bakugō, who appeared deeply smug. The remainder of the class exchanged glances, clearly uneasy and uncomfortable.

Bakugō started to laugh—practically howling with glee. “Why don’t you fucking read, Half-n-Half? You’ve got that shitty nerd’s article right there, don’t you?”

His gaze flickered down, the crinkled paper practically forgotten in his grip. From across the room, Yaoyorozu sent him… a look. To be honest, Shōto didn’t really know what to make of it—worry? Doubt?

Shōto brought the column to eye level and began to read.

To put it in no uncertain terms, Shōto Todoroki may be the most beautiful person I’ve ever seen in my life.

But he’s so much more than that, too—

His eyes jumped around the page, an unsettling lump forming in his throat—when the wind catches, his bangs blow back and his fringe gets messy and tangled and it’s no longer red and white, and it’s certainly not pink—it’s just mesmerizing—

Blinking rapidly, Shōto looked up only to realize the class was watching him intently. Waiting. Gauging his reaction. Perhaps against his better judgement, Shōto’s gaze flickered down one more time—could tell you that this single person has nettled his way into every amazing thing I see,
easily as a summer storm, readily as my ink drips from my notebook, and comfortably as if he belonged there always.

At that point, he had to stop reading, his stomach dropping in a terrible freefall. “This is some kind of joke.”

Kirishima coughed. “Erm… I don’t think so, man.”

“It’s so romantic, Todoroki,” Ashido gushed, and Shōto swore he felt his eye twitch. “Wait ‘til you get to the end!”

Taking a few seconds, Shōto inhaled a large breath of air, holding it in. The class was still staring at him, and when Shōto caught sight of Bakugō’s smug, jackass smirk, Shōto exhaled.

The judgement in the air, the measured observation—it made him feel like some sort of caged, social experiment, and everyone was waiting for the other shoe to drop, the stimulant to kick in, the meltdown, the outburst—something.

Bated breath. Anticipation.

He sought out Yaoyorozu’s gaze, and her face visibly twisted into a grimace.

“Where are Iida and Uraraka?” he asked calmly.

“I think they are in the meeting room for the newspaper,” she replied carefully.

Nodding, Shōto uttered a quick, “thank you,” and exited the classroom.

His instincts were tugging him in ten different directions, and without thoughts to guide him, Shōto’s legs moved of their own accord, pounding the tiled floors as the hallways cleared of the remaining students before classes would begin. The way his feet decided to take him, Shōto thankfully did not pass Aizawa-sensei, and he ignored the small pang of guilt for cutting class.

It’s not like he would be able to focus on lessons right now. Hell, he could barely focus on where he was going.

Shōto was lucky he’d taken to holding the paper in his right hand, else he might have accidentally set the damned thing on fire.

By the time some of his pistoning thoughts slowed, at least enough for him to gather something resembling sense, Shōto was outside, walking along the east end of the building. In a shaded spot beneath the paneled-glass monolith that was Yūei, Shōto’s back met the wall with a dull thud, and he sank to the ground.

Perhaps to his own fault, Shōto lifted the paper, smoothed out the crumpled edges, and started from the beginning.

To put it in no uncertain terms, Shōto Todoroki may be the most beautiful person I’ve ever seen in my life.

But he’s so much more than that, too. If he was just a beautiful person, this would be so much easier.

I can’t write Shōto Todoroki into an article because there aren’t words that ever make enough sense when I try to put it together in my head.
For example. I thought I loved the sun before I met him, but that was wrong, misguided. That is too constant a thing for me too imagine; and since I saw him the first time, I decided I would rather live life by a half-hung bloodmoon, always in motion, bright on darkest night. It was then that I realized the world could be so much brighter.

You see? Nonsense.

And yet, it’s not as if I can’t explain it—I could. I could talk about it all day.

I could tell you that the way the light glitters in his blue eye, and is, at the same time, transformed by his darker gray eye was the first thing I ever really saw of Shōto Todoroki, and I see it everywhere I go now.

I could tell you that I see it in catch of stars against the dark galaxies spread out over the night skies; I see it in the ruffled wings of that blue jay that zips by my classroom window in the mornings; I see a depth I could drown in when I walk by the river after I step off the train; I see a cloudless sky where even the tallest cityscapes cannot eclipse that soft, boundless color.

I could remind myself that his hair is one-of-a-kind, the line of division through the middle is almost as playful as it is endearing. Sometimes, when the wind catches, his bangs blow back and his fringe gets messy and tangled and it’s no longer red and white, and it’s certainly not pink—it’s just mesmerizing.

I could tell you that this single person has nettled his way into every amazing thing I see, easily as a summer storm, readily as ink drips from my notebook, and comfortably as if he belonged there always.

Of course I could explain how it feels. All of that—that’s easy. I can work through a sentence and put subject and verb and adjectives all down and craft them to make each word represent some part of him, but trying to capture the whole way I feel when I see him is necessarily reductive.

Everytime I put more words to the page, I feel like I’ve left something out.

There are certain qualities that are lost the moment emotion is put onto paper. Those telephone games one plays as a child—that’s what this is like. From the way it exits my chest and churns in my head and falls from my lips or is brought to life by my keystrokes—it’s never enough.

I should say: I am not living in some strange, lofty world decorated by metaphors and analogy. I know who Todoroki is, I know he is a real person with flaws. I know what his surname means, and I know what that association brings to mind.

I just don’t care. I don’t know if I could care about his wealth or status, even if I tried.

To me, he’s more like a memory that I make up more memories for. I don’t know if he has a favorite kind of movie, but I like to imagine he would hold my clumsy, shaking hands when we watch them together. I don’t know what kind of music he likes, but I can remember a playlist from a lifetime ago that I could share with him, and even if it wasn’t perfect, it would be perfect because it could be ours.

I wonder what he thinks about when he brushes his teeth, because that’s when I do some of my most intense moments of reflection. Who doesn’t? Examining yourself for a solid two minutes in the mirror, face-to-face with the person you could be and the person you appear to be is intimidating.

And then I wonder if he would laugh at that, because I can go from thinking about the
sociopolitical nightmare of prison reform to wondering if that new freckle on my neck is cancer in a single train of thought, and I bet he would laugh. I’ve never heard him laugh before, but I have to imagine it is the same things that dreams are made of, the same way the city breathes with life after a storm in the springtime. Startling, refreshing, uplifting; the colors in a gaussian blur, shuffled between a gradient of black, but it’s still lovely, no matter how unfamiliar.

In fact, that’s a lot like how it feels to realize, everyday, that I fall for him a little more. Startling, refreshing, uplifting. And so lovely, no matter how unfamiliar.

…

His eyes re-read that last line a second time. A third.

Shōto could tell he was… waiting. For what, he wasn’t exactly sure, but this felt like one of those moments with some sort of grand… grand… something that was supposed to come upon him. A revelation, or epiphany, or sense flattery, or gratitude or—anything, really.

Nothing.

All he felt was—nothing.

Shōto didn’t know how he was supposed to feel. It was… uncomfortable?

He’d heard Uraraka sing the praises and Bakugō curse the ground this Deku walked on enough time to remember their name, but not much else. Shōto didn’t even know who—or why they would—they’ve never even spoken before! How could someone who didn’t know him at all have such… such… ugh, feelings, for him? Shōto didn’t even like most people he knew, let alone imagining how it could possibly be to feel something for a stranger.

There was sincerity in the words that felt like they would be touching in some other context, but Shōto didn’t even know Deku’s real name or what he looked like, let alone if he could ever feel something towards them.

So why? Why would they write something like this?

Was it some pathetic grasping at fifteen minutes of fame? Surely the column was successful enough without using Shōto as an added stepping stool, but maybe not—maybe Deku had gotten used to the momentum and needed something big and controversial. Fuck, that was annoying to think about.

Or maybe this the workings of his Dad? Some sort of social backhand for Shōto not forcing his way into the paper sooner? Another of Shōto’s nerves for the Number Two hero to chafe, applying pressure until he’d snap out of his so-called “rebellious” phase?

Thoroughly frustrated, Shōto ran a hand through his hair, used the cool press of his right-sided fingertips to try to calm himself.

There had to be a way to fix this. Undo this.

He glanced at the paper again, his own school portrait staring back at him. Underneath the column’s header, Shōto’s gaze narrowed as he read two printed characters, utterly shameless.

デク.
Izuku was trying to activate the quirk he did not have—the one that would cause him to disintegrate into a million mortified pieces, or turn his body into a puff of smoke so he could melt away into nonexistence, or simply employ the ever-popular *Drop Dead* ability.

The writing staff was having an “emergency meeting,” sans Nejire and Present Mic-sensei, since the former was out of town and the latter had to teach his class.

It was less of an “emergency” than it was a “Izuku is a complete fuck-up and we need to figure out how to help him,” but honestly, who was keeping track anymore?

Beside him, Shinsō leaned back in his chair, legs kicked up on the desk, eyes scanning the paper. Uraraka sat across from him, and Iida beside her. Kodai and Fukidashi shared a copy of the paper at the next table over while Kendo went to track down Koda and try to finagle some sort of “excused absence” for all of them for missing class.

“It’s so bad, right?” Izuku mumbled.

Uraraka smiled, lips so tight it looked painful. “Well…”

“Yeah,” Shinsō said. “You’re super fucked.”

Izuku nodded once and turned to face the Class 1-A Representative. “Iida, I want you to recipro burst my face. Please.”

“Er, that doesn’t feel like a responsible use of my quirk,” bristled the teen, adjusting his glasses and keeping his gaze fixed on the article. “I’ll have to decline your request.”

“Oh, come on, you guys. It’s not *that* bad,” insisted Uraraka, tossing the paper to the side. “Sure, everyone and their brother has seen it—"

“*Not helping,*” Izuku interjected with a groan, slumping over again.

“Let me finish! It’s popular, sure, but I think most people will find it sweet! You’re so… um, *passionate*, about Todoroki.”

“Passionate?” A disbelieving chuckle tumbled from his lips. Izuku glanced down at the paper, re-reading his own words. “It’s straight up creepy, Uraraka.”

“Maybe… maybe he won’t notice?” she suggested weakly. She didn’t sound terribly convinced.

Sighing, Izuku rested his hands on the desk, trying to get a grip. Maybe he could transfer to a different school? Or change his name, and then leave the country? Become a hermit in the Himalayas? Or—

“Oh, I’m sure he noticed,” Shinsō interrupted Izuku’s train of thought. “He’s standing in the doorway.”

“Hello?”
Izuku felt like he could pass out.

**Apologize. Damage control. Do something! Say something, anything—**

“Ngh—oh no? What—uhh— areyoudoinghere?”

If Todoroki noticed Izuku practically blubbering to himself, he was at least polite enough not to say anything.

“Is this the *Go Beyond! Weekly* meeting room?” he asked, directing his question primarily to Iida and Uraraka.

Iida stood and bowed, moving his arms a little too much. “Yes, hello, Todoroki. How can I help you?”

“Who is Deku?”

“Nopenopenopenothappeningthisisnothappening—

“This one, right here,” Shinsō smacked him in the back of the head with a rolled up newspaper, and Izuku nearly collapsed.

Indeed, the only reason he didn’t was thanks to Uraraka, who had moved around the table and threw an arm around his shoulder to bolster him.

Thank you, God, for giving me this angel for a friend to offset Shinsō— except, wait, Uraraka was moving, and dragging him with her, towards Todoroki.

Why? What did I do to deserve this? All of my friends are traitors, heartless monsters who want me to suffer—

“This is Deku. Or, well, that’s his nickname. You can call him Izuku Midoriya.”

She elbowed him, and Izuku managed, “Nng—hi.”

The opportunity Izuku had been waiting for all these weeks… it was finally here. Shōto Todoroki was really, really looking at him. Seeing him.

Too much, actually. Way, way too much. Izuku couldn’t breathe for how much Todoroki was examining him. His gaze trailed up and down Izuku’s short stature with prickly precision, and Izuku swore he could feel his own soul trying to slip out of his mortal body. Quickly, he ran through some calculations: if he ran for the window and jumped, would a fall from this height kill him? Maybe if he was lucky and landed just right, the drop could put him out of his misery.

“I’d like to speak to you.” Todoroki said eventually, glancing past Izuku’s shoulder to look at the other students. He curtly added, “Privately.”

Sweat dotting his brow, Izuku swallowed on his bone-dry throat. This was as good an opportunity as any to explain himself, and probably the best chance he would have of making some kind of… sense of this nightmare.

Just… just say words.

“U-Um. Me too… I, uh, wanted to speak to you, I mean. Not, like, ‘I’d like you to speak to me.’ Not that I don’t want that! I just—I meant—”
Unamused, Todoroki’s already flinty gaze sharpened to razors, and Izuku felt like they were dragging over his skin.

“Come with me.”

Frosty fingers grabbed his wrist and dragged him out of the room, and Izuku swore he felt his heart leap up into his throat. For the embarrassing number of times he’d imagined and reimagined Todoroki touching him, Izuku’s imagination had always supplied him with much softer, more romantic circumstances—maybe they could have held hands or something nice?

He had not envisioned being manhandled down the hallway and tugged down a narrower passage that led to the teacher’s lounge.

Although, a horrible, very teenaged-part of his mind provided, there are definitely worse people to be manhandled by. In fact it’s actually a little—no. No, no, no! Izuku was not going to let his brain go there, not after how badly he messed up.

So what if he was currently being dragged around without any knowledge of where he was going by the single-most amazing young hero he had ever met, his grip hard-pressed over Izuku’s hammering pulse as it thrummed beneath his wrist. He definitely did not find it—just a little sexy? (Just a miniscule, tiny, microscopic amount, barely enough to even count!) Nope. It was not at all fulfilling some fantasies of his, definitely not.

“What?” Todoroki stopped and spun around, just shy of staggering backwards Izuku into the opposite wall with how fiercely he glowered. “Why did you write this? Is this a joke to you?”

A shiver ran up Izuku’s spine, and he tried to get a grip. This was his fault, and Todoroki was clearly upset. Izuku at least owed him a coherent explanation before he was swallowed up by the pit in his stomach.

Out of all of the things he would have wanted to say to Todoroki since he saved his life, asking for his forgiveness was not exactly one of them.

“I—T-Todoroki, I am so sorry. It’s definitely not a joke to me. I swear, I didn’t mean to send that to print, it w-was an accident.”

After a long inhale, Todoroki tucked his hands into his pocket and leaned against the wall. “That didn’t answer my question. I asked why you wrote it.”

“Um.” Izuku was suddenly very interested in examining the texture of his shoelaces in favor of meeting Todoroki’s pretty eyes. “W-well, my friend... suggested it actually. Sort of? Basically... I’ve been wanting to cover you in the column... f-for a long time, actually... but every time I tried to write out anything, it all came out wrong.”

Todoroki raised a brow. “And this came out right?”

“N-No! I mean, not... not exactly.” Izuku sighed. “I was trying to separate out m-my... feelings from the analysis, so I wrote up one thing where I wrote all of the quirk-focused, skill and combat stuff. The things I usually try to cover each week. And in another document, I wrote...” ashamed, Izuku’s voice trailed off, hands tightened into white-knuckled fists.

“This,” Todoroki suggested, holding up the paper.

“...Yeah.”
Once it was said out loud, Izuku felt especially terrible. This was so unfair to Todoroki, and the thought of how embarrassing this was made Izuku’s ribs crack under the compression of his lungs. All the poor guy did was save Izuku’s life and also exist—he did nothing to warrant all of Izuku’s misfortune.

Too afraid to look up, he continued looking at the ground, nerves making him twitch as Todoroki collected his thoughts for whatever it was he wanted to say.

“I see.”

Izuku blinked. That was it?

No verbal lashing? No yelling, no fists, no ill-intended use of his quirk?

Unnerved, Izuku didn’t know what to do with himself, how to handle all the guilt that sat heavy in his stomach. Todoroki should make him feel sorry for what he did. This was all wrong. He couldn’t be forgiven just like that.

Tears pricked at the corner of his eyes, but Izuku was determined not to let them spill out over his cheeks.

“I’m… I really am sorry, Todoroki. I feel like such a giant idiot. You have such an amazing skill set, you’re so smart, and after hearing about how you seamlessly took down real villains at the USJ… there was so much I could have said, and I feel like the whole school has seen the article just because I’m so… well, Uraraka calls it passionate.”

“...Passionate.” Todoroki repeated, testing out the syllables as if he were unsure if like the way it tasted on his tongue. Disbelieving, Izuku’s head shot up—did Todoroki just laugh? “That’s... one word for it.”

It was more like a scoff crossed with a small, indignant chuckle, but there was no denying the slightest trace of a smile that pulled at the corner of his mouth. The sight did something funny to Izuku’s brain, made him forget his name for just a beat.

Watching him laugh, even something so quick and meager, it was an experience. Izuku felt like he’d been yanked under by a summertide, the currents quick and unforgiving, sunbeams warm beneath the water’s surface. His eyes crinkled at the corners, just a little; the sound was surprisingly light, like dandelion cotton on a breeze; the clear edge of annoyance in his expression made it feel very real. Not some fantasy daydream, but a real, vulnerable, human moment.

Izuku realized it was exactly as he’d imagined it, and still somehow better than he’d thought possible.

Startling, refreshing, uplifting. And so lovely, no matter how unfamiliar.

Punctuating the sound with a sigh of resignation, Todoroki leaned his head back against the wall, chin pointing towards the ceiling. “Can you fix this, Midoriya? I recognize the physical print can’t be undone, but I would appreciate if you did not publish the article online.”

Nodding hurriedly, Izuku waved his hands in front of him. “No, no, of course! I… It’s the least I can do. I was planning on publishing, like, an apology sort of thing on the website tomorrow… and an explanation of what I did.”

“Alright.” Todoroki leaned up from his place on the wall, glancing down at the paper with a slant to his brow. “One more thing. I wanted to know, did—”
Izuku never got to hear whatever it was Todoroki was going to ask of him; not a moment sooner did the doors around the corner of the main hall all open for dismissal of their first lesson, and considering Izuku’s nerves were already at their limit, he jumped at the abrupt noise. Todoroki’s gaze narrowed, ever so slightly, and he ended up shaking his head before quickly stepping out towards the hallway.

“Nevermind. Please post the explanation.”

The shift in his demeanor was so sudden, Izuku felt like he’d gotten whiplash.

His hand moved before he could think to stop himself, reaching after him. “W-Wait—!”

But Todoroki was already moving away, threading through the flood of students, ignoring all the pointing and whispering that followed in his wake. Izuku watched him go, a vague sense of deja vu from their first encounter.

He may not have been stuck on the other side of the street, but Izuku was still stopped, unable to follow, and Todoroki was already moving on from the disaster.

Izuku could barely keep up enough to watch him go, let alone catch up with him.

To say Todoroki was happy with the resolution would have been a very rose-colored view of the situation.

It wasn’t the end of the world, he recognized that. This was a temporary irritant and it made every interaction he had that day heightened to the degree of misery, but it would pass. Stares were more deliberate. Laughter was louder, sharper, whittled into spears. Whispers and giggles—it was everything Shōto hated about socializing, amplified.

That was only the tip of the proverbial iceberg.

As ever, the real nuisance came from his father. How such news reached him without the article being available online, Shōto would never know, but it inevitably did and he was already having to hear about it.

He found a moment of peace in the restroom, thankfully unoccupied but for him, and silenced his phone for what felt like the dozenth time.

Shōto had let the first few ring unanswered in his pocket, but he’d taken to sending the past five calls straight to voicemail. After the fifth, his old man finally seemed to take the hint and stopped calling. Sure, Shōto might not be able to avoid his father forever, but the number of conversations he ever wanted to actively have with his old man were already few and far between, god forbid one about something like this. In this case, Shōto would gladly delay the inevitable for as long as possible.

Then, a text came.

Enji Todoroki 11:48
On impulse, Shōto froze the device in his grip and dropped it on the ground, grinding it beneath his foot.

He wouldn’t be able to return his old man’s call if he didn’t have a phone. “Whoops.”

As for lunch—that was not going to happen.

Shōto swiped an apple and a water bottle from the cafeteria (he wasn’t very hungry with his sour mood) and exited the building to eat somewhere on the grounds, away from prying eyes. He decided on a semi-secluded spot near the treeline, and as he rested beneath the filtered, chlorophyllic light that dripped down from the tree-tops. The heat and humidity had driven most students inside, and Shōto was grateful for his mother’s quirk; the cold from his right side spread out around him, laterally covering the grass and transforming his private enclave into ice-tipped blades that provided a cool contrast to the otherwise hot day.

While imperfect, the tucked away spot provided something close to privacy, and without the nagging weight of eyes on his back or his phone in his pocket, he tried to relax, to sort through some of the confusing set of circumstances he’d found himself in.

For Shōto, change from the monotony wasn’t necessarily unwelcome, but this sort of thing was just exhausting.

Foremost, he was annoyed. As much as anyone would be if one of your pet peeves was not only exemplified, but then dialed up to highest degrees. A fair amount of his frustration was mostly focused towards Midoriya, but even that was surprisingly immaterial. The guy had seemed genuinely sorry for what he’d done, so what good did being angry with him really accomplish? Neither his apologies, nor Shōto’s own anger, could undo what happened.

Confusion was another big one, too; Midoriya had explained the method of his mistake, not the madness behind it.

It was weird to think about, made Shōto’s stomach churn in unfamiliar self-consciousness. He could have dismissed the article as the delusional writings of a fan, but this just did not read that way. Midoriya had apologized for what he did, but not what he said. That was the part that stuck with Shōto most of all, made him unsure how to reconcile this, how to feel about everything. Did this boy genuinely… like him? Was it just attraction? It had to be; Midoriya didn’t know him. But the so-called passionate choice of his words were… just, strange. He’d not had a crush of his own to really compare, but there wasn’t anything about the depth of the way he wrote in the article to explain the reality of their situation.

Thinking about all of this was starting to give him a headache. Rueful, Shōto was suddenly missing the miserable rigidity of his day-day-day normal.

“Um, hey!” a voice called out to his left. “Todoroki!”

Shōto didn’t move, but his eyes did shift towards the source. It was, at least, a voice he knew.

“Hello, Yaoyorozu.”

She offered him a brief smile once she was near enough to no longer need to shout. “May I sit?”
It wasn’t worth the effort to try to send her away, even if he was not particularly in the mood for company, so Shōto simply nodded once and waited while she settled into the grass a few feet away, his eyes unfocused as he studied the thin bastions of sunshine piercing through the overhanging branches.

“So, um.” The young woman cleared her throat. “I know the article is surely the last thing you want to talk about, but—well—”

“It’s fine. Please, get to the point.”

Biting her lower lip, Yaoyorozu nodded. “Erm, sure. I guess I just—I know you don’t have Twitter or any social media, really…”

“Actually, I don’t even have a phone anymore.” Shōto commented offhandedly, almost sardonic.

“Oh?”

“Sorry, continue.”

Yaoyorozu paused for just a second. “Well, okay. Anyway, just, a lot of news handlers and the like have gotten their hands on Deku’s article. And a number of—”

“Midoriya,” Shōto corrected, not really thinking. “His name is Izuku Midoriya, that is. He doesn’t actually go by Deku.”

Now Yaoyoruzu raised a brow, almost amused. “Midoriya’s article, then. A fair number of people are directly tweeting and tagging your father—I just thought you might want to see some of what’s being said, to prepare you for when you go home later. I know your father can be… difficult.”

“Yes,” Shōto agreed with a sigh. “He can be.”

“Would you like to see the tweets, or I can just summarize for you?” she offered him her phone.

In lieu of a response, Shōto accepted the device and began to scroll through the—feed, timeline? Whatever it was called.

“These are just all the ones where people have tagged the school paper’s Twitter. There are more, but this is a pretty good sampling…”

@GoBeyond_Weekly is about to get a helluva lawsuit from @endeavor_official i’m calling it right now lmao

@GoBeyond_Weekly can we... please, they would be so cute together #tododeku

@GoBeyond_Weekly #UAships #erasermic who?? i only know #tododeku

@GoBeyond_Weekly i guess he is quirkless? sorry fam i don’t think this ship is even leaving the harbor RIP #tododeku
@GoBeyond_Weekly “Trying to capture the whole way I feel when I see him is necessarily reductive. Everytime I put more words to the page, I feel like I’ve left something out.” Felt that. #TodoDeku

@GoBeyond_Weekly #tododeku

no one:

not a single soul:

not even all might:

todoroki: (walks by)

deku: guess i’m gay

@GoBeyond_Weekly Ngl if deku wrote almost 1000 words about how pretty he thought i was i’d date him in a heartbeat

@GoBeyond_Weekly @endeavor_official so are you cool with gays or— #tododeku

“And ‘tododeku’ is…?”

Yaoyorozu scratched her cheek. “It’s... like a relationship name. Basically it means people are imagining what it would be like if you two dated.”

“Ah.” Allowing himself a bracing inhale, Shōto passed her phone back to her. He’d seen more than enough.

“Did you end up talking to Dek—I mean, Midoriya?” Yaoyorozu caught herself. “I figured that’s where you went this morning.”

“Yes. He was very…” He paused. Shōto wasn’t exactly sure how to explain what Midoriya was. “Nervous.”

At that, she let out a shocked laugh. “Well, you are a bit, hmm, intense. I hope you didn’t scare him.”

“No, I don’t think so. I—well...”

Shōto considered that possibility for a moment. Midoriya had mumbled through some of his explanation, but for the most part, he’d been very forthcoming. Honestly, Shōto had been so... just... annoyed with the whole thing, he hadn’t really considered what sort of impression he’d made on Midoriya. The idea of having scared him twinged his nerves with guilt.
“I actually… I don’t know.”

“Don’t worry about it.” Yaoyorozu shook her head with a weak smile. “I’m sure all of this will blow over in a week or so.”

Before social convention could force him to come up with some sort of reply, the few students who had bothered spending time outside in the heat began to migrate indoors, and Yaoyorozu checked the time on her cell phone.

“Oh, class is in just a few minutes. We should get going.”

Wordlessly, Shōto stood up and followed her back to Class 1-A, too-aware of the increasing amount of buzzing that followed him everywhere.

He tried, and failed, to just sit down at his desk in peace.

“So, like, what’re you gonna do, Todoroki?” Kaminari asked, turning to the back of the room. Their other classmates were returning, and the room was about half-filled. “About this whole Deku thing?”

Tsuyu made a face. “It’s not our business. Let’s let Todoroki and Deku sort it out between them.”

Unamused, Shōto simply sat down. “I’m not going to do anything.”

That seemed to take them both by surprise, Tsuyu tilting her head to the side and Kaminari’s brows jumping into his hairline.

“You’re not going to—what?”

“I’m not going to do anything,” he repeated. “The printing was a mistake. It exists and is out there now. It’ll pass.”

Iida and Uraraka walked in at almost that same moment, the former looking severe and pleased at the same time.

“That is a very healthy outlook, Todoroki!” complimented Iida, moving to settle into his own desk. “It will be a distant memory for the school by next week.”

Shōto thought that short of a turnaround time was a tad optimistic, but he decided not to argue the point. The important thing was that it would pass, whenever that would be.

“Wow, man. I sort of envy that, like…” Kirishima glanced around the room before continuing. “Ability to not be bothered by stuff. It would be really nice if I just didn’t get like, emotionally invested in everything.”

Yaoyorozu sent him a concerned glance, but Shōto pretended not to notice. It was easier to just not answer then have to try to talk through what he happened to be feeling at that moment, and even if he could try to explain it, he didn’t really want to. Not be bothered? If only.

Class began soon thereafter, before anyone could really bring up the article again, and Shōto continued to count the minutes until he could finally go home.

...And deal with his fucking dad.

Fuck.
By the end of the day, Izuku was ready to crawl into a hole and never, ever come out.

So much for keeping a low-profile, he thought ruefully. The article had gotten to the actual press, somehow—because of course it did—and he was being bombarded on all forms of social media. Are you really the writer Deku? Did you mean all that stuff you said? Are you gay? Are you and Todoroki dating? Do you want to be? Is this a publicity stunt?

Shinsō, at least, was being extra nice to him, which was a pretty rare occurrence as far as their bizarre friendship went. If anyone was particularly bothersome between classes, Shinsō would interrupt with his quirk and make them, in his words, “fuck off.”

Uraraka and Iida were both being really supportive, too. No one in Class 1-A was actually even bothering him about it, for which he was both grateful and surprised, and he had to imagine that one of them had said to leave him be—or perhaps even Todoroki had said something?

That’s another thing, he thought-mumbled to himself, collecting his bookbag in a mindless trance. Todoroki… he knows who I am now. But… he seemed so mad.

Before Izuku could make it to the door where Shinsō was waiting, his phone began to buzz in his pocket, and he fumbled for it with shaking fingers.

Nejire Hado.

Izuku was just about at his limit. First the writing staff, then Todoroki, and now Nejire, in one day? The worst part of it was Izuku knew he deserved it all, too. It was his mistake that got him here.

“Ah, I need to take this” Izuku said quickly to Shinsō. “It’s Nejire. Don’t wait up.”

With a sympathetic look, Shinsō nodded. “Yeah, good luck. Text me if you want, later.”

“Thanks. I probably will.” Izuku thought his voice sounded hoarse, so he cleared his throat quickly before picking up the phone.

“Hello?”

“Hi, Midoriya!” she all but sang, not lacking in her usual enthusiasm. It was surprisingly refreshing after his very long day.

“It’s Nejire. I would have called or texted sooner but this place has weird, spotty service. Anyway…” A small sigh. “I heard about the…”

“God-awful nightmare that is my life?”

“Something like that,” she laughed. “Listen, I won’t keep you—and I’ve got to go soon anyway—but I need you to do something for me.”

“Sure?” he blinked, eyes unfocused as he stared at the front of the empty classroom. After bungling this week’s print so completely, he couldn’t help but wonder why Nejire would possibly want him to do anything.
“Great. Okay, so—hopefully this part isn’t news to you, but the actual media has gotten hold of the article and, well, it’s sort of… blown up. Our Twitter is overloaded and the website is down. Again. The poor thing was not designed to deal with the amount of traffic you keep bringing to us. Good thing I’ve got Fukidashi working on getting us set up with a better web host!”

With a feeble chuckle, Izuku offered a brief “sorry,” which Nejire dismissed.

“Now, here’s the deal, Midoriya. I’m not going to lecture you. I am frustrated at the whole situation and disappointed in you—you usually have such a painstaking attention to detail, and this time, you didn’t. That’s okay. Mistakes happen. I’m pretty sure the stress of this is more than enough of a lesson to you without me making it harder. So instead of apologizing, just learn from this mistake and grow from it. Can you do that for me?”

Nejire’s words were blunt, and they stung a bit to hear, but there was validity to what she was saying; feeling sorry for himself wasn’t going to solve anything or make this better.

He’d been silent for long enough that Nejire said, “Midoriya?”

“O-oh. Um. I’m here, sorry, just…” Maybe he sniffled, just a little. He’d not cried all day which, considering how shitty it had been, he was rather proud to say. However, hearing the combination of reassurance and disappointment from Nejire was a bitter pill to swallow. “W-What did you need for me to do?”

“Well, I’m not sure how you planned on handling what happens next. My first instinct would be to keep it off the website and just put out a statement regarding the error. But, things are a little more complicated now. I think I want you to just go ahead and post it per usual. The best thing we can do for the paper, and, frankly, for the story, is be the ones in control of it. While it’s not necessarily the sort of attention I want for the paper, I’d rather we own the story and not let anyone else try to take your words out of context or misquote you. Does that make sense?”

“Oh…” Biting his lip, Izuku nodded, forgetting that she couldn’t see it. “That does make sense. I—I just, I told Todoroki… erm, that is, he came and talked to me about the whole thing this morning. I told him I would post, like, the statement you talked about. Not the story. Should I…?”

There was a brief pause, Izuku fidgeting in the silence.

“I’m sorry, Midoriya,” Nejire said, voice gentle. “But I’m going to have to insist. As much as I’m sure this is difficult considering your feelings towards him, I need to think about what’s best for the paper. Getting ahead of the story is a smarter option in the long term.”

“…Right, no, that makes total sense.” Rubbing his forehead, Izuku could feel the edge of a migraine starting to come on. “I’ll make sure it goes up with all the others at noon tomorrow.”

“Thank you,” she hummed. “I really am sorry, by the way. I didn’t know you had a crush on this boy or else I might have just suggested you write about someone else. Actually, I didn’t even know if you liked boys or girls or what—didn’t really feel like the kind of thing I should ask, ya know?”

“No, no, really. Don’t be sorry. This was my fault in the first place. I don’t, erm, mind talking about though. I’m bisexual.”

With a little squeal of delight, Nejire said, “Okay, good to know! Thanks for trusting me enough to share… I mean, I know everyone will just speculate now anyway, but telling someone versus having it broadcasted is definitely not the same. Anyway, I’m rambling. You should definitely talk to Todoroki about this some more if you get the chance, even if you don’t—ONE SECOND!” she
called out, the sound loud and muffled at the same time.

“Sorry, Mirio is—nevermind. I’ve got to go, but thank you for understanding, Midoriya. I would definitely encourage you talk to Todoroki, and if he has a problem with our decision, tell him he can talk to me. Okay?”

“Ummm.”

She repeated herself, just an octave higher this time. “Okay?”

“Yes… okay. Thank you, Nejire. Sorry I disturbed your trip and everything.”

Izuku could catch just the hint of a smile in her voice when she replied, “You didn’t disturb anything. I told you to be true to your writing, didn’t I? Everything will work itself out, I promise.”

“Thank you,” he let out a small, watery laugh. “You’re really way too nice to me, you know?”

“Nonsense!” She laughed, and Izuku could hear voices in the background that sounded like her Big Three companions. “And one last, tiny thing before I go!”

“What is it?”

“I’m definitely team Tododeku. Okay, bye!”

His face flooded with warmth, but before he could get through more than the first syllable of her name, the line went dead.

“Gahhh…” he held both hands to his cheeks, embarrassed, trying to get his face to cool down. Thankfully there was no one around to see him flustered, and Izuku put his backpack on while looking out over the school grounds from the classroom window. Just barely, he could see a cluster of 1-A students exiting the building is a small group: Tsuyu, Tokoyami, Shoji, Kaminari, Ashido.

Sometimes he felt weird, knowing so much about so many people. He had not a doubt in his mind that none of them could so much as pick him out of a crowd.

He could not help but notice Todoroki was not with them.

After everything, Izuku almost wished his words and actions would have poisoned the well. If Todoroki had just yelled at him or punched him or—or done something besides be completely inscrutable—then maybe Izuku could just get over his stupid crush.

But he didn’t.

He was just… there one minute, gone the next.

Chewing the inside of his cheek, Izuku shook his head and turned away from the window. He had to put faith in Nejire: *everything will work itself out, I promise.*

At the end of the day, it was only Izuku’s pride that had to suffer, owning the extent of his mistakes and trying to make up for it was all he could really do.
It wasn’t easy, but that evening, Izuku managed to write up something he felt met the request Todoroki had made while still honoring Nejire’s decision to publish. A brief explanation at the head of the page, followed by the actual (unedited) article, reading: “The author wishes to note the publication of this piece of writing was unintentional.” He set the queue to update at exactly 12:00 Wednesday, along with the rest of the staff’s writing.

But before the digital version could go live—not that half of Japan hadn’t read it at that point—Izuku had one more thing he had to do.

Taking a deep inhale, Izuku glanced at his watch.

It was 8:19 in the morning. In less than sixty seconds, Todoroki would arrive, and even if he was about ready to choke on his own nerves, there was one final part of their conversation he needed to settle.

Punctual as ever, Todoroki was entering the school grounds before the minute could even change over, and Izuku’s grip on his backpack tightened as he grit his teeth, walking to meet him before he could reach the front doors.

Once he’d gotten a bit closer, Izuku’s stomach twisted in an uncomfortable series of knots—Todoroki looked... bad. (As bad as someone like Todoroki can look, anyway.) He was especially pale, and the bags beneath his eyes looked uncomfortably heavy. He wore a scowl, which wasn’t unusual, but this one seemed particularly severe.

Don’t freeze up. You owe him this much.

“Todoroki,” Izuku cleared his throat. At once, Todoroki’s footfalls halted, his mismatched gaze holding Izuku’s with a flicker of surprise. “I need to talk to you about something.”

“What?” he asked coldly, resuming his former pace towards the school.

Not allowing himself to be deterred, Izuku pressed his lips together, walking in step beside him.

“Two things, really. First, an explanation of what I told you yesterday will go up on the website at noon. But the article is going up as well. I wanted you to be prepared for that.”

Todoroki pinched the bridge of his nose, but didn’t stop walking. Izuku tried to brace for whatever he might say, unable to tell much from his impassivity besides that he was exasperated.

“Fine.” A glare was shot in Izuku’s direction. “It doesn’t matter anyway. The damage has already been done.”

“The... damage?” Izuku repeated, but Todoroki’s gaze just narrowed, as he turned down the corridor that fed directly into 1-A and 1-B.

“Don’t worry about it. What else?”

“Oh. Um, okay.” Izuku bit his tongue on the urge to tack on another *sorry*, pushing through his nerves. This next part was what that really mattered. He could still hear Nejire’s encouragement in his ears, clear as if she was standing beside him.

*Instead of apologizing, just learn from this mistake and grow from it. Can you do that for me?*

“Listen, Todoroki... I know I’m just another random face to you from the General Department. I’m... not special. I don’t even have a quirk. I recognize that I don’t really have the *means* to make
Determined, Izuku stood his ground, meeting Todoroki’s eyes with his own soulfire green gaze. “I don’t have much, but I do have a voice, and an audience. With your permission, I’d like to publish a real, proper article about you this time. Let me show the world who Shōto Todoroki really is.”

Todoroki watched him for several silent seconds, a single brow hooked high into his bangs. “And what if I don’t want the world to know who I am?” he eventually questioned, and Izuku had a sense that he was not speaking rhetorically. “What if what you said the first time was already too much? Throwing more words at this problem won’t solve it.”

“Then that’s what I’ll write. I’ll tell the whole world to leave you alone if that’s what you really want, but I don’t think it is.”

Todoroki scoffed. “Don’t presume to know the first thing about me, Midoriya.”

“I know you’re in the Hero Course for a reason,” he shot right back. “I know that even if you were accepted into Yūei on a recommendation, that you must want to be a hero. It’s obvious that you don’t remember me, but you saved my life, Todoroki. The second day of school, the villain attack, the explosion. You froze traffic on the entire block. You didn’t have a single reason to do it besides that you didn’t want to let me die. Only heroes do that.”

Blinking, Todoroki looked a little stunned, but Izuku wasn’t concerned about giving him the chance to catch up. “And, you’re right, I don’t know everything about you. But I do know that no one would do what you did unless you really want to help people. Even if we’re completely different, I’ve wanted that same thing my whole life. It’s not like I can do anything exciting, like saving people trapped beneath a building or capturing a villain that’s broken into Yūei, but this is one of the few things I can do, and not to mention this would be for a problem I caused. So, please—let me make this right.”

By the time he’d reached the end, Izuku could feel his hands shaking, just a little, and he tightened his grip on the straps of his bookbag. Todoroki turned towards his classroom, but he didn’t walk away without throwing a glance over his shoulder. “I appreciate your enthusiasm, but my answer is still no.”

Izuku let out a breath he hadn’t even realized he’d been holding, the air deflating from his lungs with a wavering breath. “If you’re so committed to making this up to me, then all I ask is that you let this go. Without a follow-up, people will forget and lose interest, and we can both move on.”

“I—” don’t want to just move on, Izuku was tempted to say, but he bit down hard on his bottom lip. There was so much that Izuku could say, but if Todoroki didn’t want to be featured in the column, then Izuku had no choice but to honor his wishes.

Finally, Izuku dropped his gaze, a belated flush crawling up his cheeks and coloring them a shade that seemed eerily similar to his shoes.
“...Fine. I won’t force you. But you should think about what kind of hero you want to be, if you’re going to shut the world out everytime something goes wrong. I realize this is my fault. I want to make things right. Image matters. Words matter. But if you don’t want that, then so be it.”

And this time, Izuku was the one to walk away. This mistake wasn’t going to stop him from trying to support and promote his peers, whether that be through his column, education, or whatever he ends up doing after Yūei. This was a battle, not the war. He’d been okay with going unseen and unnoticed by Todoroki from the beginning, had never meant for there to be any sort of—whatever this was between them. Just because Izuku couldn’t force himself to not admire Todoroki, didn’t mean he had to let this be the thing that broke him.

No. This was not where his story ended, even if this is where Todoroki wrote himself off the script. Izuku wouldn’t let this stop him.

...

...Now, what would stop him was Ectoplasma-sensei standing outside of the classroom, expressionless, holding an arm out as he tried to walk through the door.

“Midoriya, Principal Nezu has asked you to go to his office before class today.”

He used a very teacher-like voice, the kind that suggested you’re not just in trouble, you did something wrong and you’re in BIG trouble, and Izuku was hopeless but to nod. He could catch sight of Shinsō leaning against the window on the far side of the room, who shrugged, and Izuku had little choice but to turn back around and drag his feet to the principal's office.

Why was he being sent to the Principal’s Office? Was Izuku going to be kicked off the writing staff? Expelled? He knew he messed up, but was it that large of a mistake? But why not? The paper was a huge success now, and him being expelled from the school after such a dramatic incident would probably just drum up more interest. While he was proud of the articles he’d published to date, it wasn’t like they needed him anymore, and—oh god, how was he going to tell Nejire? She had done so much to help him and now he wasn’t even going to be able to write sometime to try to make up for what he did. And Todoroki, oh god. Izuku had gone and gave that big speech earlier about how he would use his words and voice as a tool and he wasn’t even going to be a student anymore, let alone have access to the newspaper.

By the time he stood outside the office, legs shaking, Izuku raised a trembling fist and prepared to knock. Before he could, however, the door flew open, quivering in its hinges.

“I am here, unexpectedly!”

“All—All Might!” Izuku squeaked, almost falling backwards into the hallway. The hulking figure of the Symbol of Peace stood, smiling in the doorframe, towering over Izuku just as much as he had the day of the Sludge Villain attack almost two years ago.

They had crossed paths a few times since Izuku was admitted, in spite of the heartbreaking conversation they’d had over the summer, and All Might had been nothing but kind and supportive when those rare moments did occur. Usually, Izuku was just too nervous to say much but stutter through a few sentences. While he never asked directly, Izuku often wondered if the faculty knew about All Might’s condition.

Half of my respiratory organs were destroyed and I lost my whole stomach. I've become emaciated from repeated surgeries and the aftereffects. Right now, I can only work as a hero for about three
hours a day.

It was hard to believe the staff didn’t know, considering that particular contributing factor. Izuku
only ever saw him in his fully muscled hero form while on the school grounds, though, and he’d
asked Izuku not to tell anyone before leaving him on the rooftop that day, so the student body
didn’t know, either.

A startled jolt knocked him back another inch when Izuku realized All Might was waving a hand in
front of his face. “Young Midoriya? Are you okay? Maybe I should take him to Recovery Girl…”

“No! I’m fine. I’m great. I’m great and fine and wow, sorry, just—you startled me. I thought I
was meeting with Principal N-Nezu?”

“Aha, you are!” Mused another voice, and Izuku realized that indeed the principal was there, barely
visible behind the bulk of All Might’s calves. “Come in, young man.”

Nervous? Izuku wasn’t nervous, shuffling in after the Symbol of Peace and the Head of Yūei
highschool. Nervous would have been a blessing right now.

He was a freakin’ wreck.

Izuku practically collapsed into the chair opposite Principal Nezu’s desk, who very casually hopped
up into his own padded seat and folded his hands over the surface, smiling pleasantly while Izuku
visibly perspired through his uniform. Standing beside the diminutive, intimidating administrator,
All Might coughed roughly before resuming his regular, emaciated form. His suit slumped down
his lean frame, making him appear more coat hanger than human, and an uncomfortable pang went
off in Izuku’s stomach that he couldn’t quite identify. Something like guilt, but with more sadness
and less responsibility.

“It’s nice to meet with you one-on-one, Midoriya,” began the principal, voice almost as bubbly as
Nejire’s. “Present Mic is always eager to talk about the success of the paper these days, so I feel as
if I already know you! Which is why I’ve called you here today, in fact.”

“Umm…” he kept his eyes on his own hands in his lap. “I’m really sorry about the print that went
out yesterday. I figured that’s why I’m here…?”

“Well, that’s part of it,” Nezu continued, frowning. “Your Hero Analysis! column has become a
much bigger deal than any of us thought it would, and it’s become quite a source of disruption for
the student body. After yesterday, there was even talk amongst the faculty to have the newspaper
canceled altogether.”

Curling his fingers to fists, Izuku felt a little frantic as he met the principal’s steady, black gaze.
“Wait, sir, please—don’t do anything to Go Beyond! Weekly! This was completely my fault. Nejire,
erm, Hado-san, puts so much work into this project. Please don’t punish the rest of the staff
because of what I did. I’ll step down and take responsibility—”

“Easy there, Young Midoriya,” All Might interrupted, hands up in a placating gesture. Izuku’s gaze
darted to him, who wore his trademark reassuring smile. Admittedly, it wasn’t quite as impactful
with his gaunt cheeks and sunken in eyes, but there was a familiarity there, the smile of The
Symbol of Peace, and it helped him to steady his ratcheting heartbeat. “No one is getting in trouble.
At least, not today.”

Principal Nezu leaned back in his chair, nodding. “That’s right. We’re not here to punish you, but
we do need to backtrack a bit. Really, we need to establish some better ground rules. While it is
admirable that you were so prepared to take the onus for the misprint, this is the school’s newspaper and ultimately it is a part of Yūei, therefore the responsibility is something to be shared by the writing staff and our own faculty as well. When your column began to gain the traction it did, we should have stepped in and had this conversation sooner. I feel the events of yesterday are a good testament to that point, actually. That is what we’re here to discuss.”

Eyes wide, Izuku let those words rattle around in his head a bit, crashing together and making echoes of sense, but over the breadth of his disbelief it was a little hard to pay attention to the meaning behind what the principal was telling him.

*Ground rules*... that was... a good thing! That meant he could still write. The paper wasn’t going to be discontinued.

“Ectoplasma and Present Mic aren’t able to join us, as they both have to attend to their homerooms, but they have both agreed that you should be aware of some of the developments in light of your column, Midoriya. Across all classes in the Hero Department, students have been outperforming their own records from the years previous, and the first years are placing higher than any first year class before them since the column began. Even the Support and General Departments are testing higher than average, although the growth is less significant than their counterparts in the Hero Department. The funds raised by the paper have added such a boon to the Management Department that there’s actually a surplus to the budget.”

Nezu’s face broke into a knowing grin as he studied Izuku’s stunned expression. “To be honest, your work has turned into a bit of a spectacle for all of Yūei. The message is consistently empowering, and it seems to have lit a fire under the entire student body.”

“T-Thank you very much,” Izuku bowed his upper body as low as he could over his lap, more than a little overwhelmed by such a direct compliment. “It’s been an honor to write. I owe Nej—Hado-san so much. That praise should go to her, this was her vision.”

All Might smiled. “I have a feeling Hado-san would insist that the credit for the column’s success goes to you, son.”

Wordless, Izuku just shook his head and tried to keep himself from outright crying, knowing if he opened his stupid mouth again he’d probably start sobbing. Being recognized for doing something he already loved doing by All Might was... it was too much.

“Well, that segways nicely to my next point, actually,” Principal Nezu continued, pushing a folder towards Izuku that had been sitting on his desk. “This is for you.”

Curious, he reached forward and took it, sitting back into the chair and flipping it open. Inside, it contained...

Er...

Actually, Izuku wasn’t really sure what he was looking at.

There were all sorts of strange things within, a lanyard with a laminated version of his school portrait wedged in the front pocket, an academic calendar with highlights and corresponding documents that detailed different events on each day. A big fat sticky note in Present Mic’s handwriting read, “P³!”

“What is this?” he wondered aloud. “P... three? Or P cubed?”
Principal Nezu ran a hand down his face, and All Might laughed before coming to look over his shoulder. He snatched the sticky note, crumpled it up and tossed into the recycling bin. “Ignore that. Mic is insisting on naming this project something silly.”

“What is the project, though?” genuinely confused, Izuku continued to flip through the paperwork, finding his current class schedule, a copy of his most recent records of academic standing, some sort of typed up letter from Ectoplasma—it was all blurring by too fast for him to really read.

Principal Nezu looked almost comically pleased with himself.

“Think of it as your… journalism starter-kit, Midoriya. The staff and I have reviewed you academic performance, weighed against the overall improvement of the student body and in standing with our mission to help all of our students to become successful in their chosen paths, we wanted to extend the option to allow you to be more… flexible in your work as a student in Class 1-C.”

Stopping to tap his chin, Nezu gazed at a copy of the paper tucked off to the side. It wasn’t this week’s, with Todoroki, but the one previous that featured Setsuna Tokage.

“I realize this is a bit unorthodox, but you’ll be allowed some extra time to work on the column as a dedicated, school-sponsored project rather than just an extracurricular. The misprint could be attributed as your mistake, but in reality, the moment we teachers recognized the sort of impact your words were having on the rest of the students, we should have made more of an effort to protect the column’s integrity. To avoid something like this happening again, we want to lift some of the direct academic burden to encourage you to keep writing.”

He—what? Must be... uh? Dreaming. Or dissociating. Or maybe he was hallucinating?

Because Izuku definitely misheard Principal Nezu just now.

“I’m... being… what now?”

“Think of it like this: after the Sports Festival, the departments help to place students in various internships to help them gain hands-on experience. This is essentially Yūei offering you an internship, instead of an outside entity, and you’ll do some of this work in place of some of your classwork.”

When Izuku continued to gape like a fish, All Might sighed and crossed his arms. “Listen, Young Midoriya. Principle Nezu, and really, all of the teachers, value the way you and Hado-san have empowered the student body. As a sort of—well, experimental opportunity—you’re going to be given a ‘press pass’ that will grant you access to different parts of the school at different times, outside of your usual classes. In the case that there’s some kind of event that conflicts with your regular schedule, depending on how you and Ectoplasma decide to approach the division of your academic work, you may or may not be excused from class to focus on your reporting.”

“Oh, but don’t forget to tell him why you’re here, Toshinori!” the principal winked to Izuku, and he didn’t have time to possibly uncode what that could possibly mean before All Might was speaking again.

“Ah, well…” he scratched the back of his head. Was All Might… sheepish? “Since I’m the newbie on the staff, I don’t actually have any clubs or a homeroom to cover. You already know about, well, this.” He gestured up and down at his skeletal figure, smile falling just a tad. “And you haven’t told anyone even with the literal media outlet at your fingertips, so I already have reason to trust you. I may not be a reporter or have the expertise Mic does, but what would you think about
letting me teach you a thing or two? I’ve spent my fair share of time in the spotlight, so I can at least provide some inside from the other side of the camera. I’d be your primary adviser for the school-sponsored part of the project, but you will still answer to Hado-san and Present Mic when it comes to publishing your projects.”

Mildly, Izuku wondered if he looked like he was about to pass out. He sure as hell felt like he was going to pass out. There was no holding back his tears at this point.

All Might’s smile returned in earnest. “Achievable dreams, right, kid? You don’t have to have a superpower to make a difference in this world. You’ve already proven that much. So what do you say?”

And—ah—there it was. From the end of a long, dark tunnel, Izuku heard All Might’s voice one more time.

“Y-Young Midoriya?! I think he passed out... Maybe I do need to take him to Recovery Girl after all.”

Chapter End Notes

Next week: The Sports Festival!

(ﾉ◕ヮ◕)ﾉ*:・゚✧ pluuuuuuuuus ultra!!! ♡*:・(*)ω*ω*
Chapter Summary

Todoroki reflects on his past, and his present irritability leading up to the Sports Festival. Izuku determines what it means to be a hero writer at a place like Yūei... featuring Dadmight!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Stand up!

Shōto could feel the bile burn up his throat, the pulse of a bruise already forming over his stomach.

If you can’t take that, there’s no way you’ll be able to beat All Might. Or even some small time villain.

Snot and tears leaked down his face in a sticky, gross mixture, and he tried to wipe it off with his forearm while bent over the floor. Did breathing always hurt this much?

Please, stop pushing him!

Oh. Wait.

He’s only five years old.

This was a memory.

Get out of my way!

Even when he knew it was coming, Shōto would never be able to brace himself enough for the inevitable gasp, the sharp sound of skin meeting skin.

The heavy thud of deadweight hitting the floor.

Shōto sat up with a jolt, heart throbbing and lungs weighted by lead instead of air.

Letting out a low groan, he pushed the palms of his heels into his eyes, trying to blot out the very convincing phantom pains that ran blistering hot over his eye, cheek, temple, forehead. His stomach was still tightly clenched; he could feel the muscles of his abdomen tensing, anticipating a kick that did not come, bracing for a jab that would not land.

Because none of that was actually happening.

It’s not real, Shōto reminded himself, trying to regain control of his breathing.

It’s not like these dreams were new to him. They came and went in cycles, an ebb-and-flow to match his levels of stress, a bitter stain of salt against the sands that was only visible in the low tide.
Well, that was usually the case, anyway. There were some nights the memories came completely
unbidden. The ghost of his mother’s voice was a gift and curse, haunting him only in the aching
whispers that hummed a melody of her sadness.

Unbearable.

That child’s left side is unbearable.

Releasing a low sigh, Shōto removed his hands from his eyes. His heart had slowed and the
imagined scorching heat had dissipated in the haze of waking. He examined his room, unsurprised
to find that it was still dark, and a quick glance to his digital clock on his bedside table informed
him it was only 2:32 in the morning. Irritable, he flopped back down on his pillow, arms spread
out, gaze unseeing as he stared at the ceiling.

He’d gotten much better at calming himself down, if only by necessity.

When he was younger, before Tōya's death, Shōto would sometimes crawl into bed with his eldest
brother after a dream like that. It wasn’t always successful in helping him to fall back asleep, but it
was one of the fastest ways for him to calm down. In those instances, he preferred Tōya’s company
over Fuyumi or Natsuo because... well, honestly, they just both were too much like Mom for it to
be comforting. Their soft grey eyes and shock-white hair made his heart heavy, the back of his
neck prickling with the reminder of her absence. Tōya, on the other hand, may have had their
mother’s hair, but he had their father’s eyes, and Shōto knew he wasn’t exactly their old man’s
Number One Fan, either. He would tease or poke fun at their father openly and often, usually just
goofy, silly things, like guessing that his nose hairs must be set on fire like his facial hair when he
activated his quirk, or if the real reason he didn’t like All Might was simply because the Symbol of
Peace was 25 cm taller than him. Regardless of the subject, Shōto would laugh, reveling in the
illicit mischief that was ridiculing their father and staying up late with Tōya laughing beside him.
Those nights, the terror of his dreams would melt into the darkness of his older brother’s room, and
even if sleep did not come, Shōto became fond of those memories in favor of fixating on the ones
that had forced him awake in the first place.

Frowning at the dark ceiling, Shōto closed his eyes, trying to will sleep to come.

It had been a very long week since Midoriya’s article came out. Tomorrow was only Friday, and
Shōto had no hopefulness leading into the weekend.

He and his father had… disagreed on how to deal with the article. His old man had a history of
dealing with news exposure, being a Pro-Hero of such repute. From his experience with both good
and bad stories, he’d insisted Shōto make some kind of countermove. His list of complaints and
suggestions were long and many, and Shōto wasn’t interested in any of them.

At least deny the relationship, Shōto. People will assume the worst. Incidentally, they didn’t
actually address the fact that Midoriya was another guy. As far as Shōto knew, for all his father’s
pitfalls, he wasn’t homophobic.

As far as his Dad was concerned, “the worst” meant being involved with anyone quirkless,
romantic or otherwise. The way he spoke about Midoriya, even in theory, was reminiscent of the
way one might speak about a second-class citizen.

...Still, Shōto would sooner drop dead than address anything having to do with the article in any
sort of public forum, particularly on the topic of his own sexuality. All he really wanted to do was
to let it die and move on with his life.
Next Wednesday was the Sports Festival, and maybe—hopefully—that would take enough of the focus off his personal life and reorient the public towards his potential success as a hero. And, in the case of his father, perhaps Shōto could finally dissuade him of his stubbornness, show him that no amount of fighting, bribing, or training could ever mold Shōto into the so-called masterpiece of his creation.

Maybe. He wasn’t really optimistic, but anything was possible.

He wasn’t certain of when exactly he managed to fall asleep, only that he did. When his alarm blared at 5:30, Shōto felt groggy and irritable from the film reel of half-memories that lingered in the silence of his bedroom, but grateful that he did at least manage to get some sleep.

Small victories, he supposed.

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School was kind-of sort-of an absolute mess.

Iida advised that Izuku simply delete his Twitter if looking at it made him feel so god awful, but he found the miserable compulsion to be some sort of self-inflicted punishment for what he did.

@GoBeyond_Weekly I saw todoroki talking to someone outside of 1-a the day after the article… short w/ freckles and green hair? DEKU MAYHAPS???? ARE THEY DATING???? #tododeku #UAships

@GoBeyond_Weekly if #tododeku doesn’t become reality we riot

@PresentMicOfficial ok you’re like the coolest teacher at Yūei, please at least tell us if they talked. i will accept anything at this point... cRuctions. #tododeku

@GoBeyond_Weekly “To me, he’s more like a memory that I make up more memories for. I don’t know if he has a favorite kind of movie, but I like to imagine he would hold my clumsy, shaking hands when we watch them together.” #tododeku #uwu

@GoBeyond_Weekly give us more #tododeku content cowards

@endeavor_official i know cha baby boi doesn’t have a twitter but like, tell him if he doesn’t want deku i’ll take him. the sweetest kindest soul ever. his writing is like poetry like gotdamn #tododeku
@GoBeyond_Weekly i’d sell my soul to satan for literally even 1 more #tododeku shaped cornchip #UAships

@GoBeyond_Weekly I AM CRYING THINKING ABOUT HOW MUCH DEKU LOVES TODOROKI??? most of the time nowadays it’s like some fucking “swipe right” shit—deku really out here making all the rest of us out here tryin to score look like a bunch of chumps huh. im not even mad holy fuck #tododeku

@GoBeyond_Weekly please at least show us what deku looks like im dying of curiosity. ):

Izuku managed to scrape by, no longer spending his mornings outside and trying to avoid the 1-A hallway at all costs. Even if the tweets and comments on the GB!W website were tremendously embarrassing, Izuku would have been lying if he wasn’t a little touched that so many people responded to his writing with such positive regard. Especially something like that—it was just raw, unedited, and off-brand for his usual style.

Todoroki’s rejection hurt, but it also wasn’t shocking. It also wasn’t really rejection, because it’s not like Izuku did anything but confess that he was madly head over heels for the guy, to which Todoroki seemed totally unphased. It’s not like he was mean, or called Izuku names, or threatened to beat him up. He just… didn’t really seem to care.

Honestly, Izuku wouldn’t be surprised if Todoroki was used to having people fawn over him all the time. Probably not in quite such a public fashion, but considering his looks, fame, intelligence, and talent… Todoroki was just one of those people, the ones who had everything going for them.

The ones who lived in a totally different world than people like Izuku, with 24 carat gold leaflets sprinkled atop their desserts, real wax seals burnished onto their envelopes, and speciality polish for their expensive leather shoes.

The only polish Izuku had ever used before was the discount kind designed for wood furniture, when he would help his Mom clean their apartment.

It became increasingly harder to dodge strangers at school, and he sincerely would have been at a loss without Shinsō. His friend was stand-offish enough that most people left them alone if they were together, and, if the stray person or two did persist on asking him about Todoroki, their relationship, or Izuku’s writing in general, Shinsō was liberal in sending them away with his quirk.

Izuku felt a little guilty about it, because he knew Shinsō didn’t really like to use his quirk maliciously unless the situation really called for it, but he never once asked Shinsō to intervene.

He simply did it because he wanted to.

The highlight of the week was when Izuku was able to put his focus on something outside of his social orbit of negative influence: a new piece for the column, which he wrote up Thursday night and revised Friday morning so he would have something a little nicer to present to his fellow newspaper staff members, considering how much grief he caused.

This time, Nejire insisted she was the one to personally check his work, to which Izuku felt a little twinge of guilt, but he couldn’t really blame her.
Anymore, Izuku kept multiple on-going drafts in the back of his notebook so he could easily flip back and forth between his notes and his writing, the latter half comprised mostly of a sentence here or there, or a specific comparison or critique that would come to mind. Giving the ideas roots, but permitting them room to grow, Izuku liked to have an inking of what to expect to write about, while at the same time allowing his classmates day-to-day actions guide his intuitions towards their abilities in different directions. If he had a working draft of, say, Mirio Togata, but someone from Class 1-B did something that week that Izuku found truly spectacular, he might start up a new piece of that new person, or improve upon an existing one, rather than committing himself to work on the piece about Mirio. The creative license to virtually write about anyone may have been Nejire’s greatest gift to him.

Realistically, Izuku had no idea if his methods were standard with other writers who did weekly publications, or if he just made life harder on himself by stretching his attention across a multitude of works rather than focusing in on one specific project, but this was simply how he worked best. In the end, it must have worked out, because Nejire’s feedback was nothing short of glowing, saying that he’d returned to his usual caliber—or perhaps even exceeded it.

“Did you tell Ochako that you were going to cover her for this week?” Nejire asked conspiratorially as she passed back his draft.

“No,” Izuku admitted with a sheepish grin. He accepted his draft with freshly inked pages, noting the mark-ups were fewer than normal. “I wanted her to be surprised. I didn’t want her to think I was just, like, covering her because she’s my friend.”

Nejire nodded, doing a quick peek around the room. Uraraka was busy chattering with Shinsō while he worked on editing some pictures. “Don’t worry, I don’t think it reads at all like that. And I think it was a smart move to go with someone close to you after last week, if I’m honest.”

Head tilting to the side, Izuku frowned. “Oh, really? Why?”

“Welllllll…” Nejire pursed her lips, thoughtful for a moment. “How do I explain? It’s like, being the person who has to do a follow up to an amazing act in a talent show! No one really wants to be the next guy to something that gets so much attention—good or bad—but I feel like you know Ochako well enough that there won’t be a question of genuinity. In other words, it would have been easy to write a throw-away piece about someone you don’t have much interest in, because it might help the whole thing with Todoroki fall into the background of your reader’s minds. Writing something deeply thought-provoking and inspired like this is effectively doing the opposite, and I think it’s a smart move. Grabbing your audience’s attention again for the reason you started writing in the first place, with every bit of intent that you have every week—it shows that you aren’t deterred by what happened.”

A reluctant smile snuck onto Izuku’s lips at her explanation. “I guess… I hadn’t thought of it that way. Thank you, Nejire. You think this is the right move, then?”

“Definitely.” Nejire ruffled Izuku’s already-mussed hair before she called the room to attention again.

With the editor-in-chief’s support acting as a small tourniquet for his pride, Izuku tried to work up the mental preparedness he would need to take on this coming week. Which, incidentally, was the next subject Nejire wanted to cover.

“Alright. Sports Festival is next week, team. Wednesday! That’s only…” she counted off on her fingers. “Five days to go! I’m glad to see Tuesdays print is coming together without issue, but don’t
forget we have a special edition on Friday as well. This is going to be a big week for us! And I know several of you plan on participating, so please be careful and do your best out there.”

There was a hum of agreement and excitement that swept over the room, and Izuku did a quick head count of his own. Actually, he was pretty sure he would be the only one in the room not competing.

For all students in the Hero Course, participation in the Sports Festival was mandatory. Those in the Support, General and Business Departments were strongly encouraged to join their peers from classes A and B, but their participation was optional.

...Well, except Izuku, who was starting to feel like the quintessential exception to all rules. For him, not participating was, in fact, mandatory.

After he fainted—erm, collapsed—in front of All Might and Principal Nezu, Izuku came to in Recovery Girl’s office. She gave him a firm whack on the back of the head for allowing his own nerves to get so tightly wound that he forgot to breathe, and All Might laughed heartily at that. They briefly discussed the plan for his first “lesson” in the $P^3$ initiative (Izuku still didn’t know what $P^3$ meant or stood for, but that’s what he’d taken to calling it in his head), and they agreed to speak about it more thoroughly on Monday, but he was told to expect the Sports Festival to be the focal point.

As best he understood, after flipping through his folder from Principal Nezu, it looked like he would be given access to some of the restricted areas of all three stadiums which was just... so cool.

“What are you all smiley about?” Shinsō whispered while Nejire continued to walkthrough the expectations for next week, including highlights and submission guidelines.

Biting his lip, Izuku shrugged. “Just really looking forward to the Sports Fest.”

With a light snort, Shinsō turned his attention back to the front of the room, but Izuku didn’t miss the ghost of a smile on his own usual emotionless expression.

It was hard to explain, but for just a beat, Izuku stared mildly at the blurry outline of his friend, indigo hair just as messy as ever, Nejire’s voice drifting away. There was just something about that moment that felt... decisive? Like toeing the edge of a cliff face, approaching a precipice, teetering on the edge of something—something important—Izuku felt a deep, if undefined, sense of the world shifting around him. Of course the Sports Festival was exciting for everyone, but for Izuku, it felt like a defining, foundational, abstract... thing, of which he had no idea how to adequately prepare.

In the latent pause of a settling dust, Izuku would just try to keep his focus. Whatever it was about this that his nerves were gearing up for— he could tell it was going to be big.

On Monday, the agreed upon time to meet with All Might was 2:00 exactly, so naturally Izuku came scrambling down the hallway at 2:06, panting, his backpack a disheveled mess.

Someday, he would break his curse, someday.
But not today.

Today, he was late for his very first meeting with All Might, and he almost turned right back around, too ashamed to show his face... but, Izuku was a realist, and he knew there was a snowball’s chance in hell he would actually miss out on the opportunity to spend one-on-one time with the Symbol of Peace.

Timidly, Izuku rapped his knuckles on the door to the teachers lounge. A light, “come in,” answered him, and he slid open the door.

All Might was standing at the window across the room, a small but sure smile fixed on his gaunt features, his too-large suit making the sallow quality of his cheeks seem especially pronounced.

“Young Midoriya, welcome,” he said, simply, gesturing the seat across the couch. “Would you like some tea?”

Izuku forced his voice to return by clearing his throat, maneuvering his way to the chair. “Um... no, I’m okay, thank you.”

All Might joined him a few moments later, sinking into the couch with a tired exhale. He looked worn down, which, Izuku supposed, was appropriate, given his current state.

“So, have you thought about what you’ll write this week? The Sports Festival is a very big deal, I’m sure you’re aware.”

“I guess I was thinking I would wait to see how the students fare before I made that kind of call?”

“I see.” All Might took up his tea, a frown on his face. “Individual pieces on the most standout students?”

Izuku wasn’t sure what he was getting at, but it hinted towards... something? “Well, that’s what I’ve been doing, and people seem to like that... Do you think I should do something else?”

“Well, not necessarily.” All Might shifted his weight back and forth on the couch cushions, thoughtful for a moment. “When Nezu and I spoke with you about this opportunity, there was something I wanted to... emphasize, and I’m not sure if I did a good enough job the first time.”

“S-Sure.” Nervously, Izuku curled his fists in his lap, nodding for All Might to continue.

“To the effect that an intern working for business is still a part of that business, you are, in this agreement, no longer just a student. Yūei is essentially employing you to write. The school benefits directly from your publications, monetarily and academically, and while we aren’t offering you payment, you’re learning skills and gaining connections that would not otherwise be available to most students, at least, not so directly. This is no longer just an extracurricular, young man. I trust you understand that.”

Lips pressed together, Izuku just continued to move his head up and down, unsure of what to say.

“I’ve been thinking about this since I dropped you off at Recovery Girl’s office, more or less. I saw your incredible, and frankly, familiar, resolve, back when you intervened in the Sludge Villain incident and saved young Bakugō. There’s a sort of echo of that in your writing, too, the way you breakdown a quirk and a hero’s strengths, weaknesses, all while making it relatable and easy to understand. You have a commitment to the things that truly matter to you. But your responsibility to this paper will be different now. You’re going to be expected to make quality work, every time,
not just because something interests you, but because your audience will want nothing less than the best you have to offer.

“So my question, young Midoriya, is this: what motivates you? Because you’re going to need to lean on that driving force more and more as you continue to develop your skills.”

Sporting a small smile, All Might released a low chuckle as he settled further back into the couch, raising his tea to his lips. “Writing and training with a quirk are not so different in that way.”

Izuku watched him sip from his drink, his own thoughts miles away. All Might’s words wove in and around his head, binding together like chainlinks of a fence, only to break and rejoin in new places.

“What… motivates me?” he echoed, each cadence clattering around noisily in the back of his head.

Patiently, All Might added, “Perhaps you can ask yourself it this way: why do you write about your classmates? Why did you start to keep journals about heroes at all?”

*Because I wanted to be one,* Izuku had to stop himself from answering outright. *Because I wanted to be just like you.*

Instead, he forced himself to take a deep breath, to guide back his thoughts towards an explanation that would be more thoughtful.

Why does he write about his classmates? Because Nejire asked him to…? But, no, it’s deeper than that. The journals. Why does he take notes?

*Because it’s all I’ve got.*

Maybe. Maybe that was it? Izuku looked up, brow furrowed, only to find All Might gazing out the window from his spot on the couch, grip gentle around his cup of tea.

That wasn’t right, either. But it felt closer to some kind of truth. Perhaps he needed to rethink why All Might asked him the question in the first place?

*You have a commitment to the things that truly matter to you. But your responsibility to this paper will be different now. You’re going to be expected to make quality work, every time, not just because something interests you, but because your audience will want nothing less than the best you have to offer.*

Izuku could sense some truth to All Might’s claim, though he’d never thought about it quite like that before. There was an invisible expectation that hung heavy over his shoulders, especially since the article had gained such a following, to write about somebody every week that was *worthwhile,* but Izuku wasn’t sure how comfortable he felt with that sort of terminology. Who was he to determine someone’s *worth*? That never was the point of keeping his journals, he just… wanted to *understand* what it was like to be a hero. To be *every* hero. How different would it feel to be a hero in the background, operating quietly and without public notoriety, like Aizawa-sensei? Compare that to the experience of someone like All Might, or even Endeavor or Best Jeanist, and the life of a Pro-Hero was infinitely impossible to completely capture in any single summarization.

And maybe *that* was the point. That’s why he wanted to learn everything he could, document it all, scribble and scrawl and sketch whenever possible. Because, while it was impossible to know everything, Izuku wanted to know as much as he could about as many heroes as he could, to at least glean an understanding of their world… especially if he couldn’t be a part of it.
Selecting subjects to write about in the article had sometimes proven to be a tricky task, more so than just jotting down notes in his notebook. It wasn’t some elite list, that was for sure, and Izuku wasn’t pretending like his word was dogma or the ultimate ruling on anyone’s abilities. If anything, he wanted his column to function as a sort of milestone; a piece that recorded someone’s progress, not their worth.

Something that doesn’t just say, *this is who I am*, but, he hoped, said, *this is who I am now, but not everything I will ever be.*

He had never wanted just to showcase the best parts of the best students; Izuku wanted to give everyone who demonstrated a willingness to grow the space to do so.

“I think…” Izuku began quietly, and All Might turned his piercing blue gaze to him. “I write in general because I want to understand what it means to be a hero. And how different that is for every person who is a Pro. And this column, on the surface, started because I wanted to show the world how amazing my classmates are, but… I think the articles are my way of saying that I want them to do better. I want them to read what I had to say, and not only think that the person described is incredible, but then question how they can improve, too. It’s almost like writing a challenge to everyone who reads it.”

Blinking, Izuku’s unfocused eyes made clarity of the knowing grin seated opposite him, and he blushed when he thought about how his ramblings must have sounded to All Might. “A-At least, that’s how I think I feel?”

“No, no, that’s very good. It’s true that people like what you have to say about heroes and quirks, and I think that is a fine motivation. But if that’s the standard you expect of your classmates, then surely you should hold yourself to that same standard?”

Izuku opened his mouth to respond, but decided to close it again. In truth, he wasn’t quite sure what All Might meant by that, and the Symbol of Peace took it as an opportunity to further explain.

“You’ve found your skillset, young Midoriya. You can connect with people—with perfect strangers—in such a way that even some Pro-Heros spend their whole lives trying to achieve. It’s an amazing feat, but it’s just that—a feat. Just establishing those connections lacks momentum; it lacks the sort of resolve that you’ve shown to exhibit about the things that matter to you.”

Izuku’s throat felt tight, eager to denounce the unwarranted compliments, but he dare not interrupt as All Might continued.

“As an advisor, I certainly won’t force you to change your approach for the Sports Festival; this needs to be something you do at your own pace. But, it would be wrong of me to not at least point out the possibility. This is a good opportunity for you to do something different.”

All Might took a long drink from his tea, putting it down on the table, but his posture remained angled forward, arms resting on his knees, eyes intent on Izuku.

“After all, if your classmates are going to be out there, giving it everything they have to prove what kind of heroes they want to be, then it might be the perfect moment for you to do the same. I feel more than ever the world will be waiting to read what you have to say, and this may be a chance for you to proudly proclaim to the world: *I am here!*”

At a loss, Izuku felt his heart hammering in his chest. All Might had so much conviction… in him? Tears were dripping down his chin before Izuku even realized he’d been crying.
“B-But—All Might,” he sniffled, desperate to at least say something. “That’s your catchphrase.”

The hero must not have anticipated Izuku’s response, and in turn sputtered a sudden laugh. Too sudden, in fact, and blood splattered all down his front as a result.

“A-All Might?!” Izuku jumped up, hands twitching and arms waving frantically. “All Might I’m so sorry, oh god, oh fuck did I kill All Might, oh—”

“Calm down,” the man instructed as he flopped his weight back into the couch, wheezing, his lungs exuding a rattling sound that was downright alarming. “First off, you’re much too young to curse like that, even if I was dying. Second, if All for One couldn’t kill me, I sure as hell won’t die from laughing.”

“All for… One?” Izuku repeated, perplexed, trying to take deep breaths of his own as he watched All Might wipe the blood from his face.

“Nevermind. It’s a very old, very long story.” The hero shook his head, dropping it onto the couch cushions. He studied the ceiling with quiet pause, and Izuku had to wonder if he had accidentally brought up some unpleasant, or at least unfortunate, memory.

After about thirty seconds, All Might’s mile-long stare returned to the present, and he fixed Izuku with a bemused look. “You don’t have to decide what you’ll do about the Sports Festival just this minute. But keep it in mind. Do you have your folder?”

“O-Oh!” Izuku scrambled back over to his seat, now that he was sure he wasn’t going to be responsible for killing the Number One Hero, and pulled out the folder that Principal Nezu had given to him. “Yes, I do. I was wondering about some of this stuff… is it okay that it has my school photo but not my real name? Or these highlighted maps, are these restricted areas, or are they the ones I’m sometimes allowed to go through? Or is that always now if I have the pass? Also, do I talk to you first or Ectoplasma, or what if I can’t find you and it’s not homeroom but I wanted to—”

“Breathe, kid,” chuckled All Might—no blood this time. “We’ve got all afternoon. One thing at a time.”

When Uraraka’s story hit the paper, Izuku was practically bowled over the moment he stepped into the building on Tuesday.

“D-Deku,” she hugged him so tightly Izuku thought he was going to stop breathing. “D-Deku you’re a du-dummie, you didn’t have… have to say all this n-nice stuff… a-about me.”

With a bracing laugh, because Izuku was very nearly out of oxygen, he tapped her gently on the back and then peeled himself away. “That’s—hey, don’t cry! It’s okay, I hope I didn’t upset you.”

“N-No!” she cried harder, shaking her head from side to side and wiping her tears with the backs of her hands. “I just m-mean you’re… this is the week of the Sports Festival! You should have w-written about someone at the top, like, like—”

“I wanted to write about you, Uraraka,” he held his hands up before she could continue. “And this isn’t just because we’re friends, okay? I meant everything I said. You’re going to be an incredible
hero, and I think the Sports Fest is just going to be another opportunity to showcase of how amazing you really are.”

At that, Uraraka squeezed him in another tight hug before taking off for 1-A, sniffling and waving down the hallway as she went.

Once Uraraka was gone, Izuku’s hand fell to its side, a sigh forced out of him.

He caught sight of several students standing around, reading the paper, reading his feature more than likely, and it made a strange set of nerves prickle in anticipation. After what happened with Todoroki’s article, he hoped the backlash would be minimal and, like Nejire theorized, would help return the point of his writings to the purpose of lifting up his classmates rather than sending them headlong into some soap opera, after-school, teen-movie dramatics.

As was his luck, Izuku didn’t even make it to homeroom that day before he was ambushed by somebody else.

“Writer Deku!” exclaimed someone, loudly, in the middle of the stairwell, causing people up and down to all stop and turn their heads. The voice was definitively female, and he craned his neck to see it belonged to a girl with pink hair and goggles, standing at the top of the next landing, pointing directly at him.

“I have an exclusive opportunity for you, and you only!”

“Uh—oh?” Izuku began to fidget as people broke into whispers, pointing at him with an echo of Deku, Deku, is that Deku? all around. Frustrated, Izuku met the girl’s gaze, only to find a knowing glint in her eye that suggested to him that she knew exactly what she was doing.

“Let’s talk!” She barreled down the stairs and nearly pushed him down with her, but Izuku managed to stumble along after her in his haste to get away from the crowd before anyone could start to question him. In this one instance, Izuku was rather glad for his short stature; his height helped him to avoid being spotted around some of his taller classmates.

The strange, obnoxious girl led him to a—classroom? No, wait, as he walked inside, Izuku thought this seemed more like a science lab from his old middle school, but with everything jerry-rigged and… is that debris? Hunks of metal framework, tons of fabric, bolts, wires, unknown glowing substances, and plates from body armor were all strewn about, most of it condensed into an impressive, if not terrifying, pile that looked far too unstable for Izuku to trust. He felt like an ant standing next to a Jenga tower, and to make matters worse, the pink-haired girl strolled right over and began to pick up random pieces from the already unstable foundation of the junk mountain.

“Alright, Writer Deku,” she said in a sing-song tone. “As someone who appreciates the finer details of hero work, I wanted your expert endorsement of my babies!”

Dumbly, Izuku repeated, “Your… babies?” She seems… young to be a mother?

“Yes!” the girl shoved something into his arms, and Izuku blinked down at the weird… gloves? They were like gloves, anyway, but gigantic. “Everything you see here is a Mei Hatsume original product, and I’d like you to try some of them and give them a review in your column whatcha-ma-call-it.”

“Umm…” Izuku awkwardly walked towards a desk and deposited the gloves there, jumping a bit when the sparked and fizzled from being jostled. “Well, I don’t usually write about… erm, you’re in the Support Department?” he said, more of a question than anything, to which she proudly
“Okay, yeah, I guess I’ve never… written about anyone in Support before. Usually I do, er, people from the Hero Course? And I don’t really take requests…”

“Fair, fair,” the girl nodded. “Our good ol’ Classes A and B aren’t anything to turn your nose up at. But you haven’t even given my babies a chance yet! They’re incredible, I swear! What’s your quirk? Tell me and I bet I’ve got something that would work perfectly, help at least double your powers!”

Coughing, Izuku scratched the back of his head, looking around for a clock and a little unnerved to not find one. “Ahh… well, you see, I actually don’t have a quirk. I’m quirkless.”

“Is that so?” she hummed, floating around the room and picking up a helmet-of-sorts, muttering to herself before tossing it away. Evidently, she was searching for something as Izuku watched her proceed to scrutinize the pile, holding his breath each time she disturbed the delicate balance, until finally she came to him with a... pen?

That was it? It was surprisingly anticlimactic. While there was still something deeply intense about this girl—Hatsume, was that her name?—she carried with her an air of knowing that Izuku couldn’t help but find intriguing.

“As someone without a quirk, you should know better than anyone the importance of having sufficient and adaptive technology in the ever-developing world of heroes and villains. Quirks are incredible, but they are dangerous, and often need to be tempered to be used effectively. That’s what you said about that girl in today’s article, isn’t it?”

“You read it already?” Izuku balked, wondering again what time it was. Did he miss homeroom somehow?

Hatsume ignored him, clicking the end of the pen and grabbing a random piece of paper from a nearby workbench. Curiosity effectively piqued, Izuku hesitantly edged closer to watch her: she drew a box around the outside of the page, and then on the interior wrote in big letters: Deku the Writer Teams Up with Hastume the Inventor!

Lightly, he laughed, but the sound was stunted when she quickly snatched up a much larger than necessary flame thrower and blasted the paper for all it was worth. Then, she tossed a little medical tablet at it and an alarming amount of powder-blue foam exploded into the air, a large glob of it landing in Izuku’s hair.

Gaping and sputtering in confusion, Izuku groaned as he touched the goop stuck in his hair and tried to comb it out with his fingertips. Hastume seemed entirely unphased, even though she’d received more than a face-full of the goop, and readily reached her hands directly into the mess of smoke and foam and pulling out—

“Whoa.”

“Yep!” She grinned from ear to ear. “One totally undamaged sign, courtesy of my baby’s synthetic reinforcement ink! On a standard piece of paper, any ink that connects in a complete circuit from one of these bad boys creates a microscopic, synthetic fiber network that reinforces the entire enclosed area with a flame retardant, water and cut resistant material that is so thin you can still write over it, no problem whatsoever. So that’s why the outside of the square burnt off, but this fine line is where the ink begins,” she explained, running her fingertip over the edge of the remaining paper. It was smooth the whole way around. “And it is going to take a lot more than a
little fire to destroy it.”

Izuku gaped, a little mystified as he accepted the remnants of the paper into his hands. Indeed, it felt just as light as a regular piece of paper, although texturally it felt just the tiniest bit coarse over the pads of his fingers. “Wow, that’s… that’s really incredible!”

“Can that technology be expanded to applications outside of paper?” he thought to ask, already considering the dozens of ways that such a thing could be lifesaving in the field of active hero-work.

Hatsume sighed, tossing the pen at him; Izuku barely managed to catch it.

“Not yet. I’ve got a lot of work to do before it can get past something as simple as paper, but I have faith in these babies. So, what do you say? Are you impressed? Want to give the world a taste of the Mei Hatsume experience?”

Remembering himself, Izuku shook his head… though he did start to click the pen with the urge to do something with his hands.

“Hatsume, this is really amazing work. I… guess I didn’t think about the benefits of covering the Support Department before, but I do want to learn more about your, erm, babies. There’s some remarkable stuff in here.”

She placed both hands on her hips proudly, smiling, just a slight edge of mania to the curve of her lips.

“I don’t want to make any promises,” Izuku continued, “because I honestly have tried to avoid taking requests from people for covering them—it feels unfair if people can just walk up to me and ask me to write about them—but I wouldn’t want to just say no indefinitely, either. Maybe after the Sports Festival I can try to learn more about your work and we can maybe figure something out?”

“Ah!” Hatsume snapped her fingers and pointed to Izuku in the same motion. “That should be an excellent follow-up to my promotional on the stage next week. You have a deal, Writer Deku! My workshop will have doors open to Go Beyond! Weekly whenever you want to come by.”

If nothing else, Izuku had to appreciate her enthusiasm. Her confidence could rival Kacchan’s, and that in itself was impressive.

“Here’s your pen back—” he began to set it down, but she flicked him on the nose when he got close.

“Ow! What the heck was that for?”

“I’m giving you the pen, obviously. You are a writer. It’s a writing tool! The Support Department doesn’t exist solely to support the Hero Course, you know. Use it!”

“Are—are you sure? Isn’t this like a, prototype or… something?” he wondered aloud, a little wonderstruck by the device. It was surprisingly inconspicuous for something with such incredible features, barely larger than a normal pen. The only stand-out thing about it was an exterior addition, no bigger than a USB device, in place of the “clip” that you could use to hold a pen to your pocket or a piece of paper.

“Prototype, pff.” Hatsume laughed and roughly began pushing him out of her workspace. “I figured you were smarter than that, Writer Deku! A magician never reveals her secrets, nor does an inventor ever share her blueprints or original designs! …Without a patent, anyway. That is my old
model. I’m already improving the next one, but you’re welcome to keep that. If you run out of ink you can always find me and I can replenish it!”

“Oh. Um… okay! That’s great, then. Thank you, Hatsume!”

With a grin that could only be described as cocky, the girl winked and gave him a final shove into the hallway before closing the door after him.

Shōto was not in good spirits on Tuesday.

It was just one of those days that never seemed to end. The air was too humid to be comfortable. He nearly missed his train. The press room was sold out of papers by the time he arrived at school. Even with a new subject to be covered in the Go Beyond! Weekly print edition, whispers and comments followed him from homeroom and between classes.

More than he would care to admit, Shōto noticed people reading Midoriya’s article—from the previous week. He spotted his own face beneath the heading Hero Analysis! Weekly almost as many times as he saw his classmate’s, and it just served to further confuse him.

Not only was their persistence irritating, but, frankly, Shōto was a little offended for Midoriya’s sake.

This week’s feature was excellent, and yet, people were still clinging to the… passionate rambles from the previous week in favor of this new, quality piece of work. Sure, while Shōto still had personal reasons to be annoyed and frustrated over what had Midoriya had written the week previous, even he felt some injustice over his reader’s lack of attention. Midoriya—Deku— was a talented writer. Fixating on a mistake that never meant to be published would be the hero equivalent of having to watch the news replay a botched rescue attempt for a Pro-Hero over and over again.

He borrowed Yaoyorozu’s copy of the paper and gave it a proper read during lunch:


One of these things is not like the other, and yet, I often and easily forget we’re made from the same cosmic dust as the celestial landscape that decorates our sky every morning and every evening.

It’s almost funny, that we have such advanced algorithms and mathematics at our disposal that we can measure the orbital paths of heavenly bodies, but we are have such a rudimentary grip on the manifestation of quirks.

At its most basic definition, quirks enable each of us to defy our common humanity. But at the same time, with each new generation of heroes, we become less sure of what are the limitations of a quirk, how far bound are the reaches of some abilities?

Most quirks are surprisingly simple exceptions to our collective humanity: you can’t breathe underwater, unless you have a quirk that allows that; you can’t control things with your mind,
unless you have a quirk that allows that, etc. We subvert our own brand of fundamentals on a daily basis, and accept these differences with almost an almost concerning degree of nonchalance.

Quirks simply exist, and that is usually the end of our inquisition into the subject.

I won’t pretend to be any different—I often see a quirk and marvel at its functionality and potential applications, and I think little of the origins and implications that come with such an ability.

But then, there are rarer quirks, quirks that make us wonder if there are greater limits that can be tested, like that of Ochako Uraraka.

If quirks allow us to take a step outside of the confines of our own humanity, then Uraraka’s quirk enables her to defy the fundamentals of the universe.

In name, Uraraka’s quirk is Zero Gravity, which could be easily mistaken for weightlessness, floating, or flying, but in reality there are much greater consequences to a quirk such as this.

Consider this example: if you stepped onto the moon’s surface, your body would automatically readjust to be pulled towards its surface, even if that pull is not as strong as it was on Earth. That’s what allows people who have walked on the moon’s surface to ‘leap’ around. This is not just the working of gravity, but it is the sum of the complex relationship between space-time that states all matter exists in relation to everything else.

Large objects draw in smaller objects towards their center, while everything orbits around the next most massive object.

Does this sound familiar?

It should, if you’ve got a basic grip on physics, as it is the defining quality of Einstein’s Theory of General Relativity.

It is remarkable to consider the fact that a student that walks by us in the hallway has the power to undo a millennium’s worth of mathematics and scientific discovery, but even more unbelievable to imagine what sort of untapped potential literally rests in her fingertips.

Uraraka’s quirk is surprisingly versatile in its applications. While one’s initial inclination may be to assume her abilities are best suited in defensive or S&R scenarios, her prowess in combat should not be discounted. She need only touch an opponent with the five pads of one of her hands to restrain them, and she has proven resourceful in her manipulation of nearby objects to be used offensively. By releasing an object under the influence of her Zero Gravity quirk, she can effectively use their own weight as a weapon in the subsequent drop; her third score ranking in the practical portion of the Yūei Entrance Exam is indicative of her adaptability and of this skill set in practice.

What’s more, Uraraka’s quirk extends beyond what she touches with her fingertips—she can also remove the gravity on her own body to add to her agility, allowing her to scale buildings, walls, or large distances with ease. This comes at the expense of her own gravitational balance and can induce nausea, but I can, and often do, forget that I am not writing about seasoned Pro-Heroes when I write these features each week. Such a habit can easily be trained away with steady practice, and if this is the level of skill is exhibited by someone who only has room to improve, I am almost intimidated to wonder what kind of hero she will become.

Ochako Uraraka, untethered to the weights of the world and defiant of the laws of physics, has a potential that is as boundless as she is herself.
Shōto re-read this feature several times that day; it was very well-written, the words honest and powerful as Midoriya described his classmate. To his point, Shōto had noticed that Uraraka’s quirk offered her a large array of versatile maneuvers; all she really lacked was experience and some confidence. He wouldn’t be surprised if Uraraka came to be one of those he had to keep an eye out for in the future, gunning for the top.

But, each time Shōto reached the end of the page, there was a tiny pang in his stomach, stubborn and persistent. He wasn’t quite sure what to call the feeling. It made his lips thin, his chest heavy, his mood irritable. It was like a distinct sort of anger, hard-edged with uncharacteristic bitterness. He did not want to resent Uraraka, but even so, the first few times they’d crossed paths after the article came out, Shōto felt that same twist in his abdomen, annoyed and uncomfortable both.

It became tedious to deal with, so when Shōto exited the school that evening, he made it a point to catch up with Yaoyorozu. She was talking with Jiro, laughing about something, and they both looked curious and surprised to see him jog to catch up with them. He considered asking Jiro to let them speak privately, but decided that was inappropriate—he was the one imposing on their conversation.

“I wanted to ask your opinion on something that’s been bothering me.”

As Shōto explained, Yaoyorozu began to bite her lip, nodding along. Jiro kept her face forward, expression hard to discern.

“Well, I think it’s sort of hard to be exact in a situation like this, but…” Yaoyorozu coughed. “I believe you’re jealous, Todoroki.”

That made him falter, pausing just for a moment. “Jealous? I—no. I have no reason to be jealous.”

“Well, that’s just what it sounded like,” Yaoyorozu scratched the back of her neck. “I didn’t say you definitively felt that way.”

Jiro tilted her head back to gaze at the painted clouds, casted tones of bronze and copper in the setting sun, adding her two-cents.

“There’s nothing wrong with feeling jealous. Momo’s said you’re not on the Tododeku ship, so it’s not like your jealousy even has to do with Deku—Midoriya—whatever the guy’s name is. I think all of us are a little jealous when we don’t get featured, and in your case, I’m guessing it’s just like that. It feels like you’re being left out of something really amazing. I think it’s reasonable to be a bit annoyed when a classmate gets something really nice said about their abilities, and all you got was a gushing love letter about how much he was in love with you.”

Brow furrowed, Shōto stayed in step with them, trying to process Jiro’s explanation. It… actually did make a decent amount of sense. The only difference was, in the weeks previous, he hadn’t really cared as to whether or not he was featured; his father certainly did, but Shōto was content just reading and enjoying the column for what it was without being involved with it.

So why did this week feel so different? Why did he feel so different? Midoriya’s writing was virtually unchanged, if not just progressively improving, and Shōto felt undeniably worse.

It was actually quite frustrating.

Yaoyorozu turned to him when they reached a stop light at a crosswalk. “How did that all ever turn out by the way? I know we talked a bit last Tuesday about Midoriya, but you never really
mentioned it again. Are you, erm, feeling okay?”

“I’m fine,” he dismissed. “He approached me on Wednesday and asked to write another feature on me, something to make up for what he did, but I declined.”


“I didn’t want any more attention brought to the subject.”

“I don’t blame you,” Jiro sighed, lacing her fingers together behind her head while they continued to walk. “Half the school still ships you guys. Twitter is still a hot Tododeku mess. If your goal was wanting to have nothing to do with him anymore, keeping it out of people’s mouth is the way to go. They’ll get tired and forget about it.”

Yaoyorozu looked to Jiro with warmth in her smile, her tone changing to a thoughtful hum. “Is it wrong of me to feel a bit bad for Midoriya? Not that you shouldn’t have turned him down or anything, but… the way he had been so blunt and open about his feelings like that. It must have made him feel incredibly vulnerable.”

“I wouldn’t worry about him,” Shōto answered absently, his thoughts relapsing back into his memory of their last encounter. “I don’t know very much about him, I’ll admit, but…”

On Wednesday, Midoriya had hardly seemed like the same person Shōto had spoken to the day previous in the hallway with his tendency towards stuttering, blushing, and apologizing. He was no less genuine in either interaction, but there had been something different in his eyes Wednesday morning, Shōto recalled.

Something remarkably vivid.

You’re right, I don’t know everything about you. But I do know that no one would do what you did unless you really want to help people. Even if we’re completely different, I’ve wanted that same thing my whole life.

Unwavering, intense, sincere, Midoriya had shocked him stone-still, green eyes flashing with determination.

And it had admittedly mystified him, when Shōto still turned down his offer, the way Midoriya’s cheeks had reddened and voice had dropped, but his words were not lacking in conviction.

I realize this is my fault. I want to make things right. Image matters. Words matter. But if you don’t want that, then so be it.

Yaoyorozu nudged him lightly. “Todoroki?”

“Oh.” He shook his head. “Sorry… What was I saying?”

The girls exchanged a quick look before the taller of the two answered, “You were saying you didn’t know Midoriya very well, but…?”

“Right. Yes…” He ran a hand through his hair, trying to escape that flicker he’d witnessed evolve from polished emerald to fresh seaglass to glittering starburst and then back again.

The sight of Midoriya’s drive was so clear in his memory.

“I may not know him well, but I think the last thing he is feeling at the moment is discouraged.”
what's this? a two-part chapter, in MY tododeku fic?? it's more likely than you think
The Roaring Sports Festival (pt. 2)

Chapter Summary

The Sports Festival, in which Izuku is a bit of a mess, Todoroki is still rather irritable, and they can't seem to leave each other alone (mostly Izuku's fault, but hey). There's some background Erasermic for your viewing pleasure, too.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Walking into the teacher’s viewing deck with All Might urging him along, Izuku felt even more awkward than normal, which, for him, was really saying something. The Symbol of Peace continued to lightly nudge him between the shoulder blades each time he froze up.

Despite being assured multiple times that he had authority to be here, Izuku couldn’t help but feel dramatically outclassed and almost comically overwhelmed by the presence of so many Pro-Heroes. Sure, they all worked at Yūei so he’d seen all of them at one time or another walking through the halls, but never had Izuku seen this many famous faces all at once, not to mention they were all sitting or standing around, chatting within a few feet of him.

Of the faculty, he noted that Recovery girl, Midnight-sensei, Aizawa-sensei and Present Mic-sensei were all absent. The latter pairing weren’t far, however, and Izuku approached the edge of the stadium overhang and craned his neck, spotting the duo a short way’s up in the commentator’s viewing box.

Guided by his own curiosity, Izuku stayed there for a little while longer, scanning the crowds.

The Sports Festival technically launched in a few minutes, and Izuku could practically feel a jolt of excitement thrum over the stadium’s collective pulse when Present Mic’s voice spoke into the open airwaves, unapologetic as he gathered the crowd’s attention. Overhead, fireworks dazzled in the midday sunlight, glittering and bright, and the stadium roared with the sound of a thousand voices, so loud it was almost difficult to hear Present Mic over the din.

To say it was surreal would have been a spectacular, borderline offensive, understatement. Izuku felt like it was more likely that Iida had taken his request to heart from the morning Todoroki’s article went to print, and he had indeed used his recipro burst directly on Izuku’s face; it was leagues more believable that this was all just some sort of coma-induced dream from head trauma than the reality he’d somehow stumbled into.

That imagined image—him sitting in a hospital bed instead of standing here—brought a startled laugh to his lips. A dream, huh? Dreams were such a strange business. After all, Izuku had dreamt for so long to walk out down there on that very field with the students, but he couldn’t help but grip his notebook more tightly, an unprecedented rush of pride filling his chest.

This wasn’t how he dreamed it would be. Not in a million years.

But Izuku was smiling all the same.
“Midoriya,” All Might called to him after some of the ruckus died down and the students began to enter the stadium for the first time, class by class called out upon entry. “Can I see your folder for a moment?”

“Oh! Of course, right. Here.”

Accepting the folder, All Might flipped through it and brought out one of the many maps of the grounds. He showed it to Izuku, pointed out the highlighted areas, most of which ran some-version-of-parallel to the track of the obstacle course, as well as lower reserved-level seating to get a view close to the ground.

“These are the areas you’ll be allowed to go to today. You’re welcome to go to any of them, but you need your pass with you at all times, and you must notify someone—ideally, me—of where you’re going. Any of the other teachers would be fine if I’m not available, but please try to make sure I know if you can help it.”

Nodding furiously, Izuku said, “I—I understand! I just have one question, what are these hallways here?”

“Ah. That’s where the students are directed to sit and wait between matches, while the fields are fixed up, during lunch breaks, etc. It’s essentially just a ‘locker room’ like any athlete would use.”

That gave Izuku pause, raising both brows as he studied the map. Indeed, now that he paid closer attention, there was some small text next to each room that branched off the hallways with all of the first year homerooms labeled accordingly.

Wanting to be completely sure, Izuku nervously asked, “And I’m allowed in all of these places? Not just 1-C?”

“Yes. For the most part, with the exception of this viewing deck and the announcers box, you’re allowed in any of the places you might find your classmates—the idea is to give you a breadth of options so you can take the best notes possible. Do keep in mind that this only grants you access, not permission to be in these places.”

“Oh?” Izuku glanced down at the map and then back up at All Might. “What does that mean, exactly?”

The hero smiled and ruffled Izuku’s hair, at which point the young writer was prepared to melt into a puddle on the floor.

“It just means don’t get in trouble with anyone. If any officials ask you to leave or to stay away from a designated area, like Midnight or Cementoss, you have to listen to them.”

Oh, Izuku thought, feeling the need to smack his own forehead. Duh.

“Oh, of course. That makes sense. So since the students will race for the first match...” Izuku pursed his lips, looking over the railing as the students began to converge on the starting area, and again at the large display screens that would track the progress of the obstacle course.

“Is it okay if I sit up here with you, and then go down to the ground level for the second part? I feel like the monitors will capture the quirks in action better than I could hope to keep up with them outside the stadium, but once they’re gathered together again...”

“Sounds like a good plan,” All Might smiled, turning his attention towards the nearest gigantic monitor. “It looks like they’re starting.”
Alright. This is it! Izuku bit down a smile, trying to act composed and like he wasn’t totally freaking out, eyes trained to the screen. He would try to be as unbiased as possible, but he would be lying if it wasn’t thrilling to spot familiar faces at the starting line.

Uraraka, Iida, Kacchan, Shinsō… Todoroki.

Do your best, everyone.

Shōto almost felt bad for the other students at the end of the first round.

The operative word being almost.

Bakugō had just barely managed to edge him out for the first place spot, and anyone else’s return to the stadium was greatly delayed. As the next forty qualifying students trickled in, Shōto sought out an unobstructed spot alongside the wall of the stadium, leaning against it both to preserve his stamina and to warm himself.

Exerting only his right side was more draining than he would have liked, using it to restrain a large number of students at the beginning, and again to cross the canyon and landmines, but it wasn’t so severe that he felt any real remnants of rebound. It was a hot day, full of sun-warmed air, loud and clamorous when he returned to the stadium, and Shōto planned to use that natural heat to his advantage.

Of the forty-two who did make it, all twenty members of his class placed. He wasn’t surprised. Included in the headcount were a large number of 1-B students and, interestingly, Shōto noted that Midoriya’s tired, purple-haired friend was here, too.

By the time Midnight was going through the rules for the next match (a Cavalry Team Battle), his body temperature had returned to normal, and he refocused his attention on the upcoming match. In the interest of creating a compatible ‘horse’ formation, Shōto acted quickly to put together a team he felt would have a strong defense and with high mobility. He wasn’t terribly concerned about their offensive; any deficits he could make up with his own strength.

In the end, he selected Iida, Yaoyorozu, and Kaminari. A few of the other groupings stood out as obvious dynamics that he would have to look out for: Bakugō, Kirishima, Ashido and Sero had the 10 million points; Tokoyami, Uraraka, Tsuyu and Aoyama made for a largely ranged, offensive group and it would be difficult to get close to them; and Shoji, Mineta, and Jiro could prove to be extremely problematic if they gain enough points and are able to stay away from any of the others.

Then, there were the many unknowns.

Shōto could not help but reflect on everything he’d read from Midoriya in the past several weeks, trying to recall the advantages and possible shortcomings of his 1-B peers. Beyond who Midoriya covered in the article, Shōto had to admit he knew very little about the capabilities of the other students. Honestly, he would be more surprised at this point if Midoriya didn’t have extensive notes on every single one of them, and, unreasonably, he felt underprepared as a result. Most of the others were probably just like him, relying on their knowledge of each other and anything that could have been gleaned from Midoriya’s writings as part of formulating a plan.
There wasn’t much time for him to strategize given the circumstances—Shōto had little doubt that was by design on the faculty’s part—and before he could do much besides run through a mental list of the names and faces he remembered from Midoriya’s writings, Midnight was having the teams get into position, readying themselves for the match to start.

Shoji’s team and Shōto’s team ended up employing a very similar strategy: allow the others to rush Bakugō’s group, and use their preoccupation with the 10,000,000 headband as an opportunity to take as many headbands as possible. However, he came head-to-head with Shoji as they stripped the other teams of their rankings. Jiro’s made deft use of her quirk, using the end of her headphones to tear the fabric of Shōto’s own headbands and race past, grabbing them in midair rather than from around Shōto’s head and neck.

Clever.

Before they could retaliate, Iida was stopped, caught by one of Mineta’s troublesome purple orbs, and the abrupt stalling caught Shōto and the other’s off-guard. They managed to electrocute Shoji and render him mostly immobile, but half of their headbands were lost.

Shōto heard Present Mic’s voice over the crowd, his words barely making sense as they competed with his own adrenaline. Bakugō had lost the 10,000,000 headband to...

“Monoma? Shōto was pretty sure that was a name from 1-B…

“Oh! But in a surprising upset, the 10,000,000 points has been taken from Neito Monoma by Hitoshi Shinsō!”

Bakugō began to all but destroy the stadium as he forced his team to follow—it was that friend of Midoriya’s. What sort of quirk did he have? Was rushing in blind a good idea? It would be much harder to get the headband back from Bakugō if he took it from Shinsō, no matter what ability he had; it was almost impossible to outright overpower Bakugō.

This wasn’t the time to hesitate and ask questions—he needed to act. To lead.

“Go after Shinsō,” he decided as Yaoyorozu and Iida worked together to free them from Mineta’s trap. “We’re getting the 10,000,000 points.”

As if to emphasize his point, Present Mic’s voice rang out over the stands. “Only one minute left! This is going to be a real close match folks!”

“Is that really a good idea, man? We could just—” Kaminari began, but Shōto simply squared his jaw.

“We are getting the 10,000,000 points. Iida,” was all he had to say before their Class Representative set a jet-speed pace. “Kaminari, I need you send a high voltage shock through the ground when I use my ice. We’ll take out as many as others as we can. Yaoyorozo, make a—”

“Already on it!” she interrupted, and indeed, he could see the protective fabric coming up over her collar that would shield them from Kaminari’s electricity.

Shōto breathed in, steadying himself, focused. His pulse thudded heavy in his veins, a drum beat, a countdown. This was it. They were closing in at almost the same time as Bakugō, and they needed this opportunity. It was the only sure-fire way to get them to the next round.

He used a tool of Yaoyorozu’s design that was long enough to touch the ground, and exhibiting as much energy as he could afford this early in the competition, Shōto released a devastating, arctic
cataclysm around the surrounding earth, ice crystals expanding in every direction and ensnaring Bakugō’s team, along with several others.

“ICYHOT I’LL KILL YOU—”

“Kaminari, now!”

The high voltage shock was enough to stall out most of the teams, at least enough to give them the advantage, to get close—

“And if it isn’t lover boy.” Shinsō grinned, his troop retreating towards the edge of the facilities. They were steady, but not faster than Iida. “You want the headband? Come and get it, then.”

Shōto feared for just a minute that they might not be able to pull this off—what is he hiding? Where is the confidence coming from?

“And if it isn’t lover boy.” Shinsō grinned, his troop retreating towards the edge of the facilities. They were steady, but not faster than Iida. “You want the headband? Come and get it, then.”

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“Todoroki!” Iida interrupted his moment’s pause, and he could feel their weight shift around as Iida dug his heels into the dirt. “I’m going to do something! It will give you the opening you need to get the headband, but after that, I won’t be able to move anymore. My engines will stall.”

“You mean we only have one chance?” Yaoyorozu said, panicked, as Kaminari began to join in with his own doubts.

Shōto grit his teeth, pushing his own hesitation to the side. “We only need one chance if we do it right. Do it, Iida.”

“Hold on.” Nodding, Iida readied himself, and his engines started to rip and roar loudly, rumbles running up their support system with the intensity.

“Recirpo…. BURST!”

In the end, Shōto was glad Iida had instructed him to hold on. Even then, he barely managed to do so—for just a single second, Iida was much faster than he’d ever seen, the wind whipping around them so sharply it stung, his own hair flying back with the momentum, a breathless sort of gasp knocking into him as Present Mic called time. It was an exhilarating, confusing rush of sound and color and time and space, but in one second they went from in front to behind the indigo-haired student. Shōto’s heart was thudding with the unexpected jolt of adrenaline.

Hands shaking, just a little, Shōto blinked down at his hands, mystified by the ribbon of fabric that was tangled in his fingertips.

They did it.

10,000,000.

They did it.

They were permitted a break for lunch, which was a good opportunity for Shōto in regaining some of his spent strength. Given how the first two matches went, he had little doubt that he’d face off against Bakugō again at some point in the day, and, loath he was to admit it, Shōto knew he would need all the energy he could to go up against the hot-headed blond.

By the time he’d finished eating, Shōto made his way back to the 1-A rest area in the stadium,
trailing behind a group of his peers that walked ahead of him, all chattering happily with one another; in the next round, a tournament of one-on-one battles, there were no loyalties or friendships that would help anyone to advance.

Shōto was surprised when he entered the hallway that led into each classroom’s designated rest areas and heard the bubbly nervousness of a familiar voice.

Kirishima let out a laugh. “Yeah, thanks, bro! It was just about timing. I can activate my quirk all over my body, and all at different times.”

“Wow, that’s amazing! So while you were using your hardening quirk on your legs, and Ashio-san was using her acidic discharge—oh, h-hey, Todoroki!”

He turned the corner, and, as he suspected, standing outside the 1-A rest area were Kirishima and none other than the green-haired, thorn-in-his-side as of late, smiling brightly upon his approach.

“Hey, man. Nice job out there.” Kirishima offered him a thumbs up, which Shōto acknowledged briefly before looking back at the 1-C student.

“What are you doing here?”

“Oh! Right, uh—All Might and Principal Nezu gave me this pass here, see,” he pointed to some sort of laminated ID picture, upon which PRESS was printed in bold letters. “And it’s sort of this really cool opportunity to get to view all of the matches from different places all around the stadium.”

Midoriya coughed, gazing down at the notebook he had open, presumably documenting his and Kirishima’s conversation. “All Might said I was allowed to come here and ask your class some questions, especially since almost all of 1-A managed to get into the finals I thought I would start here.”

“...I see.”

Kirishima turned back to the rest area and held open the door. Before walking inside, he waved to Midoriya. “Hey, nice chatting with you. You ever wanna talk some more you can always come find me!”

Enthusiastic, the other boy nodded, closing his notebook and holding it over his chest. “Thank you, Kirishima! I’ll definitely keep that in mind.”

Once Kirishima was gone, Midoriya turned to Shōto, eyes wide and expression animated.

“You, um, did really great out there, Todoroki! That move at the very beginning of the obstacle course was really smart, immobilizing everyone like that! I thought about it during the Cavalry Battle too,” Midoriya paused, his brow furrowing. He bit his thumbnail, thoughtful, and continued speaking. “You used a similar technique to stop Kacchan from getting close to Shinsō, and to slow down any of the other teams. But that has to take some kind of a physical toll on your body? I figured that was why you didn’t use your left side when Jiro-san took your headbands, it must have been an attempt at balancing your core temperatures—so if you use one side you have to balance out the—”

It became clear that Midoriya had fallen into his own world, muttering incessantly, so Shōto took it upon himself to interrupt. “I told you I didn’t want you to write anything else about me.”

Midoriya paused, his expression turning from one of confusion and into chagrin. His cheeks ran red
and he averted his eyes. “Oh, of course not. Right, sorry, sorry. That’s just, me being curious. I wouldn’t write about that, I just get carried away sometimes. Erm. I do still have to talk to a lot of your classmates, so if you run into me again, I swear I’m not stalking you. I mean, if I was stalking you, I’d totally say that I wasn’t, so you probably wouldn’t believe me, I bet. A-Anyway! I’ll just, uh. Go.”

Shōto blinked, already moving past him towards the 1-A room. “See you.”

“Oh, and, Todoroki?” Hand on the door, he raised a brow. When he turned, Midoriya’s face was split with a broad smile, eyes bright and turned up at the corners. “Good luck!”

Shōto felt his lip twitch, but he stopped himself from smiling—not that it mattered, really. Midoriya was already walking away, humming to himself as he dove into his notes, nose to the page once again.

_Honestly_, Shōto thought as he pulled open the door, joining the majority of his class that had returned to their waiting area, _he should really watch where he’s going, he’s going to end up hurting himself._

Not that Shōto particularly _cared_ what Midoriya did or anything… he just, well, seemed like the sort of person to trip over his own two feet. Walking around with his nose stuck in his notebook seemed like a recipe for disaster.

Izuku briefly poked his head into the 1-C room to wish Shinsō good luck and made his way back up to the teacher’s viewing box to check-in with All Might.

He made it with some time to spare, and All Might was engaged in a conversation with Snipe, so Izuku decided to continue up the stairwell until he reached the commentator’s box.

Knocking gently, he poked his head in, wincing when he saw Aizawa-sensei still swathed in bandaging from his encounter at the USJ. Present Mic-sensei greeted him with his usual fervor.

“Midoriya! Well, welcome welcome. Not bad digs we’ve got here, hmm?”

“A-Ah, hi, Present Mic-sensei, Aizawa-sensei. I hope I’m not interrupting, I just thought I’d see what the set-up in here is like.”

The bandaged man dully replied, “It’s not a problem.”

Wary, Izuku smiled and looked around, mentally cataloging everything he saw for his notes; it seemed rude to take out his notebook while crowding the pair’s private space.

“So, Mido, let me level with you.” Mic said, swiveling around in his chair. “My Twitter’s sorta been blowing up with stuff for _GB!W_ and it sucks giving my beloved fans the cold shoulder. Any sort of scoop I could give them on you and Todoroki?”
“Are you really gossiping about our students?” asked Aizawa, doing little to hide his derisive tone.

Present Mic just smiled wider, winking at Izuku. “Sure am, Shōta. Sometimes if you can’t beat ‘em, you gotta join ‘em.”

“No, you really don’t.”

Ignoring Aizawa’s commentary, Present Mic stood up from his chair, only to bend to be at eye level with Izuku. “So, what’s the word, Midoriya? Give me the deets.”

“A-Ah, well…” he cleared his throat, not entirely comfortable with telling his teachers about something like this, but Present Mic was the advisor of school paper and it wasn’t like Izuku could really keep information like that to himself when it affected the prosperity of the newspaper. “Nothing really happened. Everyone saw what I had to say, and Todoroki asked me to drop the subject. He’s, erm, not interested, I guess.”

“OOF,” Mic pretended like he’d taken a jab to the stomach, to which Izuku couldn’t help but laugh a bit. “That’s tough, kid. My first gay crush hated my guts, so I can certainly understand how bad that feels.”

“He’s talking about me,” Aizawa scoffed. “Don’t take advice from him. He just pestered me until I married him.”

That took Izuku by surprise, because, as far as he knew, Aizawa-sensei and Present Mic-sensei had some sort of bond, but it’s not like it was really something he could just openly ask his teachers about. The exact nature and extent of their relationship had previously been unknown to him.

Present Mic rolled his eyes. “Isn’t he romantic? Pretty sure he still hates my guts, to this day.”

“And I will, til death do us part,” an unamused voice grumbled from behind the bandages. “It looks like Nemuri is giving us the signal to resume.”

“Ah. That’s our cue then! Talk soon, Mido. Come back up if you’re lookin’ for company, or a good quote from your’s truly.”

Awkward as ever, Izuku thanked them both for the chance to scope out the commentator’s box—it did have an excellent, comprehensive view of the entire stadium—and hurriedly left the two alone.

He barely stepped a few feet from the door before Present Mic’s voice was tearing over the stadium, crowds jeering wildly in the resuming trials. All Might approved of Izuku’s request to head down to the field to observe the matches, so long as he never got any nearer to the stage than Midnight or Cementoss and, in general, tried to stay towards the edge of the grounds. He could have been easily mistaken for just any other reporter from the level of most people in the crowds, and only certain people who knew to look for him would really even pay him any mind.

The first series of matches were almost devastatingly quick. Mosted lasted less than two minutes, whether that was Shinsō manipulating Yaoyorozu to turn around and walk out of bounds, or Tokoyami and Dark Shadow overpowering Tsuyu. Everyone seemed to have a similar strategy: use speed to gain an early upperhand, and then use overwhelming force to push or knock their opponent out of bounds.

The exception being the match up between Iida and Hatsume, which was funnier to watch than anything, and the fight between Kacchan and Uraraka, which had been…

“Wow folks, that was… **intense**… but Katsuki Bakugō wins and will proceed to the next round!”
Yeah, intense was a good word for it. Uraraka was clearly fighting tooth and nail against him, and she had a stellar technical approach with creating so much debris, but in the end Kacchan’s explosions were overwhelming.

All in all, the out of bounds option was leagues more popular than actual fighting—probably because it involved less tactical strength—and therefore real combat was largely avoided. That wasn’t necessarily a problem, but the ubiquity of such a strategy led Izuku to suspect the next round would be largely combat by necessity; both sides using the same tactic would essentially cancel the other out, and force them into a real fight.

The secondary pairings were as follows: Shinsō vs. Tokoyami, Todoroki vs. Shiozaki, Iida vs. Ashido, and Kacchan vs. Kirishima.

Izuku wasn’t a gambler, but if he’d had to place bets, he’d guess the next match-ups would be Tokoyami vs. Todoroki, and Iida vs. Bakugō.

He’d have been right, too. (Not that he ever would bet on his classmates, not only was that illegal but highly unethical. Still, the point remained!) There was simple incompatibility in the quirk pairings that gave one side an easy advantage over the other—it wasn’t some deeply complex comparative analysis or anything.

Shinsō’s managed to get the better of Tokoyami and goad him into responding, but Dark Shadow and Tokoyami were two partnered entities with distinctive minds, and controlling Tokoyami did not grant him rites to control Dark Shadow. Combatively, Shinsō was outclassed by an enraged Dark Shadow and ended up knocked out of the ring.

Iida’s strategy remained largely unchanged from the previous match—while Ashido had a versatile quirk, she could not out-maneuver Iida. It took getting the better of her early on and simply pushing her out of the ring, and the match was set.

Kacchan and Kirishima made for an interesting match, but Kirishima’s quirk could not hold up against the brunt force of Kacchan’s; as was often the case, Kacchan was too well-rounded a fighter and tactician in the application of his quirk to be bested.

The most surprising of the matches—and the one that almost would have lost Izuku his imaginary gamble—was Todoroki and Shiozaki.

Izuku was as curious as anyone as to why Todoroki did not use his fire quirk—was it difficult to control? Was he afraid of badly hurting another student? The best and most logical explanation Izuku could come up with was that his quirk had some sort of internal/external dynamic that impacted Todoroki’s core body temperature. Meaning, if Todoroki wanted to use his ice quirk, he needed to keep his flames internalized to keep his body temperature up, but that explanation didn’t quite seem right.

If using the ice externally made his internal body temperature drop, then the same would likely be true of his flames, right? He would need to externalize his flames, or “activate” that half of his quirk, to trigger some sort of internal warming, right?

Izuku took notes on the anomaly as he watched the first two trials of the Sports Festival, and he had even let some of that curiosity slip when Todoroki took him by surprise after he spoke with Kirishima, but it was mostly just Izuku rambling. Nothing particularly unusual about that.

Before Todoroki’s match with Shiozaki, the observations had been just that: a curiosity.
During the fight? It was all Izuku could think about.

Todoroki almost *lost*.

It was only on account of Todoroki’s quick reflexes and an absurdly powerful attack that he managed to win—it wasn’t really strategic or calculated, which was something Izuku had gathered through observation to be quintessential to Todoroki’s prowess in combat. It was, in effect, what differentiated him from Kacchan; while the latter was remarkably powerful, probably more so than Todoroki in terms of raw strength, he lacked the tactical refinement that Todoroki usually demonstrated in a fight, that he had acquired through years of training (probably on account of his Dad, Izuku guessed).

This victory was not a pretty one. Shiozaki’s manipulation of vines was faster than Todoroki’s ice and was more precise, could turn needle-sharp, and could blow through walls of ice by executing relentless amounts of surface pressure. Todoroki was nearly knocked out of bounds, but he built himself a column to catch his weight from behind, and countered Shiozaki’s offensive by demonstrating an entirely overwhelming display of force. He concentrated the power of his right side into a massive, glacial fortress, a prison of ice that blew out of bounds and encapsulated half the stadium. The move effectively captured Shiozaki, and her vines, in a collateral attack of the indefensible cryostasis.

It was amazing. Totally the sort of thing he would expect out of someone with Todoroki’s skill level. He really shouldn’t be worried.

But, damn it, if Izuku wasn’t *worried*.

It wasn’t his place to be concerned about Todoroki—Izuku *knew* that—but god, if it didn’t just make it harder when those heterochromatic eyes stormed away from the stage and brushed past him in the hallway leading off the field. He knew it was wrong involve himself in whatever was upsetting the 1-A student... Izuku could only imagine how stressful it must be to fight like that, under the scrutiny of so many people, and to almost lose...

But...

Izuku turned and watched him go, could not overlook the way his forearm was shaking, his right-handed fingertips frosted with ice. Even his right shoulder didn’t move as freely as the left side.

Todoroki not only almost lost the match, but he was clearly hurting himself fighting this way.

And that’s why Izuku decided to follow him—because, *surely*, Todoroki had to only be stopping in the 1-A rest area for a minute, perhaps just to calm down, and then he was planning on going to see Recovery Girl.

Izuku stood outside the door, awkwardly shifting his weight back and forth, waiting. Just because he *happened* to think Todoroki was endlessly interesting and unfairly attractive, Izuku was *not* a stalker, or being creepy, or anything like that. He would never harass or sneak around someone he had a crush on.

He was just checking on a classmate, worried for their health. That was all.

Izuku took to doing whatever he could so as not to count the passing seconds, because this really wasn’t his business. Like studying the woodgrain of the door—*thirty seconds*, okay, that wasn’t working—the curvature of the door handle—*sixty seconds*, nope, not that either—the texture of the spackling along the wall—*one-hundred twenty seconds*. 
These distractions weren’t working, and Izuku began to run his thumb over the uneven spine of his notebook, flipping his index finger mindlessly over the worn pages at the margins, trying to focus on the sensory experience—and not the fact that it had been three freakin’ minutes since Todoroki went into that room!

Three minutes—that’s one-hundred eighty seconds. And then, three became four, became five, and Izuku couldn’t take it anymore.

He yanked open the door, stumbling into the 1-A rest area, blurring out the first thing that came to mind.

“I’M NOT A STALKER BUT THREE HUNDRED SECONDS IS A REALLY LONG TIME!”

Todoroki had been seated in a chair in the otherwise empty resting room—all the other 1-A students were likely viewing the matches from their seats in the stadium—and he looked up, expression blank, confused.

“...What?”

“Uh,” Izuku cringed, shaking his head. “I just—I mean—I saw you come out from the match, five minutes ago! Do you need me to go get Recovery Girl? You’re freezing.”

“Oh. No.” Standing from his seat in the otherwise empty room, Todoroki walked nearer to Izuku, his already frosty, mismatched glare turning colder. “I thought I asked you to leave me alone.”

Izuku felt a little gobsmacked. His gaze flickered down Todoroki’s right side, not missing the patches of ice patterning his forearm and calf. “W-what? Forget about me for a minute, you need medical attention, Todoroki! Please tell me you honestly weren’t planning on staying here until your next match?”

He walked around Izuku and headed for the door. “Don’t you have someone else to bother?”

“Hey!” Izuku turned and began to follow him as he took the hallway towards the exterior stadium walls. “I don’t know why you don’t use your left side, but it’s clearly taking a toll on your body! It would be irresponsible to go into your next match against Tokoyami without at least being seen by Recovery Girl.”

Slowing to a stop, Todoroki raised a brow and glanced his way, more curious than hostile (at least, Izuku hoped that’s what he was perceiving).

“Why are you so insistent? I already told you I don’t want anything written about me, so this is a waste of your time, isn’t it?”

“N-No!” A little offended, Izuku held up his notebook, flapping it around to demonstrate, “Not everything I do is for my column, you know! I’m not taking notes on this, because that’s not what this is about—if I saw anyone walk off that field and they were hurting, and keeping themselves from seeking help, then it’d be wrong of me not to at least try to help. If you keep fighting like that, you could really end up hurting yourself. You could have beaten Shiozaki in minutes if you used your fire, so you must have one hell of a reason for almost losing your match to not activate it.”

Todoroki leaned back against the opposite wall, examining Izuku in silence. It was nigh impossible to tell what he might be thinking, and Izuku felt tremendously awkward, but he stood by what he said. If it had been Shinsō, or even Kacchan, Izuku wouldn’t have been able to just stand idly by without at least checking to see if they were okay.
Eventually, he asked, “You really don’t have a good sense of boundaries, do you? It’s none of your business what I do and don’t do.”

It took everything in Izuku not to roll his eyes. That was the exact same manner of deflection Todoroki had used when Izuku asked to write the follow-up article; he had been willing to let that go, because that ultimately just affected the two of them, but this was different.

The stakes were higher now.

“You’re right, it’s not my business,” Izuku said, harshly. “You don’t owe me any answers. But you do owe it to everyone who is out there to try your best. Our classmates—they’ve been putting everything they’ve got into these fights. Uraraka gave it everything, Shinsō, too, and they lost. That shows that they’ve got to get stronger. But, putting yourself at such a disadvantage, using only half your power—it’s not right. It’s not fair to them.”

Todoroki’s eyes narrowed. “If I tell you, will you leave me alone?”

Izuku had not been expecting that. He blinked several times before blurting an overly enthusiastic, “Maybe I will!”

“...Have you heard of quirk marriages?”

Midoriya bit his lip, shaking his head from side-to-side.

“Well, obviously, you know my father is Endeavor, the Number Two Hero.” Sighing, Shōto held up his right hand, curling it into a fist. The numbness from that finishing move against Shiozaki had almost faded from his fingertips.

“And these quirk marriages, they were a popular thing in the first few generations after quirks began to emerge. There were those who sought out there potential mates solely for the purpose of creating powerful children. Many people were forced into relationships. They were simply viewed as old fashioned arranged marriages. I’m sure you can imagine where I’m going with this; my father has not only a rich history of accomplishments, but plenty of money to throw at his problems. He bought my Mother’s relatives to get his hands on her quirk. And now, he’s raising me to usurp All Might.”

“Todoroki…” Midoriya sounded heartbroken.

Of course he would; pity always does that to people. Shōto, however, did not want his pity—Midoriya was the one who pushed the issue, and, now angry, Shōto couldn’t stop. The words fell from his mouth without regard, the memories grazing his tongue with all the fondness of a razorblade.

“It’s so annoying. I refuse to be a tool for that scumbag…” Beheld by the fine, gossamer strands of a memory, Shōto raised his hand to cover his left eye. “In every memory I have of my mother, I only see her crying. She called my left side unbearable before she poured boiling water on my face.”

The horrified gasp he heard was predictable, and it wasn’t even fucking satisfying for how pent up
Todoroki had felt all afternoon. Speaking with this kind of flaying honesty… it wasn’t cathartic. He didn’t like it. There was probably some displaced anger involved, more frustrated with himself for almost losing to Shiozaki than with Midoriya for expressing concern for him, but that didn’t matter right now. All Shōto felt was cold fury, the frostbitten half-memories of his mother mixing with the seething resentment he held for his father into a dangerous tonic, his words poison-tipped and Midoriya acting as the only available target.

Green eyes. Freckles.

Bullseye.

“That’s why… I am going to win this tournament, using only my right side. I don’t care if it would be easier, or if it would give me an advantage. No matter how fiercely anyone else comes my way. My old man is out there, watching, and I’m going to show him I don’t need his damned fire quirk.”

In that moment, Shōto could not have cared less for any of Midoriya’s concerns, whether that was sympathy or something equally as useless. If he was going to waste his time, then Shōto wanted to be certain the message was loud and clear.

“You’ve got your answers. But this will be the last time I’ll tell you, Izuku Midoriya. Stay out of my way.”

Shōto exited the stadium proper, heading out to soak up the warmth of the sun, anger driving his feet to anywhere that was away.

But he didn’t move fast enough.

“Wait!”

Hurried footsteps. Heavy breaths.

Shōto, against his better judgement, looked behind him. Midoriya was there, and when Shōto met his gaze, he realized he was seeing it again—that glowing conviction, the flicker that shifted between every shade of green Shōto could conceive: from earthen jade to bright chartreuse, it was like some great cosmic joke, someone concentrating the essence of an aurora borealis and trapping it into a fierce, unwavering pair of eyes.

Eyes that were staring him down. It was borderline unnerving.

“Y-You’re right, Todoroki, okay?” Midoriya exhaled heavily, straightening his posture. “There’s no way I can know what you’ve gone through. Your life has been so much different than mine. And if you want me to leave you alone, fine, but you can’t just get tell me to stay out of your way because you don’t like what I have to say. Everyone in Class 1-A has the right to have their stories told, so you’ll have to get used to seeing me whether you like it or not. I’m here for them, and I was only able to get to this point because other people have supported me and given me so many opportunities that I never would have had otherwise. I owe it to them to do whatever I can, even if that’s only writing, even if that’s only an article in a paper in a high school that comes out once a week. I’m doing the best I can with what I have. I’m proud of that. Can you honestly say the same?”

Shōto flinched, his head an echo chamber. Midoriya’s words hit the back of his mind, but when they came back to him, they were changed. The voice was different.

But honey, you do still want to be a hero, don’t you? Just remember: stay true to yourself.
“I-I don’t—” he blinked, surprised by the sight of Midoriya taking a deep, deep breath. He smiled on the exhale, but it was barren, different than his usual smiles. (Shōto errantly wondered when he had become familiar enough to recognize what was one of Midoriya’s usual smiles, but he quickly dismissed the thought in favor of paying attention.)

“It’s not like I don’t respect your motivation, but...” An edge of sadness snuck into Midoriya’s tone as he turned away. “You’ve essentially got two really amazing quirks wrapped up into one, while some people... don’t even have one to start with. You really shouldn’t take that for granted.”

By that point, the sun had successfully warmed his right side to a comfortable degree, but a different kind of chill passed over him as he watched Midoriya walk away, heading back into the stadium.

Izuku almost immediately took towards the stairwell; he needed to report in with All Might before the semifinal match, and, honestly, he didn’t really want to be around any of his peers at that moment. Shinsō was probably not in the mood for a conversation, Uraraka would ask him to tell her what was wrong, Kacchan would probably try to murder him, and Todoroki—who even knew anymore? Were they even friends, anyway? If anything, their warped relationship was just a gut twist for each of them, saddled with the knowledge that every living-breathing soul in that stadium had more than likely read the accidental, rambling confession from his column.

Sighing, Izuku flipped open his notebook, reviewing what he’d managed to glean from the last couple of rounds. It wasn’t surprising that Kacchan and Iida placed first in the respective pairings, and, honestly, he didn’t really want to be around any of his peers at that moment. Shinsō was probably not in the mood for a conversation, Uraraka would ask him to tell her what was wrong, Kacchan would probably try to murder him, and Todoroki—who even knew anymore? Were they even friends, anyway? If anything, their warped relationship was just a gut twist for each of them, saddled with the knowledge that every living-breathing soul in that stadium had more than likely read the accidental, rambling confession from his column.

“You.” A voice said, deep and sharp as a blade’s edge fresh from the whetstone.

The sound ran up Izuku’s spine and pricked the skin around his neck; the hostility was palpable from just a single syllable, and Izuku couldn’t help but remark that the feeling was not unlike being addressed by Kacchan, but this was somehow even more unforgiving.

Izuku carefully turned around, doing his best to appear casual and utterly failing in that respect when he realized who had been the one to stop him.

“E-Endeavor?!?” He nearly shouted, but his voice cracked and it turned out to be more of a squeak.

Indeed, the so-named towering figure of the Number Two Hero loomed over Izuku, studying him head to toe, looking decidedly unimpressed. There was just the briefest moment of familiarity, Izuku remembering how it felt like to be picked-apart by Todoroki’s gaze when Uraraka had introduced them in the doorway of 1-F.

But, any inkling of resemblance between father and son was fleeting, purely cosmetic, and forgotten almost immediately.

The softened shade of crystal blue—the one that Izuku had basically waxed poetry in praise of—was missing here. In Endeavor’s eyes, all trace of life was absent, coldly cut away to leave only a
bare color; there was no reflected world, caught in their surface like glittering sunlight upon an open sea. No subtle curiosity, impulsive anger, suspicious calculation. They were just, empty.

“Um.” Izuku coughed when the man proceeded to say nothing. “H-hello. I’m, um, a b-big fan of your work! I mean—y-your hero work, not, aha, anything else. Not that I’m not a fan of your other work, I just meant—”

“You are the writer of the Hero Analysis! Weekly column.”

It wasn’t a question.

And yet, Izuku felt compelled to reply, but he didn’t know what to do besides to nervously paw at his photo ID, the lanyard All Might have given him wrapped round his neck. In that instance, it felt unnervingly like a noose rather than a pass to roam the grounds.

“Umm… yes. That’s, uh—that’s me. I’m—”

Endeavor didn’t even seem to have heard him. “I want you to write another article on my son. A proper testament to his abilities.”

“Ah, well…” Izuku floundered for a moment, resisting the urge to shrink into himself. “Todoroki didn’t—I mean, your son—we talked. I offered to write something, but he asked if I would just leave it alone. So I really, erm, can’t write anything else, but I am sorry about the article from be —”

“This was not a request.” Endeavor’s lips curled up into a sneer. “I don’t care if you are trying to cater to him because you have some sort of feelings or if you are hoping by listening to him you’ll gain his favor. You made a mockery of my family name by printing something I could have found in a tabloid. The responsibility falls to you to fix it.”

“H-Hey!” Izuku protested, indignant. “I didn’t mean to print any of that about your son, but I accept the blame for what I did. I offered what I could to Todo—to Shōto, and that’s all I’m responsible for. Anything else that has to do with you or him is something you should… s-sort out… um… b-between…” His voice trailed off, the syllables crawling back down his throat, passing his chest and settling neatly into his stomach.

“Listen to me,” the hero said, voice little more than thinly veiled rage. Izuku didn’t even realize he’d begun to step away until his back hit the wall. “My Shōto is stubborn. If he is to have any hope of achieving his true purpose, he needs to understand the potential he is wasting by refusing his quirk—his birthright. Whatever your purpose for publishing that... other piece of writing, it was successful in capturing the attention of Hero Agencies and citizens alike. It’s all I’ve heard about for the past two weeks; half of Japan is holding its breath, waiting for you to publish a follow-up to my son. It’s the perfect opportunity to redefine Shōto’s image in the public’s eye, so allow me to make this very clear, Izuku Midoriya.”

Endeavor’s glare had turned fatalistic, the blue barely more than opalescent slits beneath an orange firestorm.

“You will write about him, and you will write about both aspects of his quirk. Much more talented students—students with real abilities—have been dismissed from Yūei for much lesser mistakes than the one you made. If you value your enrollment in this school, and any future credibility you have as a writer, I would see to it that you write a proper article on my son the week following the Sports Festival.”
Heart pounding, Izuku tried to swallow the lump forming in his throat. Was Endeavor…

threatening him?

“Do you understand?”

For just a moment, Izuku was compelled to just nod, prepared to jump on virtually any opportunity in order to get the hell out of there—but, no, what was he thinking?

Flight response be damned, Izuku couldn’t just write without regard to what the heroes he featured in his articles wanted.

So my question, young Midoriya, is this: what motivates you?

What Endeavor was suggesting—that’s not why he was doing this.

“I…” Izuku chewed his lip. “I’m sorry, but that’s not my call to make. If your son is going to become a Pro-Hero, he has to do that on his terms. I’m not going to help you do—whatever this is—force him to be this person you want him to be. If he wants to use the fire side of his quirk, or be covered in my column, or anything else—that’s his choice.”

The heat from the man’s costume, rippling with live fires, were so near they were almost burning Izuku’s skin, and he had to force himself from moving. Even a slight twitch and he could end up badly burned.

“He may be your son, but he isn’t you.”

Endeavor let out a low grumble, and, on account of the instincts Izuku had honed from a childhood growing up with Kacchan, he tensed, preparing for the punch or kick or burn.

“Yo!” A voice called, bright and perhaps a bit sharp, and Izuku cringed back into the wall. Thankfully, Endeavor had nerves wrought from harder stuff than Izuku and did not accidentally burn him. “Ah, there you are, Young Midoriya! And Endeavor too—long time no see! Let’s catch up.”

Izuku let out a breath he hadn’t realized he’d been holding when Endeavor stepped away. “A-Ah, All Might. Hi…”

“Why don’t you go up to the viewing deck, Midoriya? I’d like to catch up with my old friend here.”

Sweat dotting his brow, Izuku stuttered out a quick, “Uh… uh, yeah, o-of course. I’ll just…”

He made his way back to the teacher’s box, as instructed, the remainder of the two Pro’s conversation going unheard.

“All Might…”

“I haven’t talked to you in almost ten years, at that press conference. Really been awhile! I saw you chatting with my student, so I figured I’d say hi.”

Unamused, Endeavor was already walking away, “Did you now? Well then, if that’s all you wanted to do, we’re done.”

“...Come on now!” All Might jaunted after him. “Why the cold shoulder? After all, you must be very proud, your son is doing very well out there. Just using half his power and all. You must be an
excellent teacher.”

“Are you implying something?”

Smiling pleasantly, All Might met his stare, undeterred. “No, of course not! I just want to know your secrets! How do we teach the next generation to become better heroes?”

Endeavor paused, scoffing and turning to All Might before proceeding down the stairs. “Do you honestly think I would teach you anything I taught the boy? You’re all flash and no brains, as usual. Outta my way.”

On the receiving end of a shoulder check, All Might blinked awkwardly after the Number Two Hero as he descended the steps. “...Okay.”

“Let me assure you of one thing, All Might. Whatever it takes, that kid of mine will beat you, someday. I’ll make sure of it. That’s why I made him.”

That took him by surprise, enough to make his trademark smile falter. “You... did what?”

In lieu of a response, however, the hellflame hero just walked away.

“ALLLLLLLL RIGHT! IT’S TIME FOR THE SEMIFINAL MATCH!”

Approaching the center of the stadium, Shōto could feel the weight of eyes all over him, could feel the tremors of the screams of hundreds of people, could hear the shuttering click of cameras.

And yet, he could not have felt more disconnected from that world, the sensory one all around him. **Unbearable.**

*M-Mom, I d-don’t want to be the kind of guy he is, someone who hurts you and bullies you.*

*But honey, you still do what to be a hero, don’t you?*

*Ignore them, Shōto. They’re from a different world than the one I’m raising you for.*

**Unbearable**. *I can’t raise him anymore.*

Vaguely, Shōto acknowledged that Tokoyami was in front of him, that Present Mic was speaking, that he really should be focusing right now. He registered that Tokoyami was taking on a stance, and instincts had him mirroring, readying for a fight for which he wasn’t quite ready.

**“BEGIN!”**

Spikes of ice rose from the ground, and he drove them forward with Tokoyami as the intended target, testing his ability to dodge or counter. Dark Shadow tore into them, perhaps not *easily*, but thoroughly enough that his classmate remained unscathed.

Without hesitating, their approaches reversed, Tokoyami taking on an offensive and Shōto forced
to defend.

Straight ahead. A direct attack, from Tokoyami, not Dark Shadow?

_He’s feigning._

Pivoting in place, Shōto raised his right arm high and created a parabolic structure of ice, thrust into the sky like a falling star in reverse, glittering and bright. It met Dark Shadow with crushing force, head-on.

_“Oooh, a direct hit!”_ Present Mic cooed over the stadium.

Tokoyami caught himself before he was in range to try to Todoroki, presumably sharing in some of the whiplash, but he used the change in momentum to simply come at him from another angle.

_He’s not trying to knock me out of bounds. Why?_

Another front rush, this time from Dark Shadow, but he was keeping low to the ground. Shōto made a wall between his feet and the approaching target, but he was forced to build a structure high in the air as Dark Shadow stretched its form to try to scale the wall.

_The movements are different. I can’t predict them._

By all accounts, it was an awkward fight. Shōto continued to land blows on Dark Shadow, though he never got near enough to Tokoyami to actually strike him. Dark Shadow couldn’t fight endlessly, right? He still could recoil and feel pain in response, so why?

Was he trying to turn his into an endurance match?

Shōto could feel his leg cramping up, and, frustrated, he dug his heel into the ground. The attacks were coming too quickly for him to have much time to strategize. A finishing move like the one he used on Shiozaki wasn’t unfeasible, but would Dark Shadow be able to free them both? If that failed, Shōto might not have enough strength left to fight them off.

_“Wow, it’s like a winter wonderland down there, folks! It’s almost hard to tell what’s happening inside—is anyone else getting Frozen flashbacks? I always wanted to visit Elsa’s castle! How did that song go again? LET IT——”_

_“Stop that.”_

It was harder to see the stadium, Shōto noted. Perhaps his father could no longer see him from the stands; that rather defeated the point of drawing this match out longer than necessary.

Shōto moved forward, keeping his eyes open for Tokoyami or Dark Shadow. The structures he’d created were now acting as a series of barriers, and he wouldn’t be surprised if Tokoyami had opted to hide behind one while Dark Shadow took him by surprise.

_“Let’s finish this quickly...”_

With a great crash, nearly tectonic in its surge of force, the ice structures began to collapse inward like some sort of inverted, conical prism. _A distraction?_

Something moved in his periphery, and, ready to counter a strike from Dark Shadow, Shōto pivoted as he saw the effluvius beast coming his way. But his evasive maneuver was for naught, as the direct assault was not so direct, moving _over_ instead of _at_ him, colliding violently with a
blockade of ice directly behind Shōto.

*Shit.* He managed to roll away in the nick of time, seconds before the structure could fall on top of him. *Is he using my ice against me?*

Glancing around, Shōto realized he’d been drawn into the center of the stage, and it was almost completely dark. His barriers and the remnants from his offensive attacks had all caved inward, creating more of an ice cavern than any sort of defense.

*Oh, no.*

Eyes wide as they struggled to adjust to the sudden dim, muted entrapment, Shōto gaped at the sight of a towering, haunting iteration of Dark Shadow, greater in size than Shōto had ever seen it before.

A particular line from a particular column rose to the surface of his mind, his memory providing it with startling accuracy:

*Tokoyami is a veteran in mastering and managing his quirk, and those who have to struggle to take in the hard, deep breaths that make your solar plexus roil or that make your head swirl with vertigo—he has already surpassed you.*

*And doesn’t that beg the real question—how are you going to catch him?*

This wasn’t an endurance match, and Tokoyami wasn’t even weaponizing Shōto’s own ice to use against him.

He was using it to make himself *more powerful.*

“I have to thank you for giving us plenty of darkness to operate in, Todoroki,” Tokoyami smirked. “And I should apologize, too. Dark Shadow is harder to control like this, but… I’ll try my best not to hurt you.”

Teeth grit, Todoroki had only enough time to lift his hands up to shield his torso from being rammed headlong by Dark Shadow, the force of which hurled him back devastatingly into a thick slab of glacier.

His head smacked into the surface particularly hard, enough to make his ears ring, to make the bones of his jaw ache in radial pulses of pain.

How quickly he’d become a prisoner of his own creation.

*You are not a prisoner of your lineage.*

His eyes snapped into focus, clenching his right fist and putting all his focus into forming what was, essentially, a cryokinetic pressure chamber. The whole world seemed to rumble around them as the ice towers, columns and walls all started to come down with explosive force, and Shōto, at the last moment, rolled out of the collapsing epicenter, trapping the huge, shrouded construct and Tokoyami within.

If Tokoyami could use the ice to make a cavern, trapping them both, then Shōto would give him an avalanche.

His breathing was ragged in the crashing afterman, felt a cold that went much deeper than his skin, and gripped at his temple. That very easily could have concussed him, but he was more concerned
about that voice.

It was… a memory.

*Every day, the children seem more like him. And Shōto… that child’s left side sometimes looks unbearable to me. All I can see is his father. I can’t raise him anymore. I want to run away from this life.*

*Mom…? What are you saying?*

Some of the collapsed crystals began to unsettle the fallout of his attack—*damn it*. That hadn’t been enough to take Tokoyami out. Dark Shadow was just too powerful, especially under those circumstances, that darkness… He needed a different strategy. Something decisive, something—

*“TODOROKI!”*

He responded on instinct to the sound of his name, turning. That stand-out voice, that determination—

*“Midoriya?”*

There he was. How many times would they have to go through this? He’d run out onto the field, standing a few feet shy of the arena, visibly furious.

Another, louder shift across the length of the stage. Shit, Tokoyami would be clear of it any moment now, he didn’t have *time* for—

*“QUIT SCREWING AROUND!”*

Shōto had never heard Midoriya sound like that before.

Shōto wasn’t sure he’d heard *anyone* sound like that before.

Ahead, Shōto could see Tokoyami pulling himself to his feet. He was out of time.

(Some small sense told him that Present Mic was speaking, too. “*Oh, what’s this? Uh, a student—erm Dek, ow! Erm, Midori—ow! Some UNNAMED STUDENT is yelling encouragement at Todoroki! Stop kicking me Shōta or so help me God—*”)

Shōto *knew* he shouldn’t turn around, he should *focus*, but he just couldn’t help it, couldn’t help but make *sure*—and there they were, again. Those *eyes*.

Flashing, vivid, heat lightning without a rainstorm. A flicker.

A dedicated, stubborn, *beautiful* flicker.

Midoriya was all hard-pressed fury, his voice loud and intent. “By refusing to use your left side, you’re not denying your Dad’s quirk! All you’re doing is giving him control of what you do with your quirk. He doesn’t have any power over you unless you give him power over you.”

Todoroki felt the world tilt, and he squeezed his eyes together tightly.

*Moronic woman. To hurt you at such an important time.*

...*Where did Momma go?*
Hm? Oh, she hurt my masterpiece, so I put her in a hospital. To keep you safe.

That was your fault. You’re the one who made her hurt me.

“I won’t—I won’t use my left side.”

I don’t want to, Mom. Please, I—I don’t want to be the kind of guy he is. I don’t want to be someone who bullies you and hurts people, Momma.

“Damn it, Todoroki! We don’t get to choose where we come from, but we do get to decide who we want to be. Ignoring your left side isn’t going to make it any less real. If you want to reject your father, fine, but you don’t have the right to be number one if you aren’t going to use your full power!”

“N-No,” he tried to ignore Midoriya, the throbbing in his head, in his chest, in his throat. He tried to focus on Tokoyami and Dark Shadow, rearing up for another attack, a full on offensive move. His arm was hurting badly, and his leg was numb down to his toes.

“I r-refuse—”

Words of broken glass, sharp and uneven and jagged at every edge, but, still, crystal clear, a world beyond had shattered into being, Midoriya’s voice was a plea.

“It’s YOURS! Your quirk, NOT his.”

...But honey, you do still want to be a hero, don’t you? Just remember: stay true to yourself. You can be the kind of hero you want to be when you grow up. You are not a prisoner of your lineage. It’s okay to use your power to become who you want to be.

The fingers on his left hand twitched. Tokoyami was only a few meters away.

Everything returned to focus. He could feel his right fingertips again. Someone had bottled the sun and Shōto drank it all down, blood boiling, thoughts molten, heart a phoenix freshly risen. Skin searing at a fever-pitch, Shōto’s nerves flashed white-hot, lighting up his left side like fireworks.

Before he could remember to breathe, he was ablaze.

Shōto had forgotten what it felt like to really release his quirk like this. Both sides, at once, and Tokoyami faltered, backing up. Holding a hand over his eyes, he drew away, and Dark Shadow withdrew with a shriek at the sudden brightness.

They were strongest in the darkness, and weakest in the light. And Shōto... he could win this—no, he would.

He will.

And so, Shōto does.

It’s YOUR quirk—the kind of hero you want to be—NOT his—It’s okay to use your power to become who you want to be.

...I see now, Midoriya.
...Thank you.

Cementoss intervened, forcing his attack to be halted by several few walls of cement, and it was probably a good choice for Tokoyami’s sake. It had been too long, Shōto could appreciate, in hindsight, since he had used his quirk to its full power like that. It wasn’t a smug sort of realization, that he could have killed Tokoyami, but more of a frightening reminder of—of the fact that he still had so much to learn, of how much he still had to grow.

Midnight, over the announcers headset, declared:

“Todoroki wins!”

In some kind of half-aware haze, Shōto was breathing raggedly and his heart pounding urgently in the roaring stadium. Shōto glanced behind him to see Midoriya, sitting upright against the edge of the stadium walls. To his chest, he was gripping his left arm like one might do to soothe an animal—had he burned Midoriya by accident in the collateral? He’d been standing very close... but, for some godforsaken reason, he was smiling.

And, for some godforsaken reason, Shōto smiled, too.

He walked off the stage to thunderous cheers, the revelry unheard to him. Instead, he walked over to Midoriya, offering him a hand to help him stand.

“U-Uh—s-shirt—” the other boy’s eyes were wide, face red as half their families’ hair, eyes glancing up and down from Shōto’s face to—oh, he’d burned through his uniform. Half his torso was exposed. “N-Nice weather y-you’re w-w-wearing?”

Shōto could have laughed.

In fact, he wanted to, so he did.

“...Thanks.”

Chapter End Notes

thanks everyone for your amazing support!!! this chapter/these chapters were quite a ride and it was a pleasure to write!!

Next week: join us for the aftermath of the Sports Festival, as first year students prepare for their first internships across Japan!

*::* ◇ pluuuuuuuss ultra!!!!!!! *::* ◇
What Does it Mean to be a Hero?

Chapter Summary

he-ro /ˈhɪrəʊ/ noun
\textit{a person who is admired or idealized for courage, outstanding achievements, or noble qualities.}

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The image of Izuku’s bedroom on Thursday morning was a rather fitting reflection for his current state of mind: notes spread haphazard across his bed and desk, post-its and highlighters and drawings abundant and senselessly organized, bedroom door open in case his Mom needed him.

The only difference was that his room was quiet. His head was different story; a vinyl record at the end of a song—\textit{Thanks}—was catching again and again on the scratched divots of a melody—\textit{Thanks}—and the resurfacing memory made it very—\textit{Thanks}—difficult to focus.

\textit{Thanks.}

Izuku had heard the saying “a picture’s worth a thousand words,” but how was he supposed to make peace with a single word that was worth over a million emotions?

\textit{Thanks.}

Sighing, Izuku sat back in his desk chair, angled his head towards the ceiling as he tried to sort through some of the tandem that had become his thoughts.

It was Thursday, the day after the Sports Festival. Students were given Thursday off classes and extracurriculars to help them to recoup from Wednesday’s activities.

There had been an air of disappointment in the stadium when Kacchan was declared the winner, and no one was angrier over the victory than Kacchan himself; Todoroki did not use his fire in their match, and when Izuku heard, he found the subsequent defeat upsetting but unsurprising. In the end, Kacchan had to be subdued by Midnight for All Might to put the gold medal on him.

It hadn’t even been a full 24 hours and it seemed like hardly anyone even cared about who won or lost. It wasn’t on account of Kacchan’s very…\textit{sportsmanlike} display… or Todoroki’s refusal to use his left side, or simply just the passage of time that led it to fade into the background of people’s consciousness. No, the reason why people were so willfully forgetful—that right was reserved for Izuku’s shame, or lack thereof, anyway. Combine that with the power of social media, and, in particular, an incriminating photo that conveniently was “trending” by the next morning, and Izuku had himself one spectacular, devastating, disastrous storm of gossip blowing in from the west.

Too curious for his own good—Izuku thanked his stars for not being born a cat, because all nine of his lives would have been long spent by now—his hands itched towards his phone.
@GoBeyond_Weekly so... care to explain?? #tododeku

@GoBeyond_Weekly #TODODEKU #TODODEKU #TODODEKU #TODODEKU

ARE YOU FUCKING KIDDING ME RIGHT NOW FKJSAD;LFJDLFJSLDFJ

@endeavor_official First you get the perfect son, and then your perfect son gets the perfect boyfriend. and they say money can't fix your problems ;_; #tododeku

@GoBeyond_Weekly first deku writes his heart out, and then he runs out screaming onto a field to support his boyfr?? todoroki is fucking fsakdjf;lasd lucky lkjfsfdj godiwhthatwereme.jpg #tododeku #UAShips

@GoBeyond_Weekly please please please please give us todoroki article part 2. Please i bet izuku has so much to say. He yelled at todoroki on live tv because he believed in him so fucking much oh my GOD im so SOFT— #tododeku

@GoBeyond_Weekly #deku yelling: “[he?] doesn't have any power over you unless you give him power over you” my crops are watered my skin is clear #tododeku
@GoBeyond_Weekly This is the blessed #tododeku stop light. You don’t have to do anything, you just get good luck forever and it will help you achieve your dreams

@GoBeyond_Weekly Can we please talk about Deku’s GAME. (a #tododeku thread)

→ first the dude is like, fuck a gender norm I’m-gonna-wine-and-dine-and-compare-your-eyes-to-sunshine with a public love letter like this is victorian ENGLAND. And then

→ when that doesn’t work he’s like alright maybe that was too subtle HEY TODOROKI QUIT FUCKING AROUND IT’S YOUR POWER YOU CAN DO ANYTHING YOU WANT #tododeku

@GoBeyond_Weekly tbh I think the reason #tododeku works so well is b/c they’re both amazing independently? Like the article about Uraraka was so good, and Todoroki did so well at the sports fest. Together? Talk about a power couple

Embarrassed? Izuku?

_Hah._ If only.

What Izuku felt was a little closer to mortification, with just a sprinkle of crippling anxiety and horrible, gut-wrenching guilt. Not for the first time, he genuinely considered dropping out of school. Glancing around his room, Izuku figured he could probably fit everything he would need to start over his life into his bookbag. Take his pictures of him and Mom, only three or four of his All Might collectibles, his shoes, a few changes of clothes, a toothbrush—he could do it. Cut his hair, change his name, maybe start wearing a face mask like a celebrity, except, he could just pretend he was actually sick all the time so no one would approach him.

It seemed like a more viable option than ever showing his face at school again.

Groaning, Izuku forced himself to turn and face his computer, turning off his phone in an attempt to focus. It had already been an hour, and he didn’t have a single word to the page, too indecisive on what or whom he should write about, the five o’clock deadline creeping steadily closer with every passing minute.

_You’re going to be expected to make quality work, every time, not just because something interests you, but because your audience will want nothing less than the best you have to offer._

The words just weren’t coming today—_Thanks_—and that scratchy record wasn’t helping at all.

How could it be that after Izuku made a fool of himself, all Todoroki had to say was “thanks?”
Nevermind the fact that he overlooked Izuku’s awful, horrible, godforsaken attempt to act cool, but he actually laughed?

For the love of All Might, did he have any idea what he was doing to Izuku’s poor heart, or his sleep schedule, for that matter? Izuku was up half the night, pressing his palms into his face again and again to cool down his burning cheeks each time he relived the exchange they’d had on the field after Todoroki’s match with Tokoyami. It was a toss up between if Izuku was more embarrassed for his own stupid, idiot brain for saying all of that stuff out in public, or if he was more flustered because Todoroki laughed and smiled, and he helped him stand up with his warm, left-sided fingers, and he was practically shirtless—

“Hnnng—”

Shaking his head, Izuku sat up and took a deep breath. “Okay. You’re fine. This will pass, just like the article did! Just focus on writing. Words. Column. Heroes. S-Sweaty, shirtless heroes—hnnng.”

Izuku squeezed his eyes together tightly and pressed the heels of his palms into his lids for good measure, not that it would help. He’d never be able to block that particular memory from his brain. Shirtless, breathless, smiling, laughing Todoroki—if there was a God, they were intent on showing Izuku’s dumb heart exactly zero mercy.

Trying to reorient his attention, Izuku sat up straight and pulled his chair close to his desktop, fingers positioned over the keyboard. He watched the stationary black bar flicker at the header of the blank page, mockingly.

Write something, it taunted. All Might had faith that you could do this. But can you really?

He tried to take a step back—mentally, anyway. If writing about the who of the Sports Festival wasn’t engaging, perhaps he needed to change his question. How was the Sports Festival organized? Where was it held? Why did Yūei broadcast it? What was the point of participating?

The answer to those questions largely tied into one another: the event served to help students make a name for themselves in the public eye as future Pro’s, sidekicks, et cetera, while giving them a chance to put their training to test outside of typical classroom exercises.

But none of that was new. That was just summarizing the event itself, not analyzing it.

All Might was right—that sort of coverage lacked momentum. Discussing student’s quirks every week for the column was one thing, but this wasn’t just any other week. He had the space to submit not one, but two written pieces in this edition, and Izuku wanted to make them appropriately energizing.

“Izuku?”

Turning around, Izuku’s eyes remained a little unfocused as he continued to linger on the question. “Hm?”

His Mom smiled patiently, walking forward into his room a bit. She didn’t comment on the mess. “Any luck with the writing?”

“No… not really,” he mumbled, mostly to himself, before taking a big breath and fixing his attention to her properly. “Sorry, just thinking. What’s up?”

Her responding smile grew a bit. “What’s causing your writer’s block? Can’t stop thinking about
“Mom,” Izuku covered his face with his hands, muffling his voice. “I told you it wasn’t like that!”

She laughed, the sound bright and infectious, taking the hands shielding his face and giving them a squeeze. “I know, I know! I’m just teasing. Anyway, I was about to sit down for lunch, want to join me?” Warily, Izuku managed to pluck up a smile. “I think that might help. Maybe I just need to step back from the computer for a minute.”

“It couldn’t hurt,” she encouraged, motioning for him to follow into the kitchen. “C’mon, then.”

“Thanks,” Izuku smiled, following after her and stretching his arms out.

Before he took a seat at the table, Izuku glanced towards the news playing on the television. Reels of gruesome back alleys, grimacing news reporters, and shots of a hospital all played in succession, and Izuku felt the bizarre sensation of sinking without having moved an inch, the drop contained entirely to his stomach when his brain managed to process what he was seeing.

*Hosu, Japan*

His throat felt like it had been rubbed raw with sandpaper, suddenly desert dry and constricting the longer he watched.

*Pro-Hero Ingenium in Critical Condition, Police Suspect Connection with String of Fatal Pro-Hero Attacks.*

“Izuku?” his Mom asked, worried.

Izuku didn’t hear her.

*Iida...*

Shōto didn’t care for all the added publicity after the Sports Festival, but it was nowhere near as bad as the aftermath of Midoriya’s article on him.

At least this time, Shōto knew Midoriya, could at least see see the media blitz coming. He was able to mentally prepare for it, as opposed to being blindsided by Bakugō on a Tuesday morning with a paper shoved in his face.

Was the unsolicited attention on his personal life still annoying? Absolutely.

Would Shōto have preferred people minded their own business? Without a doubt.

It all centered around some specific picture of them together which had only really come to his attention Friday morning while he prepared for school.

He had just returned from his morning run and was stepping out of the shower, wrapping a towel round his waist at the sound of a knock at the bathroom door.

“Shō, I’m making breakfast.” It was Fuyumi. “It’s just me and Natsuo today. Wanna join?”
“Yes. I’ll be down in a few minutes.”

She hummed, voice fading as she moved away. “Alright!”

Shōto went through the motions of getting ready quickly, so he could eat breakfast with his siblings and still make his train.

Once Fuyumi spotted him, she motioned with her head towards a stack of bowls on the counter, her own hands busy with what looked like miso soup. “Can you help set the table?”

Wordless, Shōto did as she asked, and at almost the same time Natsuo strolled into the kitchen.

“Heyo, g’morning,” he waved, yawning and rubbing his eyes. His hair was sticking up in odd places, and Fuyumi teased him over it.

“Nice of you to finally wake up. Shō’s already gone on a run and showered, Dad’s in his office on some call, and I made breakfast. And you’ve accomplished…?”

“Exactly as much as any normal human being should for this early in the morning,” Natsuo grumbled, slumping into his usual spot at the table. Shōto’s lips twitched into a smirk as he listened to the two bicker; the moment felt rarely and pleasantly domestic, at least for their household. Once the last bowl was set, Shōto sat down next to Natsuo while Fuyumi wrestled some natto onto a platter.

His older brother was giving him some kind of… glare? Honestly, Shōto didn’t know how to describe it. He looked… curious? Skeptical? Almost… conspiratorial?

“What?” he felt compelled to ask.

Natsuo chuckled knowingly. “Oh, c’mon Shō! We’re your siblings, you can talk to us you know!”

“Talk to you about… what?”

“Well, you know. You didn’t seem like you wanted to talk about it before, but now there’s this picture and—what is going on with you? Do you have a boyfriend?”

Fuyumi practically jumped, her neck snapping as she fixed her gaze on them. Natsuo just continued to watch him with that same expectant expression, but when Shōto simply stared back in confusion, the older brother sighed and pulled out his phone. He thumbed through the device for a moment before turning it to face Shōto; pictured on the device was a scene of green turf, sunshine, gray walls, his own likeness, and—

Midoriya.

“Oh, that.”

His older brother’s eyes narrowed suspiciously as he took back his phone.

“Yes, that. It’s blown up on the internet since Wednesday when you—I don’t even know what you did.” Natsuo dropped his voice, glancing towards the doorway before leaning in close to Shōto.

“Are you dating this kid? Does Dad know?”

“Er, no, we’re not—his name is Izuku Midoriya, though most people know him as Deku from the school newsp—”

Fuyumi let out a little huff, joining the conversation at last. “We know that. Tell us who he is to
“To me? He’s…” Shōto tilted his head to the side. His automatic response was to say a friend, but, was Midoriya his friend? Did Shōto even want them to be friends? Midoriya didn’t feel like a friend, not in the way he considered Yaoyorozu his friend.

“…an acquaintance,” Shōto decided.

Both older siblings looked at him disparagingly. “…And?”

“Uh,” Shōto wasn’t sure what they wanted him to say. “A... a first year student?”

Neither Natsuo nor Fuyumi responded for several seconds, instead exchanging a look that Shōto could not for the life of him identify.

Eventually, Natsuo shrugged, uncrossing his arms,

“I told you it was nothing,” said Fuyumi, tone smug.

“Yeah, yeah.”

Their sister laughed as she pulled the apron she’d been wearing over her head. “I mean, it’s just silly. There’s no way they could be dating, Shō is just a baby, and—”

“I’m fifteen,” he pointed out.

Fuyumi didn’t so much as blink. “You’re a baby until you’re eighteen, kid, I don’t know what to tell you. I don’t make the rules.”

Before Shōto could get a word in edgewise, Fuyumi sat down and signaled for them all to start eating, so he let it go with little more than a roll of his eyes. They ate in relative peace after that, conversation sparing but nice; Shōto generally didn’t feel he had much to say, but Fuyumi always had lots of questions about school, or things around the house, or just, life, in general.

She was in the middle of asking one such question when their Dad entered the dining area. “Good morning.”

Natsuo let out a sleepy sound that resembled some kind of greeting, and Fuyumi started to get up and put together another place setting. “Oh—I thought you were stuck on that call, we just started eating—sorry, let me…”

“That’s alright,” he motioned for her to stop by holding up his hand. “I had a break, but we’ll resume in a few minutes. I just wanted a word with Shōto.”

Shōto said nothing, continuing to eat while meeting his father’s gaze, glare-to-glare.

After glancing back and forth between the Pro-Hero and Shōto, Fuyumi cleared her throat. “Well, okay. Um…”

Shōto hadn’t even finished chewing his current bite before his father got right to the point.

“I was disappointed in your performance.”

Natsuo paused with chopsticks halfway through his mouth, eyes flickering to Fuyumi and then to their father.
“I’m shocked,” Shōto said, not at all shocked.

“What did that reporter say to you?”

The question was not what Shōto expected, and it gave him momentary pause.

“...The truth. Even if I didn’t want to hear it.”

“So,” his old man inhaled, and Shōto did not miss the anticipation he sensed in his father’s tone upon the exhale. “You’re finally ready to accept—”

Shōto cut him off before he could go any further. “Don’t mistake what happened Wednesday as meaning anything has changed.”

Their father kept talking, the words poison-tipped and catching on every one of Shōto’s nerves. “Your stubborn opinions may not have changed, but using your power like that you did means that something has. And the fact remains the way you released your flames was reckless. You’ll end up hurting someone if you keep up like that—did you not burn that boy’s hand by mistake?”

Shōto ground his teeth together, gripping his chopsticks hard enough to make his fingers hurt. “...I did. He was healed by Recovery Girl.”

“I have no doubt. But if he had been closer, or the surroundings did not provide for such a wide breadth of flames but a narrow one, he may have sustained burns well beyond what Recovery Girl could heal. You need to learn to control your fire if you’re to use it.”

Hands twisted to fists in his lap, Shōto fell into a quiet rage. Not only was it true that he had inadvertently injured Midroyia, his father was exactly right—it could have been a lot worse.

“...Speaking of which.” Shōto swore he could hear Fuyumi let out a tiny, almost inaudible, groan. “What exactly is the nature of your relationship with that boy?”

“He’s an acquaintance.”

Brow raised, the Pro-Hero seemed surprised by Shōto’s answer. What else was he expecting?

“Not a friend?”

“Not... really?” Shōto suffered through enough of this at school—he knew Natsuo and Fuyumi had been coming from a place of caring earlier, but the subject was starting to become more of a nuisance than anything else. “We don’t know each other very well. It feels rather generous to call that friendship.”

“Hm.”

Their father had surprisingly little to say on that, and it made Shōto suspicious. Preemptively, he added, “Acknowledging anything about it to the press will only make for more of a story, if you’re thinking about making a statement. Let it die on its own.”

“Shōto, you’ll regret beginning your career already entrenched in gossip. People don’t like uncertainty. Even with the current situation notwithstanding, the reality is being associated with that boy in headlines gives the wrong message.”

Mood darkening like a subdued storm, Shōto asked, “And what message is that, exactly?”

“Quirkless individuals should stay out of the way of heroes. Even the General and Business
Departments of that school are filled with talented individuals, all of them possessing quirks. He is occupying a seat in a classroom that someone with more potential deserves. Whatever way it’s framed by the news, it’s not...”

By that point, Shōto had already tuned him out—probably sooner, actually, by the time he said heroes.

The vague familiarity of it made his stomach roil.

You’ve got your answers. But this will be the last time I’ll tell you, Izuku Midoriya. Stay out of my way.

God, did Shōto sound like as much of an asshole as his father when he said that? He sincerely hoped not. Even after how he had acted, Midoriya had still...

You’ve essentially got two really amazing quirks wrapped up into one, while some people... don’t even have one to start with. You really shouldn’t take that for granted.

“His name is Midoriya.” Shōto blurted, interrupting whatever inane lecture he’d been missing. Blinking, it took him a moment to refocus on his old man, his expression one of muted surprise. “Just because he is not my friend does not mean he doesn’t at least deserve some basic respect. I’d appreciate if you used his name.”

Lip curling, clearly incensed, his old man began to reply when the phone in his hand buzzed. He paused, glaring at the device and then back to Shōto. “We’ll finish this discussion later.”

And just like that, he left again, footfalls heavy as he marched down towards his office. Shōto glared at the spot he’d just occupied, like the empty space was tainted for having been in his father’s company.

Sarcastically, Natsuo muttered under his breath, “Yay, family breakfast...”

The commute passed quickly, Shōto’s thoughts preoccupied in a frustrated whirl of annoyance with his father and... well, with himself. Specifically, he was disappointed for having treated Midoriya so poorly, knowing full-well that the publication had been a mistake and an embarrassing one at that for him.

The notion of seeing him again suddenly made Shōto uncomfortable.

Please, I—I don’t want to be the kind of guy he is. I don’t want to be someone who bullies you and hurts people.

As he entered the building, the usual tide of whispers rose in his wake, his stride trailed by a lunar gravity, drawing the gossip after him like waves upon the shore. Shōto did his best to ignore it, and he was pleasantly surprised he didn't face much difficulty in that respect. One of the many benefits of maintaining a mandatory fuck-off zone, approximately a meter in every direction, was that most people didn’t bother getting near enough to him that it became a problem; all he had to do was try not to pay attention to the whispers and the looks people sent his way.

That said, it took him a moment to realize that a number of the people who were in the hallways
were preoccupied, reading tall columns of grey papers with black print lettering.

Oh. Right. Shōto had entirely forgotten that Go Beyond! Weekly would be publishing a special edition for the Sports Festival.

He performed an abrupt about-face as he reached the stairwell, heading instead towards the press room, passing throngs of students that seemingly couldn’t wait to read it at their desks in homeroom. Shōto managed to buy one of the last dozen or so copies—a bit surprised, he had to spend a 250¥ premium for the Sports Festival Edition, which, he supposed, was fair. It felt like a lifetime ago that he’d read Midoriya’s article on Uraraka, but it was only four days ago. The notion of participating in Wednesday’s events and working on something like this even sounded exhausting.

With some added, newfound respect, Shōto began to walk to 1-A and quickly looked over at the headline runner along the top. All the stories he glanced sounded interesting: an approximation of the financial burden the Sports Festival places on the school, an interview with the head of a Pro-Hero agency that unpacks their process for selecting potential interns from the performances of the Sports Festival, a piece summarizing the highlights of all three years’ activities—and then, Midoriya’s, simply titled in its regular place on the bottom of the second page.

*Hero Analysis! Sports Festival Edition*

Shōto withheld his curiosity until he arrived to Classroom 1-A. He must have been early, as he was one of the few people there. Aizawa-sensei was curled in a ball on the floor in his sleeping bag, and spread around the room were others reading their own copies of the paper: Sato, Mineta, Koda, Hagakure, Tsuyu, and… Iida.

Reality smacked him upside the head as he stood in the doorway, remembering all at once what had happened to Iida’s brother on Wednesday. Shōto had been so concerned with his own affairs, the news of Ingenium had fallen to the wayside of his awareness.

His hesitation was brief, and, not wanting to draw attention to himself, Shōto moved to settle in at his desk. No one really looked up or made much of a notion of acknowledging him anyway, engrossed as they were in their papers.

He was powerless but to join them.

*Hero Analysis! Sports Festival Edition*
What does it mean to be a hero?

he·ro /ˈhɪrəʊ/ noun

*a person who is admired or idealized for courage, outstanding achievements, or noble qualities.*

What does the ideal hero look like?

Is it All Might? Is it the first place winner of the Yūei Sports Festival? Is it the top graduate of Yūei, the highest ranking Pro-Hero in the popularity polls, the person who’s taken down the most villains?

Is there an objective answer?

I’d like you to take that image in your mind, whoever you’re picturing, and imagine putting their whole presence into a box. Now, pick up the box and set it off to the side.

You won’t need it today.

Because, today, the focus is not on the *who*, but the *what*.

What *is* a hero? What does it mean to *be* a hero?

There seems to be no more appropriate time to reevaluate these questions than in the fading glamour and grandeur of the Sports Festival, an event which should, at least in theory, be related to the construction of the ideal hero, don’t you think? Yūei is renowned for its ability to make successful future Pro-Heroes after all, and the Sports Festival is one of the annual highlights at the institution. It’s become such a spectacle, there are dozens of cameras and reporters, enough to justify an entire reserved section of seating for the media; three stadiums, all with concurrent activities that are differentiated by class rank; national and international broadcasting for the world to watch.

A spectacle, indeed.

But there’s still something that isn’t captured in the still-frames of a camera shutter on those fields, and it’s something that has left a lingering sense of dissatisfaction, something that sits heavy in my thoughts as the post-celebration adrenaline fades.

What are we trying to tell the world about heroes, if this is our measurement?

What if you’re *not* in the 42 qualifying students after the obstacle course; does that mean you’re not worthy of becoming a Pro? Are only those who placed highest—are they the only ones who are deserving of being heroes?

It’s a word that has come to mind more and more recently—*deserving*. Worth. Who is measuring these things? Where are the metrics? I haven’t seen any data, and I have notebooks heavy with ink that record everything I can conceivably document about every hero I encounter.

A cynic might tell you that Pro-Heroism is as much a commodified practice as any other profession—behind the mask, heroes are still people who need to eat, sleep, rest, take vacations, spend time with their families—and so we often forget about the shallow but realistic reality that underlies the commercialization of their livelihoods.
For our modern Ideal Hero, this reality is inescapable, even if it’s not as glamorous to imagine taking down a villain or putting out the flames of a burning building.

The highly publicized nature of the Sports Festival exemplifies this admittedly unattractive component of what it means to be a modern day hero; those who place among the top are talented and ambitious, and there is no doubt in my mind that they have all the potential to become Pro’s should they continue to apply themselves. But, it is important to remember that the Sports Festival is only one part of a larger narrative, captures only a few shades of the greater palette that plays into our social construction of heroism.

If the Sports Festival measures combat skills and introduces the next generation to their first real instance of fame—if it does these things, but doesn’t capture everything—what are we missing?

It is what returns me to my earlier question: what does it mean to be a hero?

The thing that makes someone a hero isn’t what we could conceive as typically quantifiable, not really. It’s nebulous, intangible, something we intuit and can sense through the actions of heroes, rather than any one person’s appearance, their quirk, their name or title. It’s part of what has made All Might’s legacy so permanent, why the image of the Number One Hero’s smile is immediately available to anyone if you were to try to visualize it. That proverbial $x$ factor, the one some people might spend their whole careers chasing, is something all the best heroes personify on a daily basis.

And I’m no mathematician, but I’d like to at least try solving for $x$.

If being a hero is something connected to actions, and not strictly to an individual’s fame, personality, motives, or appearance, then what sort of behavior is it that is heroic?

Why does pulling a person lingering too close to the train tracks back label someone as a hero? Is it simply the act of saving someone? Why is it the Symbol of Peace has not only the skills and ability to keep us safe, but he grants us peace of mind? Many people idolize All Might and have never been saved by him before, but they still look up to him as a hero.

The essence of what makes someone a hero is not the money made saving other people, or the exceptional bravery of a Pro, or someone who is unbeatable and immune to mistakes— I believe it is much smaller than that. It is simply the desire to make a difference and then doing everything in one’s power to do so. It’s taking courage from a state of mind to a state of being, and it’s so much more common than we tend to think, if we were to only know where to look.

Courage can be, of course, risking your life to put yourself between a villain and someone you love. That’s incredible and should be celebrated. But, sometimes, the bravest person is just someone who lived to see another day. Someone sitting in a classroom that feels three-sizes too big, or who seeks out the silver-lining no matter how hopeless a prospect, or who gives the people you love hope for something better. Courage isn’t a one size fits all sort of thing: it can be getting up after a terrible night, being the first to break the silence or the person who listens instead of speaks. Courage can be as simple as trying again. It can be delivering heartbreaking news, or giving someone a tissue who’s crying in the waiting room, or being vulnerable enough to be the one crying in the waiting room.
Courage can be letting go of your expectations, and accepting whatever comes with grace.

And the best part—the thing that gives me more hope in this world than anything else—is that we all have that capacity in us. No matter your quirk, your title, your age—no matter who you are—your power is a part of you, not the other way around. We are defined not by the power we possess, but how we choose to use that power.

Some of us are the products of bloodshed or damaged families from the dangerous threats villains impose on our society, but we are too the products of grace and courage, of a culture that lifts up heroes—heroes who would sooner die than let us be hurt. We are all subjects of the same governing morals, shaped by our fears and the common dirt beneath our shoes, but we are also embodiment of the same accidents, the same stardust that created the universe, and that, I think, is the most beautiful thing about our common humanity—just like that stardust, we can be remade. Stranger or friend; damaged or healed, hero or villain. And if we don’t like it, we can be remade.

Again, and again.

As many times as we need; as many times as it takes.

And what Yūei has done and continues to do through the Sports Festival—it’s not wrong. It’s simply realistic. It’s a lesson to students that, in addition to honing their skills, they have to be prepared to face a life of constant scrutiny, and to understand the importance of the compensatory obligation that goes hand-in-hand with modern heroism. Yūei seems to recognize that the lives of heroes cannot be sustained with pretty, penniless things like hope and admiration. Their graduates, hopeful heroes-to-be, will need to eat and pay their bills, just like anyone else.

But what the school exceeds in, in addition to that, is instructing students on how to establish and uphold ideals that promote a better, kinder world. How to remake themselves, how to be functional members of our society, and, most importantly, how to be the best heroes they can be.

The reason it’s so hard to capture this—why we can’t really solve for $x$—is because it’s not something you can photograph or measure in usual terms. I’m reminded of the sun when I try to conceptualize it; I often forget it’s there at all, that the star of our solar system is always at work around me, warming our planet and lighting my path. It’s so quintessential to my daily life that I don’t even acknowledge it most days. It’s simply there, and I am able to keep moving forward because of it.

Similarly, a true hero would be content with going unnoticed, without expecting a thank you or any reward in return. They are the people who so fill up our world with a notion of safety, protecting us and granting a peace of mind. A hero provides light, even on the darkest of days, and is content with the possibility of that kindness going unnoticed.

What does this all mean? What does it mean to be a hero?

A hero, I think, is simply someone who leaves the world brighter for having been in it.

And I believe there’s a light in you, too.
In the wake of the recent tragedies across Japan’s Hero Community, Go Beyond! Weekly respectfully sends our thoughts and support to the families of those injured or who lost their lives in the line of duty.

If you would like to write a message to reach the affected families, please email gobeyond.weekly@yūei.edu and we may include your statement in an upcoming print edition.

To our readers, friends, and the families of those who have been impacted: be gentle with yourself and patient with others; your light is in there, somewhere. You just have to find it.

By the time he finished reading, the whole class had gathered. There was some quiet chatter, and Aizawa-sensei was still fast asleep.

Looking around, Shōto felt a little off, a bit out-of-body, and much too reflective for a Friday morning.

It almost wasn’t fair. He was borderline indignant, because, well—Midoriya had been as good as nobody to him as little as a month ago, and now, from just a few corridors over in the General Department, the other boy was stirring all sorts of feelings in him that Shōto couldn’t even name, let alone attempt to process, by just his words alone?

It reminded him of that strange moment of passage, the one in the earliest hours when night decided to flip over to day. Shōto remembered plenty of those from the nights he would stay up with Tōya, when he couldn’t fall back asleep; Tōya’s room had a window facing east. Those nights—or mornings—the room filled with light like water in a glass, somehow dark and then, in less than five minutes, so steadily you hardly notice the dim brightening, it turned to daytime again.

Shōto knew it was nonsensical, but that was the closest comparison he could make to how reading this made him feel. It was absurd and bizarre and... he was rather surprised that he actually didn’t mind it. It was… nice? There was something… vulnerable about it, or evocative, maybe. It left an impression of something soft set against the rise and fall of his chest.

“Alright, listen up.”

Aizawa-sensei had woken up at some point or another and called the class to order.

“Last time we had a regular session, we discussed nominations from the Pro’s that come in after the Sports Festival. Usually, these only come in your second and sometimes even your third year—but your class is different. Now, keep in mind, that by selecting you for nominations, these Pro-Hero’s are essentially investing in your future.”


“If you’re not up to par by graduation, however, these agencies all withhold the right to rescind their offers.”

“So that means…” Hagakure began. “Even if we get selected, we still have to prove ourselves after
“we’ve already been recruited?”

Mineta, nearby, muttered, “Stupid, selfish adults…”

“That’s right. Which is why, today, you’ll all be focusing on creating your hero names. Identities to go along with the service of your recruitment.”

A sense of excitement sparked across the room, several of the more expressive students smiling and letting out quiet cheers at their desk. Kaminari and Kirishima engaged in a sort of bro-fist-bump, and Tsuyu let out an attentive kero sound that Shōto could only assume meant enthusiasm or interest, neither of which he shared in.

Ah, lunchtime. Izuku was a firm believer that nothing paired better with bento than some peace and quiet.

Unfortunately, such a thing was laughable in the aftermath of the Sports Festival, so he would just have to settle for what he could get.

At that exact moment things weren’t too bad. Much better than it had been when Izuku arrived at school Friday morning, the subject of pointing and whispers and endless personal questions. Right now, his lunch was only disturbed by the crackling-hum of welding metal, accented by the occasional scrape of tools—

“So let me make sure I got this right,” Shinsō said, struggling not to laugh.

—And the voice of his closest friend, who found Izuku’s suffering endlessly comical.

“He offered to help you stand, and you told him, nice weather you’re wearing?”

“I know,” Izuku dropped his head in his hands, groaning and blushing a terrible shade of red.

They were seated opposite each other on the floor of Hatsume’s workshop, while she worked on… it was hard to keep track of what she was working on, actually. Izuku didn’t question it, and Shinsō didn’t care; Izuku had begged her to let them eat lunch here as long as they didn’t disturb her work. Hatsume didn’t mind the idea, contingent upon Izuku’s agreement to spend some of the time testing her various gadgets and gizmos in exchange for the privacy her workspace provided.

“I don’t know what happens to my head when I’m with him!” continued Izuku, glancing up in mortification. “I mean, I know that I sometimes ramble, but it’s like my brain is against me when I’m talking to Todoroki. Just, totally stupid, knuckle-dragging, duh thoughts.”

Shinsō laughed even harder, and Izuku had to smile a little at his own chagrin, if only because he was sure he’d never heard Shinsō outright cackle before. It made his usually sallow, tired face light-up.

“I mean, I wouldn’t worry about it too much. I don’t know him very well, but Todoroki doesn’t strike me as the most, uh, socially competent person. Hey, at least you two have that in common.”

Izuku moodily chewed a mouthful of his rice. “Gee, thanks.”
“My pleasure.” Peeling an orange, Shinsō changed the subject. “That picture has sort of become huge, though. What are you going to do about it?”

“I guess I’ll try to ignore it like I did with the article before. It might just… go away?”

Shinsō’s responding expression was so spectacularly deadpan, Izuku felt the need to slump his shoulders in shameful defeat.

“Yeah, okay, okay! I know that won’t work. I just don’t know what to do…” No sooner was the admission spoken aloud did Izuku’s face start to feel hot. He had to put down his chopsticks and press his palms into his cheeks to try to cool them off, and Shinsō had the decency to at least look sympathetic. “I mean, I get that, like, half of Japan wants us to date at this point, I’m not dense, you know? But it feels so awkward now! It doesn’t matter if they want that—or if I did—because Todoroki doesn’t… ugh, I don’t know how I’ll ever face him again! I’m sure his Dad saw the picture, and, All Might, and you, and everyone in this entire school—I feel like I can’t even pass someone in the hallway without thinking ohmygodthatpersonhasseenitdoesthatpersonthinkI’mdatingtodorokiwhatiftheydo—”

“Hey!” Shinsō snapped his fingers harshly, causing Izuku to jump. “You’re doing that thing where you forget to breathe again. Just relax, shit. You’ve got options, you just need to figure out how you want to move forward.”

That had Izuku tilting his head, confused. In the background, Hatsume laughed maniacally at something, totally in her own chaotic world.

“Options?”

“Yeah. I mean, at the end of the day, you can always break things down into options. Questions you can ask yourself. For instance, do you like this guy enough to want to deal with all of this drama? If not, do you think it would help to make a statement clearing things up? Or, if he’s worth it to you, then he’s worth dealing with the stress and you’re freaking out over nothing, right? Have you actually talked to him since? Maybe he doesn’t mind as much as you think.”

Izuku squirmed in place, keeping his eyes to the ground. “I… I mean, I don’t know how he feels about it, but I doubt it’s good. He made it pretty clear he wanted me to leave him alone—what if he was just thanking me for helping him win the match? Ugh, and another part of me feels really shallow for worrying about this at all, what with Iida’s brother…”

Popping a slice of orange into his mouth, Shinsō sighed meaningfully. “Okay, yeah, I know that’s…Well, you saw Iida this morning, and he said not to worry, right? You said he seemed okay.”

“Yeah. I just hope he would tell me if he…” Izuku chewed his bottom lip. “Wasn’t okay, you know? Sorry, I didn’t mean to be a downer…”

“Nah, that’s alright,” Shinsō dismissed the apology. “You’re allowed to feel upset for your friend. But it’s his business at the end of the day, even if he wasn’t okay. If he’s not willing to come to you for help, then you can’t force it. The best you can do is be there for him if he needs you.”

Izuku smirked, focusing on his bento again, reluctantly picking up his chopsticks. “Geez, Hitoshi, when did you become so wise?”

“I’ve always been wise, jackass.”

“Pfft—” Izuku laughed. “I guess you got me there.”
They lulled into a brief silence after that, their lunch set to the backdrop of a sparking blowtorch and cranking socket wrenches. As was his habit, Izuku ended up thumbing through his notebook, eyes scanning the pages of his most recent entries, scribbling down added thoughts or questions that came to mind as he reviewed the materials he’d taken down from the Sports Festival. The pair of them exchanged some notes on Shinsō’s match with Tokoyami, and Izuku had to praise his friend for making it as far as he did.

The honesty and earnest conversation evoked a sudden swell of gratitude in Izuku for their friendship; this whole social catastrophe would have been so much harder to deal with if he didn’t have someone like Shinsō in his classes or who joined him in the hallways. People were less likely to approach them as a pair, and, more importantly, Izuku was just glad that he had someone who he felt like he could rely on. Not only were they classmates, both deemed ill-fitted for the hero course and told to follow a different path, they both had ambitions and faced barriers they continued to have to overcome, and they were constantly reminded of the negative associate of their respective quirks—Shinsō’s so-called villainous one, and Izuku’s lack of one entirely.

More than that, Izuku was just glad to have someone who gets it; Shinsō knew how it felt to be good-but-not-good-enough.

And he was someone who didn’t just see him as, Deku the writer, you know, the kid in 1-C with the messy hair, but as Izuku, awkward as he had been on the first day of school, someone who was genuinely just trying his best to learn as much as he could, and who was plagued by misfortune the likes of which the world has never seen before.

That moment in Hatsume’s workspace—it was fleeting, quiet, and small. But it was nice. Simple.

Izuku needed simple right now.

The corners of his eyes felt wet, and, sniffing, Izuku said, “I know you don’t like compliments and all, but you’re, like, the star of the General Department now. No one saw you coming, and you were the only person in D, E or F to place! I-I’m just really h-happy for you.”

He beamed, even as Shinsō rolled his eyes, feigning nonchalance but unable to hold back a tiny smile of his own.

“I noticed,” Shinsō gave him a well-meaning look, glancing up from his phone. He’d taken to scrolling through it after finishing his food, and he mustered up a small smile. “Speaking of which, Twitter—”

“Ugh.”

—let me finish. People really seemed to like what you had to say this week. Nejire said we’d put up the digital copies at like, 5:00 or something, so this is just like, the initial wave reactions. Still mostly Tododeku stuff right now, but, the column was good, so, kudos to that. I think it’s what people needed to hear after… well, like you said, Iida’s brother and for those of us who didn’t win —oh, oh god, stop crying—Midoriya we talked about this—”

But it was too late, big fat tears already rolling down his cheeks, proud and happy and sad all at
once. Izuku tried to wipe the snot running from his nose onto his napkin and not his school jacket, but there was a lot and he wasn’t the best at containing his emotions.

“I—I’m just happy to be able to do something, you know? You might not r-remember but Nejire asked me to write two articles instead of one big one, but once we heard about Iida everything sort of…” Izuku mimicked the way Kacchan would make explosions by expanding his hands outwards from an invisible epicenter. “Boom.”

“Yeah, yeah. You’re a good writer, just don’t get too big for your gigantic fucking shoes, or you’ll end up like those 1-A kids. Ego’s so big your head won’t fit through the door.”

“I-A isn’t so bad, you know,” Izuku defended, barely able to stay his flow of tears. “Uraraka and Iida are both in there.”

Shinsō began to stand up, brushing himself off. “Someone has got to keep them humble.”

“You’re such a saint, Shinsō. A true martyr for the cause,” teased Izuku as he cleaned up his own lunch and stored away his bento box in his book bag.

“You’re lucky I find you tolerable,” his friend hissed, even as Izuku hummed, pretending not to hear. “I could make you walk off the damn roof if I wanted.”

“Hatsume!” Izuku waved in her direction, ignoring him. “I’m ready when you are.”

Pushing the goggles back on her forehead, the girl turned around with wide eyes, full of their usual, discerning intensity.

She reached for something that had a very obvious skull and crossbones label on the container with a gaseous, green vapor trapped inside.

“Prepare yourself, Writer Deku!”

Shinsō shot Izuku a look, almost mournful, like he had just been tasked with delivering the news that Izuku had been diagnosed with cancer.

“I’m gonna, uh, go. Good luck with… that.”

After the third homicidal incident at the hands of Hatsume’s inventions, Izuku managed to skirt away with a few minutes to spare before classes. Sighing, he checked his bag as he walked into the hallway, making sure he had all his belongings in tow and that nothing was damaged, burnt, broken or blown to pieces.

His stuff at least appeared to be fine, but he’d forgotten that Shinsō had also left him to Hatsume’s mercy—which meant he was also at the mercy of a hallway full of his peers, listing about before classes began.

“Deku!”

Some heads turned his way, and a girl with glittery skin waved at him excitedly, holding the special print edition in her hands.
“Oh, shit. That is Deku, hey, over here!”

“Can you sign my paper?”

More people were approaching him, and more eyes found him.

Not good.

“O-Oh, um, hi. Ah, I was just trying to—”

More people.

“Are you dating Todoroki?”

“Ah—no—”

“You could be a professional writer!”

“Erm, thank you—”

“You article today really touched my heart. Thank you so much.”

“I’m, ah, g-glad you like—”

“It’s Izuku Midoriya, right? Where did ‘Deku’ come from?”

“T-that’s, um... sort of a l-long story...”

“What’s your history with Bakugō? Is it true you’re secretly friends?”

“Is it true Endeavor paid you to stay quiet?”

“Do you really not have a quirk?”

Too—too many people—

“U-Um, please, I—I r-really appreciate t-this, but—”

“Please sign my paper, it would mean so much to my friend if—”

“So you are actually single?”

“Are you gay, or bisexual, or...?”

“Um...”

Easy as a breeze, a voice cut through the crowd, elbowing Izuku’s anxieties off to the side in the momentary shock.

“Midoriya?”

He nearly leapt out of his skin, and some of the people around them actually gasped. Parting like a biblical sea, the students surrounding him separated to reveal the only person who Izuku really couldn’t bear to face right now—because of course. That was just his luck, wasn’t it?

Frowning, Todoroki gapsed around, evidently assessing the situation, before his eyes returned to Izuku. “Are you alright?”
“T-T-Todoroki, ah, um… I’m, y-yeah! Yep! Alllllll good. Huh, ah, wow. Fancy running into you here, huh? W-What are the odds, right?”

A thin brow raised in his direction. “This is a hallway between the cafeteria and my classroom. I imagine the odds are fairly good.”

*Stupid stupid stupid stupid—* “A-Ahah, of c-cOURSE. Um.”

Todoroki tilted his head to the side. (Internally, Izuku pleaded for him not to do that, because it was really cute and it was doing really dangerous things to his blood pressure) “Can I talk to you for a moment?”

Whispers erupted around them, and Izuku felt like he might actually pass out, hands shaking terribly from the overwhelming amount of attention and his own tightly-wound nerves.

Warily, Izuku managed to nod and move his legs, dragging one after the other, keeping his eyes to the ground. They walked away from the dumbfounded crowd, and, by some great miracle, were not followed or mobbed.

It was silent for almost a whole minute, and Izuku didn’t even have a conception of where they were going, too nervous and fidgety to pay attention to much else than his immediate stream of consciousness.

*Oh my god what was that? He talked to me in front of all those people, are they going to think we’re dating for real now? Did someone get another picture? What if that gets picked up by the news? Oh god, no—*

Now all Izuku could imagine was Principle Nezu having to call his poor Mom, explaining how his string of misfortune led him to being the first person to truly die of embarrassment. That seemed like a fitting way for Izuku to go, honestly. To die as he lived.

He could imagine the headlines already—

*Local Teen Dies in Impressively On-Character Circumstances*

*Is Willful Death by Mortification Considered Suicide? Yūei High School First Year Found Dead*

*Izuku “Deku” Midoriya: Teenager, Trashfire, or Both?*

“Midoriya, I wanted to ask—”

Izuku jumped, so absorbed in his daydream/nightmare that he forgot Todoroki was even there, blurt out the first thing that sprang to his tongue. “I’m too young to die!”

“Erm… what?” Todoroki looked appropriately confused, and Izuku was stunned to discover that not only had he already reached the lowest of the lows, there were, in fact, ways to make things worse, and he was finding every single one of them.

“Ooooooh my god,” he laughed, borderline hysterical, and threw his arms up in an attempt to hide himself. “N-Nothing, nevermind. I’m—I’m sorry. I’ve... had a really weird day.”

Izuku could have fallen over, because Todoroki just... chuckled. He was laughing, again. Not angry, or annoyed, or acting like Izuku was one social slip-up away from falling into an emotional coma.

“That’s alright.”
“It’s not, though!” Izuku wrung his hands. “I should have—because—you—and I could’ve just—made them go away! You saved me… again. First from being hit by that car, and then this… that’s twice now.”

Todoroki shrugged, adjusting his shoulder bag. “I wasn’t keeping score. You looked like you were having a hard time, and I thought I could help. That’s all.”

Awkwardly, Izuku kept his eyes to his shoelaces. “But... you know what people will say, right? About us being together like that?” Izuku was all too aware of the fact that some people were stopping and staring as they passed, but he tried to keep his attention on not tripping over his own two feet. “Like this?”

“Yes.”

If Izuku’s cheeks were any more red, he would have given Todoroki’s hair a run for its money.

“And that doesn’t… bother you?”

The other boy simply shrugged again. “Not really.”

Bewildered, it was Izuku’s turn to raise a brow. “But I thought you didn’t want to draw attention to yourself or—or, erm, the w-whole, you know, concept of, uhh, us?”

“I don’t,” Todoroki confirmed, pursing his lips as they finally came to a stop. Izuku was surprised to find they were just down the hall from his homeroom, 1-C. “But I also don’t want to let that impede doing the things I want to do. You said not using my quirk was giving my Dad power over how I behaved, I felt like the same principle applied here. You looked like you were overwhelmed, and I wanted to help. I’m sorry if that wasn’t appropriate.”

“W-What?!” Izuku felt like he’d missed a step going down the stairs, and he had to shake his entire head wildly from side to side to demonstrate how completely backwards Todoroki had things. “No, no, I really appreciated it! I was overwhelmed. I’m not used to people coming up to me like that. I guess you saw… the picture, from after your match with Tokoyami.”

“Yes. My brother shared it with me this morning. I suppose your pseudonym was nice while it lasted.”

“If there was any uncertainty before, it’s gone now,” Izuku grumbled in bitter agreement. “And I totally get it now, I’m so sorry, Todoroki—the being noticed by everyone all the time. Some people would totally thrive with that kind of attention, but I’m definitely not one of them. Ugh. I really didn’t mean to drag you into this in the first place—if I had known about that a picture was going to blow up like that, I wouldn’t have come out onto the field—I didn’t think, my legs just moved—”

“Midoriya,” Todoroki interrupted, and Izuku’s jaw snapped together so tightly it audibly clicked. It was like a shot of straight adrenaline into his bloodstream to hear Todoroki say his name, familiarly, easily. With kindness, not contempt. “You don’t have to apologize.”

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“The circumstances that led up to the photo being taken were my fault, really, so if either of us to blame it would be me. I didn’t want to listen to you, but you forced me to see that I had been dealing with my problems… poorly. That was one of the reasons I wanted to talk to you.”

Izuku couldn’t help but smile at that, heart fluttery and light in his chest. He took a deep breath, trying to get his erratic pulse a little more under control so he could attempt to hold a real conversation. “Oh?”
Todoroki frowned at a spot on the wall, contemplative, before turning his heterochromatic gaze to Izuku.

“I wanted to... thank you... but I also owe you an apology. I don’t know how I feel about using my fire, at least not yet, but for that—at least at that one moment—I was glad that I did. And I felt uncomfortable thinking about how I acted on Wednesday. I am sorry. I know we’re not really friends... but, I still hope you can forgive me. You told me to be better than my old man, and I am really trying.”

“Todoroki...” Izuku had to bite his lip to stop from smiling too hard. “Of course I’m not mad. I thought you would have... ah, nevermind. Anyway. You have your own reasons for fighting your way, and it really hadn’t been my business from the start. I guess, I just felt like—hmm. Actually, did you er, happen to read what I wrote in today’s edition of the newspaper? N-Not that you should! Or feel like you have to at all, I’m sure you—”

“I did.”

“O-Oh, well, thank you.” It felt like Izuku had just swallowed fireworks, the warmth running all the way to the tips of his ears.

“I... um, I mentioned that being a hero is all about taking the power you have and defining it, not letting it define you, you know? I guess that’s just how I felt when I watched you losing to Tokoyami... I knew you could beat him. I’ve, erm, not to sound creepy or anything, you know, but I’ve studied you and him enough to just, ah, know? Even in terms of quirk compatibility, yours would have made for a much more tacti—wait, nevermind.” Coughing, Izuku’s throat felt tight. Get to the point! “What I meant to say was, if you define your quirk, the possibilities are endless for what you could accomplish, and each of those possibilities are all yours... just, don’t waste them.”

Todoroki let out just a small huff of a laugh, barely smirking. “You’ve got an incredible capacity for observation, Midoriya. Thank you.”

Was he dreaming? Izuku must be dreaming. Maybe he did pass out earlier in that crowd of people after all.

After taking a moment to adjust his bag, Todoroki began to turn away. “Well, class is about to start. I’ll see—”

Wait—wait, Izuku wasn’t done yet! He didn’t just want to leave things so vague between them again.

Seizing what little remained of his courage, Izuku stuttered out a quick, “H-Hold on!”

Todoroki paused, curious, glancing over his shoulder. “Yes?”

“U-Uh. Well...” Shit, shit, he didn’t think this far ahead. Izuku scratched his cheek, looking at the ceiling in favor of Todoroki’s pretty eyes or hair or face. “You, uh, just said—you didn’t really think we were friends. Maybe... you, and me... we could... be friends? Only if you w-want to, I mean, I know you’ve probably got lots of—”

“I’d like that.” With a quick nod, Todoroki turned around again. “I’ll see you later.”

Izuku felt like the air had been knocked out of his lungs, and he waved mindlessly, overcome by the sensation of weightlessness and of falling both at the same time. Todoroki was long gone by the time Izuku stopped waving, only interrupted when Shinsō walked by him, grabbed him by the
collar and dragged him through the doorway of their classroom.

“You’re a complete mess, you know?”

Boneless, Izuku collapsed into his seat, smiling up at his friend in a daze. “He… friends... and… thanked... me...”

“And on today’s episode of *Irony at Yūei*: Midoriya, the best writer in the school, can’t form basic sentences.”

“Mmm.” Izuku sighed, putting his head down, too happy to care. Todoroki had been so nice to him. Sure, it was absolute torture to know that Todoroki didn’t want him in any of the ways that Izuku felt would really matter, but it was the best sort of torture and he would gladly submit himself to it. What if they start talking regularly at school? He said they weren’t really friends… but maybe they could become friends?

Shinsō sighed before heading to his seat. “Stop mumbling to yourself, Ectoplasma-sensei is about to start the lesson.”

“Alright, class.” Ectoplasma began, proving Shinsō’s point, just as he slid into his chair. “In the wake of the Sports Festival, we and the Business Departments are going to be doing a shadowing activity next week, along the same vein of the nominations for the Hero and Support Departments.”

With great difficulty, Izuku forced his attention to the front of the room, his hands automatically pulling out a notebook and pen to record Ectoplasma’s instructions.

“The institutions you are working for will not necessarily be Hero Agencies or Support Manufacturers—in fact, it’s more likely that they are not. A few of you may end up there depending on your assessments, but this project is intended to be more far-reaching than just the heroes who actively fight villains or perform search and rescues. Unlike your counterparts in the Hero and Support Departments, you have more freedom to choose from a list of different agencies that apply to you. For example...”

Izuku’s brow furrowed as he focused on the screen, projecting an image onto the board behind Ectoplasma.

“If your career path, for example, was to work in city & regional planning, and your speciality were to be to design public spaces with preventative measures in place in the event of a villain attack, your expertise might draw you towards architecture, business, support manufacturers, or research. In this example case, however, we would not likely include anything pertaining to, say, agriculture or art history, as they aren’t necessarily applicable. Each of you will have access to a selection of different institutions, businesses, or agencies that have been tailored for your current assessments.”

Izuku, along with his classmates, were all intrigued by this news. Many people leaned over to their neighbors and started whispering excitedly, and Izuku even managed to catch Shinsō’s eye and raise a brow.

“That all being said,” Ectoplasma cleared his throat, and the class silenced themselves again. “You are also not limited to one placement. We want you to get the most of these experiences, so you will have the option of being placed in one position for six days, or two positions for three days each. The first ‘half’ of the shadowing will last from Wednesday to Friday. If you feel like you’ve enjoyed your time and wish to continue, we will automatically assume your continued placement in that institution. If you would like to opt into your secondary choice, there are instructions on how
to transfer in the folder each of you will be receiving at the end of today’s lesson. That way, for Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday, you will instead report to your secondary placement position.”

Six days outside of Yūei? That felt… like a really long time, to be honest. Maybe it would help to calm down all of the speculation on he and Todoroki—out of sight, out of mind, right?

It was probably intentional that Ectoplasma withheld their folders until the end of the lesson, because Izuku was distracted enough just by theorizing what sort of placements he may have qualified for. If he and his classmates had all been given their assessments and lists of potential placements any sooner, they all would have probably spent the entire lesson just peeking glances at the lists instead of paying attention.

When Ectoplasma finally dismissed them, it was mostly a mad-dash to get their folders. Neither Izuku nor Shinsō were in any rush, as they had to attend the newspaper staff meeting after class anyway, so Shinsō maneuvered over to Izuku’s desk and waited with him for the rest of the students to disperse. Once the path was mostly clear, the indigo-haired boy went up to the front and grabbed both of their folders, just as Ectoplasma was heading out the door himself.

“By the way, Midoriya—” he paused. “All Might said he’d like to speak to you about your list.”

“O-Oh! Okay! Thank you.”

With a brief thumbs-up, his teacher exited the classroom, leaving them with a parting thought: “And excellent work on the Sports Festival edition, both of you. The writing and graphics were both superb.”

“Thanks,” Izuku beamed as he accepted his folder, and Shinsō just hummed as he was already reading through his own assessment.

Following suit, Izuku’s fingers were a little shaky as he flipped open his eyes running down a list of places for which he qualified.

His top matches were hero research facilities across Japan, a prospect which made his nerves titter excitedly, along with a number of large news and communications networks, and even two specific Pro-Hero agencies. Other potential places of interest included: a few law offices, a hospital, a handful of marketing and consulting firms, and three different police precincts.

“Unbelievable…”

It was actually unbelievable. As in, Izuku turned the folder over to make sure it was his name printed on the front in neatly lettered font, the whole thing more than a little disbelieving. These were real places, some of them world-renowned, and he had an opportunity to be a part of them… It made his heart thud loudly, blood electric in his veins.

Looking up began to ask Shinsō what sort of placement opportunities he had, only to falter on the first syllable. Not only was Shinsō smiling, he actually looked like he might tear up.

“I got—I got recruited. Like the Hero Course students. My top assessment matches are all Pro-Hero agencies.”

“Oh my god,” Izuku practically vaulted over his desk, ignoring Shinsō’s usual rule about hugs and squeezed him tightly. “You did it! You really did it, you’re going to be awesome, oh my god, let me see, where did you get placed? Here, trade me—”

“Shit, we’re going to be late,” Shinsō laughed, a little flushed in the face as they swapped folders.
“Come on, we can look once we get to 1-K. I don’t want Nejire to kick my ass.”

“Okay, okay,” Izuku waved him off, haphazardly throwing his stuff into his bookbag and hauling it over his shoulder, walking down towards the press room and he poured over Shinsō’s list.

The moment reverberated with the buzzing feeling of potential. These experiences could change their lives forever, and it was really real, happening to them.

Izuku might have cried… again.

Everything about Saturday was overcast.

Skies flinty, gravel and sidewalks unpolished fog, the journey from his house to the station all bled together, a continuous watercolor of grayscale by the time he boarded. The trip would be about an hour from Tokyo Station, so Shōto settled into a seat as comfortably as he could and watched the world zip past, slow and fast, somehow, all at once.

It had been a strange, long, tiring week. His father was angry with him, especially after their disagreement Friday morning, and Shōto could feel it in his sore muscles from training that evening. It felt like his old man had pushed him particularly hard, and it would be of no surprise if it was his own brand of punishment.

Shōto did not choose to use his fire, much to his father’s disappointment. He couldn’t even say it was out of spite or anger anymore.

Shōto was just so... confused.

On the one hand, he felt like Midoriya was right. He wasn’t his father. Shōto would do everything in his power to never become such a man as him. But, it wasn’t so simple; he couldn’t just shrug off one of the most important guiding principles of his life just like that. For ten years, becoming a hero that surpassed his father without using his left side—it had been the charge he’d taken up, the motivation that kept him moving forward.

What was he supposed to do now?

Shōto glared at his left hand, flexed his fingers and then uncurled them a few times. The quirk was his. The power was his. The potential to be better—the possibilities are endless for what you could accomplish, and each of those possibilities are all yours.

Midoriya hardly knew him, and yet, he had so much faith in Shōto’s abilities. That he could do all of these things as easily as snapping his fingers.

It was so frustrating.

That irksome feeling lingered for the length of his train ride, followed Shōto off the platform and through the streets. The buildings around weren’t particularly interesting to examine, so Shōto made to studying the skies. White-gray-blue, indecisive, he liked that the world could not make up its mind either. At least he wasn’t the only one.

A gradient of granite hues lined his path, trailed after him to the entrance, to the nice ladies
working at the nurse’s desk, to the doctors he passed speaking in the stairwell, and all the way to Room 315 of Kisarazu Hospital.

Funny, how something as unassuming as a door had the ability to render him completely incapacitated.

Some element to this felt absolutely wrong. Like trying to swim in a hurricane, trespassing into the far side of a darkness, to discover a backwards sign that reads *off-limits*.

A pathetic and cowardly part of him considered leaving.

*That child’s left side is unbearable.*

What if he scares her?

*All I can see is his father.*

What if she can’t tell them apart?

*I want to run away from this life.*

Would this be dragging her back in?

His fingertips trailed over the handle of the door, trembling, lingering, almost-but-not-quite grabbing on.

No, no. He needed to do this. They were—they were bound by blood and history and Shōto couldn’t stand letting things be overcast for another day. If he was really supposed to have all of these *endless possibilities*, if he was supposed to use his body and his powers to become a hero, if he was going to *give it everything he has*... he needs to see her.

*Courage can be as simple as trying again.*

Biting the inside of his cheek, Shōto took a deep breath, tightened his hold on the handle, and opened the door.

And there she sat, still and calm, the room cold as Shōto stepped inside. She was looking away, out the window to an overview of the grounds; while the facilities were necessarily urban for their location, they had a large part of the land dedicated to green outdoor space.

*She’s right there.*

“Hello, Mom.”

Eyes turned to face him, grey and tired, aged from how he remembered in his memories, but her features were all the same.

“Shōto?”

That was all it took for her face to break into a smile—a smile he had not seen in over half of his life—and Shōto swore the world felt just a little bit brighter.

Tentatively, he smiled, too.

“I hope I’m not… I hope it’s okay that I’m visiting.”
“Yes,” she said, shaking her head, and Shōto noticed her eyes crinkle at the corner when she smiles, just like Natsuo. “Yes, of course. Please, come here, I’ve—you’ve grown so much…”

Inching forward, Shōto eventually sat down opposite her, taking in the full brightness of her features. He had missed her so much, it was almost painful, like trying to collect stardust as if it could be done as easily as a child might make a snowball, brilliant and impossible.

Her eyes were warmth, full and expressive and every bit as adoring as he remembered. With the exception of that one day, that moment when things changed, his mother’s eyes had always been softer than clouds and gentler than the kiss of sea spray beside the ocean.

“I wanted to visit… sooner. So many times.” Shōto began, curling his hands to fists in his lap. “I’m so sorry, Mom. I didn’t—I didn’t ever want things to turn out like this.”

Gingerly, movements slow and deliberate, she stood up and moved a little closer to her son. Shōto wanted to look away, if only because he was ashamed it had taken him this long to come see her, but he’d missed seeing her face too much.

She knelt, so they were nearly eye level, and took his white-knuckled fists into her own hands, smoothing her thumbs over them. It was jarring to realize how cold the tips of her fingers felt against his left side, even if he sometimes had the same encounters with Natsuo and Fuyumi; their quirks weren’t as purely cryomatic as their mother’s. It was odd to think that, when he touched people with his right side, it must have felt something like that.

“Shōto, I don’t—I could never blame you. There’s no need for you to ever apologize to me. I’m just… I’m so happy to see you. I can’t believe you’re here.”

Shōto watched as the corners of her eyes grew misty, but she smiled anyway, giving his hands a squeeze before gently moving one of her hands towards his face. She brushed the hair back from his forehead carefully, admitting quietly, “I’ve thought about seeing you for so long, I thought I would know just what to say… I went over it a million times in my head, and now you’re here… but I don’t have any of the right words,” she laughed, just a little, the sound barely holding back her tears.

Quick as a spark, she leaned in and gave his forehead a kiss, pulling back and beaming at him. “It’s just so nice to see you again, Shōto.”

All at once, Shōto felt very small. Not younger, but just a tiny thing, something so easily held, so breakable. Mirroring the same slow, unfamiliarity of her movements, Shōto leaned in and wrapped his arms around his mother, pulling her into a hug.

“It’s nice to see you too, Mom.”

“I missed you so much, sweetheart,” she said into his shoulder with a wet chuckle. “So much.”

He nodded. “Me too.”

More than you could ever know.
Meanwhile...

Elsewhere, in a far corner of the darkest room across Japan, a small television screen filled a dingy office with a blue tint. Another, smaller light mixed with the television, the source a dimmed laptop screen behind which a man sat, irritably scratching at the skin of his neck.

The television was muted.

On the television screen, two newscasters sat at a desk, both smiling their perky, perfect, smiles—the ones they were paid to keep up, while they talked about the tragic news stories of all the recent hero deaths, or the Yūei Sports Festival, or whatever else flitted through their small little worlds.

After a long silence, the laptop was closed harder than necessary.

“Sensei,” a voice scratched out. “Why should I care about what some kid has to say?”

A pause.

“It’s just empty words, and with all of the stupid, dramatic fawning with him and that other kid, the whole thing is so annoying. It sorta pisses me off.”

Scratching harder, he drew just a sliver of blood that dripped down his collarbones. By the time the first droplet hit the floor, he was finally given an answer.

“These words may be that of a child, but they are reaching heroes all the same. Under the right circumstances, a unifying message across the hero community may prove to be an added obstacle to you in the future.”

“Tsch.” Scoffing, he retorted, “I doubt it. This kid doesn’t even have a quirk. What a joke.”

Next came humming, and the sound was the opposite of soothing.

“A voice can be a powerful thing when used properly. I’d advise you pay close attention to what he says… Tomura Shigaraki.”

Chapter End Notes
hi everyone! thanks so so much for reading along! whether it's a kudos, comment, bookmark, or subscribe, I appreciate the support so so much (ง'̀-'́´𝛾)  

one order of business for you all, if you would be so kind!  

I have a lot of fun ideas for where to take this writer! izuku/todoroki AU, one of which is applying it to the plot of My Hero Academia: Two Heroes (the first movie!) but I'm not sure what would be the most enjoyable approach for you all. just like izuku, my own success as a writer depends on YOU ALL enjoying it!  
Here are the options I'm considering, and I would be SO grateful if you could offer some feedback in the comments (or, just throw a vote onto this strawpoll)!
Just for context/a reminder, the story of Two Heroes "arc" takes place after the Hero Killer arc and before the Forest Training Camp arc.

1. Write the Two Heroes arc AFTER this story catches up with canon and continue the main arcs for right now. I would create an AO3 "series" for 'read between the lines' and have the Two Heroes arc exist tangential to the main story. (Divide the story into two parts.)
2. Include the Two Heroes arc in this, the original story, set between the Hero Kill arc and Forest Training arc. (Keep the story as one, told in a linear fashion.)

thank you for your amazing support!
next time: Izuku's shadowing, Shōto's placement, a crazed murderer, and iida too?!
join me next time as we journey into Hosu City!

pluuuuuuuuuu ultra (◦‿atching ◦)!!
Friendships: Laying the Groundwork! (pt. 1)

Chapter Summary

Shōto doesn't really get how the friendship thing is supposed to work, but he's trying, Uraraka might be the best wingwoman Izuku never asked for, Bakugō said gay rights, and Dadmi—I mean, All Might and Izuku talk through some recent developments.

Part one of the Hero Killer arc!

Monday sucked.

Now, while it’s true that Mondays always suck, this Monday, in particular, really sucked.

It started, as all Monday’s do, in classroom 1-A.

Everyone was chattering happily, excited about the upcoming internships, while Shōto was just doing his best to keep his wits about. If the existential crises that had oh-so-casually come up within the past week had been a series of earthquakes, he was still feeling the aftershocks of the tectonic upsets. The world had not stopped shifting beneath his feet, and he would still have to keep clear of a number of faultlines before things would start to feel normal again.

But it’s not like time had any regard for Shōto’s problems. It ticked and tocked stubbornly on, and he couldn’t shrug his responsibilities just because there was a massive, confusing tilt to his world right now. His class was told they had until the end of the day to submit their request for internship recruitment, and Shōto was still expected to do the same.

Even of the excess of four-thousand offers he’d received from various professional hero firms, Shōto recognized that all of them paled in comparison to one that was headed by the Number Two Hero. Not only would his father’s experience be a boon to Shōto’s educational experience, there were added benefits to going somewhere familiar. He would have considerably more autonomy than he may if working for a stranger, and he could at least avoid the discomfort of meeting new people (he knew most of his father’s staff and sidekicks already).

Objectively, it was the best option.

But subjectively? God.

Being in his father’s company for six full days sounded just this side of insufferable.

Shōto wasn’t working himself up to accept the offer, necessarily—he had already resolved on his way home from the hospital that he would go through with it—he just… wasn’t particularly looking forward to it.

It was all on account of his mother convincing him, once Shōto worked up the courage to apologize to her for letting her get trapped in a place like that.

“I would say I forgive you, but there’s nothing to forgive, sweetheart. I was the one who…” Shōto
needed only close his eyes to be back in the hospital room. It was too easy to recall the feather-light
touch of her frosted fingertips, trailing her thumb over his cheekbone, tracing the bottom of his
scar.

“The fact that you blame yourself for any of what happens breaks my heart, Shōto. Holding this
resentment inside of you… it’s not healthy. As much as I wish things had gone differently, how
much I wish I could have been stronger to protect you… if I hadn’t married your father, I wouldn’t
be able to call myself your, Fuyumi’s, Natsuo’s, or Tōya’s mother, and I would never change that. I
wouldn’t give that up for anything in the world. So please, don’t let any of this hold you back—you
have so much ahead of you, so much potential, and nothing would make me happier than to watch
you move forward with everything you have.”

Shōto would accept those things he could not change—his lineage, the two halves of his whole
quirk, and all of the history that led him down this path—and try to do as she bid. Optimism was
not… exactly Shōto’s speciality, but he would at least attempt to not to actively hold his father in
contempt. Outright forgiveness may not be realistic, but, his mother believed, neither was
continuing the trajectory of their bitter coexistence.

So he would try.

All of this introspection was happening in the four or five minutes that it took for class to actually
begin, so it was safe to say his day was not exactly starting on the most positive of notes.

Sero and Kaminari were discussing something without regard to their volume, which effectively
brought Shōto back to the present. He had to assume Aizawa-sensei would be there any moment,
tuning in only enough to catch that they were talking about some new meme or happening on
Twitter that he, frankly, could not keep up with even if he tried.

Tokoyami shifted in his seat, glancing at Shōto over his shoulder. “You know, on the subject of
social media, I commend you for being able to handle all of the dramatics so well. I can barely
stand to hear it in the hallways.”

“It helps not having any accounts,” Shōto shrugged. “I don’t care much for gossip and there’s little
to find on those websites otherwise.”

Nearby, Mineta swiveled in place, jumping into their conversation (uninvited, Shōto might add).
“Oh for sure, but I bet that has to get in the way of scoring with some of the ladies, right? If you
had a Twitter or whatever you could just shut down the rumors yourself. You know, now that
everyone thinks you’re—well, like that.”

Uraraka, who had been passing back to her seat after talking with Hagakure, was fuming. “What he
is and isn’t is NOT any of your business! Leave Deku out of this!”

“Hey, hey!” Mineta held up his hands in an apologetic gesture. “I have no problems with homos!
Totally cool in my book. In fact, it’s like, even better—more girls all us guys, right?”

Nearby, however, Kirishima bristled, and he sounded uncharacteristically annoyed when he
jumped in, “Could you not call gay people *homos*, dude? Like, I dunno, it’s sort of just insensitive. My Moms are gay and it just rubs me the wrong way?”

“Gay *women,*” Mineta sighed, leaning back in his chair and almost resting his head on Yaoyorozu’s desk. She looked about ready to smack him. “What a waste… like it can be really hot, but at the end of the day that’s just two more people off the market.”

“Dude, that’s my *Moms* you’re talking about, can you not?!”

“I didn’t mean your Mom’s in particular! Just in general. You guys get what I mean, right?” Mineta rolled his eyes, nodding sagely at Tokoyami and Todoroki as they were the closest males in the room. “This is why polyamory is so good, like, you could be dating two girls and watch them make out but at the same time—”

The chair seated in front of the tiny, grape-headed student scraped loudly over the floor, and everyone stilled when a blond, seething head of hair turned around.

Bakugō grabbed him by the scruff of his jacket and yanked him right out of his seat.

“Listen here you subhuman, flaccid excuse of a raisin, you shut your fucking shithole of a mouth and keep your thirsty Nethanderthal thoughts to your-fucking-self, or I will cauterize your tongue with my fingertips and blow your teeth so far into your skull your brain will have cavities. *Understand*?!”

Silence followed, and it took Ashido loudly gasping for everyone to realize Aizawa-sensei was standing in the doorway.

He appeared to have heard every word, examining Bakugō and a struggling Mineta with a blank face.

“Sensei, thank god!” Mineta let out a cry as the blond dropped him back into his chair and swiftly sat down.

Yaoyorozu spoke up, standing from her seat. “Sir, please don’t punish Bakugō too harshly, he was just—”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” their teacher interrupted, his gait slow while approaching his desk. “Punish Bakugō for what? We have a lot to cover today so I don’t want to waste anymore time.”

Stunned for just a beat, Yaoyorozu’s mouth hung open before she caught onto Aizawa-sensei’s meaning and hastily sat down.

Shōto had watched the whole thing unfold with quiet amusement, finding himself, for once, quite glad for Bakugō’s temper. His classmate may have the personality of a feral, territorial wolverine, he did at least have something close to a reasonable moral compass guiding his shitty behavior, and Shōto could respect that.

Honestly, anyone who put down Mineta’s perverse commentary was considered redeemable, as far as Shōto was concerned. It helped to keep him in better spirits for the remainder of class.

And then, lunch happened, and with it left any semblance he had of a good mood.

Shōto decided to try to catch up with Uraraka and Iida, mostly with the intent to make sure the latter was still doing alright. The state of Ingenium’s condition had been announced over the
weekend, and the news was stinging salt to an already wounded hero community.

Before he had the chance to catch up with the two of them, they met up with some other familiar faces on their way to the cafeteria.

Nejire Hado was standing purposefully in the middle of the hallway, pushing one of those expensive DSLR cameras into the hands of Midoriya’s purple-haired friend—Shinsō, if Shōto was remembering correctly—before the upperclassman swiftly pulled Iida into a hug. He patted her shoulder with stiff arms, and Shinsō gave them a long-suffering look before busying his hands with the newly acquired camera. Uraraka and Midoriya were waved off by Nejire while she spoke with Iida privately, and Shōto felt abundantly awkward just watching the whole thing happen, so he continued on his own goal of getting to the cafeteria and decided he would try to talk to Iida later.

A little ways ahead of him, Uraraka linked her right arm with Midoriya’s left, to which he seemed to awkwardly consent, and the two chattered happily the rest of the way together with Shinsō walking beside them, intent on the camera. Framed side by side in the hallway, they made for a fairly scenic match. Both short of stature, wide-eyed and expressive. Open, welcoming, friendly. Kind.

The way their mannerisms all blended into each other, the laughter that he could just barely hear over the idle chatter of other students, the too-far-but-sort-of-closeness from his vantage point—it felt an awful lot like being splashed in the face with cold water, or taking a swift kick right to his stomach.

They looked almost like a picture.

A lovely, cute… annoying picture.

—where did that come from?

Shōto sucked his teeth, crediting it to his aforementioned state of irritability.

Was this what Yaoyorozu and Jiro had been talking about—the jealousy? Because companionship came so naturally to them, and Shōto didn’t even understand how this whole friendship thing was supposed to work? They made it look so easy. He had never really had friends before—his father had made such a thing impossible for most of his life—and the friendship he had with Yaoyorozu only worked because they grew up together, were familiar with each others idiosyncrasies.

Midoriya had extended the offer to be his friend, and yet, Shōto didn’t even know where or how to begin.

There were many things he wanted to say with no real way of saying them, and his instincts felt like they’d been reduced to a rustworn weathervane, and the very real sense of disorientation had him unsure of what to do or how to act. All of his encounters with Midoriya thus far had been almost entirely coincidental or self-contained to a specific context for a specific reason—like seeking him out for answers on the article.

This was different. Intentional.

Was Shōto supposed to… do something?

It was frustrating. For that reason, he decided to keep things in as simple terms as possible: spending time with Midoriya was nice; talking to Midoriya was also nice.

If Shōto wanted to do those things, then he would do them. If he didn’t, he wouldn’t.
Plain and simple.

That was what compelled Shōto to follow them all the way to the lunchroom, and then outside into the pleasantly temperate Spring weather, too. He lost track of them briefly on the grounds, and just before he’d been prepared to give up and go back inside, a sudden peal of laughter caught his attention around the corner of the building.

After some very quick investigating, Shōto found Uraraka, Midoriya and Shinsō all seated on the ground outside. The tired-looking one of the three was still thumbing through the camera while Uraraka was in the middle of talking to Midoriya animatedly about something.

Not wanting to cut her off mid-conversation, Shōto just sort loomed a bit closer and tried to catch one of their eyes. “...asn’t sure if I wanted to do that, or take up the offer with Gunhead because— o-oh! Hi, Todoroki. I didn’t see you there!”

“Hi.” He said in response, properly stepping forward. “I hope I’m not interrupting anything.”

“Oh, no, just talking about the internships. Nothing important.” Beaming, Uraraka shot a glance in Midoriya’s direction, who was pink-faced but wore a bright smile.

With a nudge, she added, “Right, Deku?”

“Y-yes! I mean, no, you’re not i-interrupting, yes, we were just talking about the internships.”

Unable to resist, Shōto found a small smile sneak its way onto his own lips. “I’m glad.”

It was silent for several seconds after that, Uraraka looking skeptically from Midoriya and Shōto as if watching an intense match of tennis.

Eventually, Shinsō glanced up from the device in his hands. “So, did you need something, or were you just going to stand there?”

“Erm, no, not really. I just thought I’d say hi.”

An unusually smug look crossed Uraraka’s expression. “Oh, you don’t say?”

She finished off the gesture by wiggling her eyebrows in Midoriya’s direction, who let out a tiny sound, something between a groan and a gasp. “Uraraka, don’t.”

“Todoroki,” Uraraka said, smiling pleasantly up at him. “What were you planning to do for lunch?”

Was that… a trick question? What else do people do for lunch?

Unsure of what she was getting at, Todoroki answered, “Eat.”

For some reason, she began to laugh. “I meant—actually, nevermind. Do you want to have lunch with us?”

Before he could answer, Midoriya let out a squeak, and Shinsō raised a brow up at his fellow General Department classmate.

“I think you broke Midoriya.”

“Uh,” Shōto didn’t know if Shinsō was referring to him or Uraraka, so he ignored the comment and answered his classmate. “Sure.”
Sitting down in their shaded spot on the grounds, the four of them formed a sort of awkward quadrilateral, Midoriya and Uraraka sitting immediately next to each other, Shōto sitting about a meter in front of them, and Shinsō had sprawled out to one side, laying out in the grass and returning to fiddling with the camera in his hands.

“Soaaaa…” Uraraka cleared her throat after several seconds of silence. “Are you looking forward to your internship, Todoroki-kun?”

His response was immediate. “No.”

Shinsō perked up suddenly, his eyes dark as they appraised Shōto.

“You would say that, seeing as you got all the best offers. Must be pretty boring when everyone just wants you for your last name.”

“S-Shinsō!” Midoriya gasped at his friend, and Uraraka ran a hand down her face. “I’m sorry about him—”

Shrugging, Shōto just took a bite of his bento rice. “It’s fine. He’s right. Objectively, Bakugō should have gotten more offers than me. There’s no telling how many of my offers were legitimate or just because of my father. That’s part of why I decided to pick him for my internship, actually.”

“O-oh…” Uraraka’s smile tightened, just a tad. “Well… at least you’ve got that to look forward to, right?”

Shōto almost laughed. “God no. I’d sooner drop out of school than do that, but I don’t have that option, so, here I am.”

That made the three others fall silent for a moment. Shōto worried he might have made them uncomfortable, when Shinsō threw his head back and laughed.

“Hey, maybe you’re not so bad, lover boy.”

The conversation continued, light discussion on classes and internships, for the remainder of their lunch break, and once they’d all eventually finished eating, Shinsō stood up and set up the camera with a tripod, turning it outward towards the campus.

“What is he doing?” Shōto asked after Uraraka finished laughing at something the indigo-haired boy said. He used the opportunity to sneak a glance at Midoriya, who had a pen between his teeth and brow furrowed, reading something intently in his notebook.

Uraraka stretched her arms as she explained. “Nejire-chan wanted some different pictures for the print tomorrow, last minute, I guess, and Shinsō does most of the photography work so he’s got to pull together something before five. It’s the deadline for everyone to submit their stuff. Usually, anyway.”

“Usually?”

Midoriya looked up momentarily, eyes glinting before shooting back down to his notes.

“Um, well, this week isn’t going to be usual. We all wrote stuff but we’re going to save the articles ’til next week. At the end of uh, all the articles from last week, there was that little blurb for people to w-write in something to support the victims, like Iida’s brother, by sharing encouraging words or messages.” He cleared his throat. “And so many people actually emailed us that it would literally take up the entire paper to print them all. Actually, more than that, so we tried to pick the best
messages and just print those. It’s sort of like… a ‘moment of silence’, but print-edition?”

“Oh.”

From the side, Shinsō called over, “How is Iida, anyway?”

Uraraka and Midoriya exchanged an unsure look before the former eventually answered.

“Hard to say. We’ve both tried to reach out to him separately, but he insists that he’s fine. I don’t know, Iida’s just sort of private, I think he’s probably still processing everything.”

To that, Shōto didn’t know what to say. He didn’t think Iida seemed to be… processing much of anything, but he also wasn’t very close with the class representative. From an outside point-of-view, it sort of just seemed like he was trying to ignore the problem. Which, Shōto could tell you from experience…

“Maybe the placements will serve as a good distraction!” Uraraka suggested brightly, dropping a fist into her open hand like a detective who just cracked a case. “I think everyone needs a bit of a breather after the emotional strain of that and the craziness of the Sports Fest. You two maybe most of all.”

Midoriya’s posture straightened so fast, he actually sort of jumped in place despite being seated on the ground.

“W-Well, that’s—I mean—I guess that, um, maybe, hah. But we don’t have to talk about that, Uraraka. In fact some of us might even be trying to forget about it.”

“I could use the break,” Shōto admitted, distantly observing Shinsō take pictures but his sight was really a million miles away. Or, well, at least however many miles away the Kisarazu Hospital was housed.

A scoff came from the indigo-haired teen, glancing over his shoulder at them. “Same here. I was looking forward to this shit for about an hour until my insomnia hit over the weekend. I’d rather take the first leg of the placement and just fucking sleep.”

“Well, I for one am really excited about the internships!” Uraraka huffed, a little indignant as she crossed her arms. “I want to get some combat training under my belt, and I think Deku convinced me to go with Gunhead. I think it’ll be a good match.”

“I do too,” Midoriya nodded with a small smile, and the moment made Shōto’s face sour like he’d just eaten a lemon. There it was again—that uncomfortable feeling of… of…

“Fuckin’ optimists,” Shinsō mumbled, loud enough that they could still hear him. “You disgust me.”

Midoriya rolled his eyes. “Alright, well, what do you want to get out of these placements?”

“A will to live.”

“...Are you okay?” Uraraka asked.

With a sigh, Midoriya just waved off her concern and shot Shōto an apologetic look. “He’s just like that. Don’t mind him.”

“I find it refreshing, actually.” Shōto said, using his right hand to push some of his bangs from his
face, cooling his forehead against the warmth of a Spring afternoon. “1-A is a little… chipper, sometimes.”

Puffing up her cheeks, Uraraka did her best to look convincingly angry, and failed spectacularly in the process. “I happen to be a part of the positive vibes in our classroom, you know!”

“Oh, believe me, I know.”

Midoriya and Shinsō both sputtered with laughter. Uraraka, in mock-offense, dramatically turned her head away with a hmmp! “This is the last time I invite you to sit with us!”

“Aw don’t be like that, Uraraka,” Midoriya said, still laughing a little. Shōto felt strangely pleased; he didn’t think he’d ever heard Midoriya really laugh before. It was surprisingly soft, like clouds in a cotton-candy sunset, swirled around a papercone of amusement.

“Yeah, Uraraka,” Shinsō repeated, mimicking Midoriya’s tone. “Don’t be like that, or else Midoriya’s boyfriend won’t come hang out with us again.”

Izuku turned so red, Shōto was actually concerned he was going to spontaneously combust. “SHINSŌ!”

After lunch, Shōto felt a little less stressed about the whole friendship thing, though he was still a little unsure how to reconcile the underpinning of annoyance that fanned the flames of his nerves whenever Uraraka and Midoriya stood too close, or touched too much, or shared little looks. Midoriya didn’t do that with Shinsō, and they were arguably even better friends than he and Uraraka. Did that... mean something? And even if it did, why did the idea bother him so much?

He walked with them until he and Uraraka had to take their leave for the Hero Course hallway. Just before they went their separate ways, Uraraka snapped her fingers together, simultaneously winking to Midoriya.

“I almost forgot to ask, Todoroki! Sometimes we get together on Fridays after the newspaper staff meets and go out for boba tea from this cool place that’s just, like, fifteen minutes away. Would you want to come with us sometime?”

At once, Midoriya’s hands were up, waving so frantically they were a blur. “Oh, no, no, that’s not—you don’t have to do that—!”

Shōto raised a brow. Boba tea wasn’t his favorite, but it was fine on occasion, and he did enjoy their company during lunch for the most part.

“Yes.”

She pulled her phone from her pocket, only to dramatically sigh and put it back. “Ahh, drat, I was going to ask if I could text you the details, but I just realized my phone is dead. Hmm. Oh, Deku-kun, why don’t you give Todoroki your number and you can text him about it instead!”

Shinsō began to laugh, patting Midoriya on the shoulder before turning away without another word, heading for the General Department.
“I’m going to go get settled for class,” Uraraka continued before either of them could really say anything, waving. “Byyyyyeeeee Deku, see you later!”

Shōto watched her go with pursed lips, sliding into their classroom without hesitation. He glanced over to see Midoriya had taken to looking at the floor.

“Uraraka is confusing sometimes,” Shōto commented.

“Confusing. Diabolical... same difference.” Midoriya sighed, the sound taking shape around a humorless laugh. “Sorry about her. You don’t have to come with me—I mean, us, you don’t have to do that. She’s just trying to... I mean, well, of course y-you can come if you wanted, too! I just, I understand if you don’t—”

A bit bemused, Shōto interrupted, “I don’t mind. We’re friends now, right?”

At that, Midoriya glanced up, eyes widening and color flooding his face. He managed something that Shōto could only describe as a wobbly smile, and he had to appreciate the fact that the shorter boy was always so... expressive.

“W-Well... I, um... I guess I can give you my n-number?” Midoriya cleared his throat harshly, and Shōto pulled out his phone and thumbed through it to his contact list. He hit the button to create a new one and handed the device to Midoriya, who immediately almost dropped it.

“Oh, god, I’m so sorry!”

Shōto laughed a little at the way his ears turned pink. “It’s fine. I broke my last phone on purpose anyway.”

“R-Really?” Midoriya said, typing away at the screen and passing Shōto back his phone. “Why would you do that?”

“My old man was bothering me,” Shōto rolled his eyes. “I’m sure that answer is shocking to you by now.”

A sunny smile pulled at Midoriya’s lips, and it was so bright Shōto felt the need to squint. “No, not really. But I’m glad you trusted me enough to share that. It’s, um, nice. Knowing that part of you. Not your Dad, he’s not nice. He’s sort of a huge jerk, actually.”

Shōto was startled into a laugh so sudden it almost made him choke. That was probably the most charming thing Midoriya had ever said to him, and the other boy grinned a little mischievously, evidently proud of the jab.

“A-Ah, anyway!” Midoriya covered his own cheeks with his hands, looking away. “I’ve got to go or else I’ll be late, but if you w-want um, y-you could text me too, so I have your number! You know, so I can s-send you information about Fri-Fri-Fridays!”

Bemused, Shōto nodded and waved before walking away. “Sure thing. See you later, Midoriya.”

Monday’s weren’t so bad, Shōto decided.

In fact, he could even see them becoming something he started to look forward to.
Later that afternoon, Izuku left the final lesson of the day earlier than normal. Ecoplasma had excused him, contingent upon the agreement between departments that Izuku would have occasional special permissions when it came to his responsibilities with his writing and *Go Beyond! Weekly*.

Seeing as it was his default was to run late, Izuku conveniently decided to do the opposite and show up almost fifteen minutes early.

And now, he had nothing to do.

Perhaps he could knock on the door to the teacher’s lounge? Maybe All Might was just killing time waiting for him, and they could start the meeting a little early?

Just as the impulse grabbed him, Izuku positioned his fist over the door and was about to knock when it opened.

“Ah!” Izuku startled in place, jerking his hand back before he inadvertently knocked on the chest of a complete stranger. The man was maybe in his late thirties or early forties, had dark hair and a plain, but not unkind, face. His dark eyes were currently blinking in momentary bewilderment at Izuku, but the confusion was quickly replaced by a polite smile.

“Hello there, excuse me.”

“Naomasa, is something—?” All Might’s voice cut in, and Izuku’s gaze flickered to the gaunt face of his teacher over the man’s shoulder. “Oh, young Midoriya! So sorry, did I miss the start of our meeting time?”

It took his brain a few seconds to process what was going on before he snapped to attention. “O-Oh! No, no, not at all, I was early. I just thought I’d knock to see if you were ready, I’m so sorry. Please, excuse me.”

“No need,” the man—Naomasa, presumably—waved off Izuku’s apology. “I was just leaving, you’re absolutely fine. But this is perfect, I actually wanted to meet you anyway. I am Naomasa Tsukauchi, a detective with the Tokyo Police Force. And you’re the young reporter who is dating Endeavor’s kid, right? Deku?”

In response, Izuku’s face turned so pink it appeared he’d gotten a fever, while All Might sputtered a surprised laugh and covered his mouth when he began to cough.

“No—nononono—you’ve got it wrong, I’m not—”

“Relax, relax! It was a joke.” Naomasa held up his hands apologetically. In the background, All Might was still in a fit of laugh-hacking, and Izuku felt so embarrassed he could have melted on command. “Honestly, it’s nice to meet you. Toshi—er,” he cleared his throat. “All Might—has told me about the repute of your work, but honestly, your articles speak for themselves. They’ve caused a bit of a ripple in the hero community lately.”

Not out of mortification for once, Izuku’s heart skipped a beat. He couldn’t help the shy, disbelieving smile that snuck onto his expression even as he bowed his head out of respect. “O-oh, well, thank you, Detective! Writing for *Go Beyond! Weekly* has been a real honor. I’ve only been able to write so much because I’ve had an amazing amount of support.”

“Well, keep it up, kid. Sometimes heroes have a thankless job, and I know the recent story you
wrote, in particular, really touched a lot of people.”

“T-Thank you.”

Naomasa nodded amicably before half-turning around to All Might. “I’ll see you later. If I learn anything new, I’ll update you as soon as I can.”

“I’m grateful,” All Might said in a low tone, with much less enthusiasm than Izuku was used to seeing from the Symbol of Peace. “Good luck, friend.”

If anything, he sounded almost… sad.

“Take care. And it was nice to meet you, Midoriya.”

With a final, quick bow, Naomasa bid them both goodbye and started off down the empty hallway. Izuku watched him go for a moment, the echo of his hard-tipped shoes reverberating around in his head with unusual sharpness. He couldn’t help but wonder what sort of conversation he’d nearly interrupted, if it had left All Might so…

Izuku glanced into the room, only to find the Number One Hero no longer standing near the doorway, but framed against the daylight streaming in through the window. Tentatively, Izuku stepped into the room and shut the door, sliding into the seat he’d taken last time. All Might did not move, the bones of his arms darkly outlined, harsh and prominent when he gripped the bottom of the window molding, leaning into it.

He looked, Izuku thought, especially skeletal. It was a hard truth for Izuku to admit even to himself.

For reasons Izuku didn’t understand, the silence made him want to apologize. It wasn’t like Izuku had even done anything wrong, but there was something about the tension, the empty sort of quiet, that was not calming. It was unnerving. Like he had intruded upon something, Izuku was an uninvited guest in the company of a family in mourning, or an atheist entering a house of prayer. He could be sympathetic, but the distance between himself and the cause of such an atmosphere of grief was too great for him to make sense.

Despite his growing desire to fidget, Izuku tried to sit still, allowing All Might whatever time he needed to gather his thoughts; it was probably on account of Izuku’s interrupting that he needed the added moment of reflection anyways.

Eventually, after the painful passage of three minutes, All Might heaved a mighty sigh and turned around, a threadbare smile fixed on his features. He folded his arms over his chest and rested his back against the window.

“Forgive me, young Midoriya. Detective Naomasa just delivered some surprising news on a case we’ve been working on for… a very long time, and it simply took me by surprise.”

Shaking his head, Izuku hurriedly said, “No, no, it’s no problem at all. I, um, hope whatever you and the detective are working on is resolved soon.”

At that, All Might’s smile twitched a little wider.

“Me too. Now, before we dive in, I did want to commend you for the powerful article you printed from this past Friday. It was a pleasure to read, and, well—it reminds me of why I became a hero in the first place.”
Izuku’s chest swelled, a breath filling his lungs and pushing out all the disbelief and gratitude he could muster, exhaling into a large, almost goofy smile. He forced down the urge to cry so he could attempt to speak without openly blubbering.

“T-Thank you. I really owe it to you for giving me the push to do something different, All Might! I was so stuck trying to figure out what to write about and then I thought about your advice and—it just felt right. Especially, well, with Iida’s brother…”

The Pro-Hero responded with a low sound of assent, finally dragging himself over to the couch and sitting down slowly, minding his joints. “The news of Ingenium was a blow to heroes all around Japan, even the world. I have no doubt your words might be just the thing someone out there needed to hear right now. A little bit of hope in a dark place can make a world of difference, young man. My teacher taught me something to that end many years ago.”

“Your teacher?” Izuku felt like he could feel sparkles buzzing around his brain just from trying to conjure up an image of someone who could have been so incredible as to teach All Might. If the Symbol of Peace was the result of their teaching, then they must have been truly incredible.

Too curious for his own good, Izuku found himself asking, “What were they like?”

All Might laughed a little, but the sound was tinged with sadness.

“She was an incredible hero, and one of the strongest people I’ve ever known. She was the one who taught me to always smile, in spite of how terrifying or impossible a situation. In a world like this, it’s not uncommon for extraordinary people to save other people, but it’s much harder to save someone’s heart. When people have little hope left to look towards, sometimes… smiling can be that reassurance they need. That small, final step towards letting them know: it’s going to be okay. I am here.”

“Wow,” he barely breathed the words, eyes wide. It took several seconds for that to sink in. “That’s… she must have been an amazing teacher. I can’t even imagine how it must have been to learn from someone like that!”

All Might tagged on his signature smile, still recognizable no matter how sallow his skin or tired his eyes. “Don’t be too impressed now, I’m still your teacher. Speaking of which, enough of all that. Let’s talk about your shadowing this week. You have to turn in your placement decisions by the end of the day, yes?”

“Ah, right!” Izuku nodded once, stern, before diving into his bookbag and pulling out an assortment of folders. “I wasn’t sure what exactly you wanted to talk about, so I took the liberty of outlining my assessment matches in order of preference by category, and an alternative set of organizations based on preference of location. Crossing-referencing the two, I think these matches would be my first picks, but this was just a cursory run-through of my options.”

“Erm… wow, this is…” All Might hesitantly flipped through one of the many folders Izuku presented. “I hope this didn’t take you too long.”

Izuku shook his head. “Not really. I just need to be able to sort through things before I can really understand what I’m seeing, and this approach helped me to compare like-type pros/cons. It’s sort of the same way when I take my notes.”

“Well…” humming the last cadence, All Might scanned the many folders until he pulled forward the one labeled Research Facilities, opening it and doing a quick flip through all the institutes and agencies within. “Based off the assessment Ectoplasm gave me—you should have received the
same one— scholarly research seemed to align most immediately with your interests. And it
certainly seems like a career I could envision you taking in stride. However…”

He flipped the folder closed, and Izuku’s brow knit together curiously.

“An old friend of mine is going to be in Japan next week, doing some remote work in a colleague’s
lab in Shinjuku, and I believe you might have a lot to gain from working with them for the second
half of your shadowing. Their agency isn’t on the list of places that accept students normally—
actually, on paper, I’m pretty sure they’re not even listed as a resident of Japan—so they weren’t
able to extend any sort of formal offer through the school. Would you be interested? I understand if
—”

“Yes!” Izuku blurted, only to realize he just interrupted All Might and quickly squeaked an
apology.

Bemused, the Pro-Hero asked, “Aren’t you going to listen to the conditions? You put an awful lot
of work into these lists, comparing places, and I don’t want that to go to waste if you feel like any
of these were a good match for you.”

“Forget the lists,” Izuku snatched the Research Facilities folder from the table and carelessly
smushed them back into his bookbag. “If there’s someone you think would be a good fit for me,
I’d be honored to work with them!”

All Might leaned forward and propped his chin in his hand, elbow resting on his knee as he gazed
at the window. He wore a fond look as he looked, far-off, seeing something Izuku had to imagine
was much more distant than the Tokyo skyline.

After a brief pause, he continued, “Well, I appreciate you putting your trust in me, Young
Midoriya. I suppose it works out well, as the only real condition I had to share was that I can’t
share much about them. Like I said, on paper, their life appears very different. I promise it’s all for
a good reason, but I’d rather leave it to their discretion to explain once you meet.”

Nodding, Izuku had to bite his tongue to stay the rush of questions that bubbled beneath the surface
of his curiosities. The possibilities were many, and Izuku couldn’t help but run through a list in his
head of all the known sidekicks, partners, and heroes of repute All Might had worked with over the
years—would this person be a name Izuku recognized? Or did the high-profile sort of
confidentiality thing mean he was largely unknown to the hero world?

Not that any of that actually mattered, in the end. Izuku was just overjoyed, welling with gratitude
for the opportunity to shadow someone that was a personal friend of All Might’s…and that All
Might had enough interest in helping Izuku grow that he would even make such a referral in the
first place. It made him want to do a victory cheer like you might after hitting a homerun in a
baseball game.

(Not that Izuku actually knew what that was like. He wasn’t exactly... athletic. But he could
appreciate the mental image all the same.)

All Might must have sensed some of Izuku’s excitement—it’s not like he was vibrating in place or
anything—and he let out a low chuckle.

“I know you must be very interested to learn more, but there’s still the first half of the shadowing
program to talk about. Since you will have an opportunity for research already aligned for the
second half of your program, I think it would be wise to try to get in some experience with some
sort of writer or journalist. Part of these meetings are supposed to be with the interest of helping
you become a better writer, so I’d be interested to hear what your research turned up in that respect.”

“Oh… right.” Izuku blinked, returning to reality. His gaze fell to another folder, thick with his personally performed research. “Umm… well, my second highest matches were for journalism and different news broadcasting stations anyway. I’m still not super sure about that, though… I don’t really want to be, like, in front of a camera or anything? But I guess it would be interesting to see how some of the more investigative reporting is done.”

All Might nodded along as he explained. “My experience in the media world is more limited, especially lately, as I’ve tried not to spend too much of my time in hero form in front of the cameras with the off-chance I might not be able to hold it. So, my contacts might not be the newest, I could try to put you in touch with Daikaku Miyagi—are you familiar with—”

Izuku flattened his hands in front of his mouth, unable to stop himself from some amount of fangirling. “Yes! Of course, he’s the lead anchor for the Hero News Network! It’s all my Mom and I watch, your interview with him after the fight with the Full Th—”

“Easy, easy,” All Might coached, patiently, and Izuku clamped a hand over his own mouth before facepalming with the other, embarrassed to have interrupted All Might again. “As you pointed out, Miyagi is an anchor, not necessarily an investigative journalist. I’ll make a call and see if he could make any recommendations, if you’d like, in the HNN. Again, this is entirely up to you, you’ve gotten some good offers from other major networks, too.”

Chewing the inside of his cheek, Izuku considered the option—he had gotten a regular offer from HNN as well, but it would be really cool to utilize All Might’s connections to meet with some more specific people. Even if it wasn’t Miyagi, it could still be a unique experience.

While he considered, All Might added, “Keep in mind that Miyagi is a little more, erm, old school than some of the younger reporters. Present Mic was trying to explain to me some of what this social media drama is involving you and young Todoroki, and I wasn’t able to really keep up…”

“Not you too!” Izuku groaned, leaning forward in a sort of crumpled-seated-fetal-position, trying to hide his face in his knees. “I’d gladly take old school over anyone who has a Twitter. Please.”

A stunted laugh answered him, and Izuku snuck a glance to see All Might lean back against the couch. His hands were folded in his lap, but he looked severe once more. “This brings up a good point, actually. I haven’t had a good opportunity to talk to you about this… Let me start off by saying anything between you and your friends—girlfriends, boyfriends—that is your business. I’ll not bring up the situation between you and young Todoroki, or anyone else in your life, unless you want to talk to me about it... But I also can’t in good faith pretend not to have caught some of the conversation you had with Endeavor during the Sports Festival.”

An uncomfortable hand reached into Izuku’s stomach and twisted his insides all around, causing him to glance up shamefully from his half-folded position.

“Right… that…” Sighing, Izuku gathered the shredded remains of his dignity and leaned up, facing the Symbol of Peace even if he was too embarrassed to meet his steady gaze. “I hope what I said wasn’t inappropriate. I don’t know how much you heard, but… I just couldn’t stand letting him talk about Todoroki like—like that. All of the stupid drama, that’s my fault, and I understand why Endeavor is frustrated with him for not using all of his quirk—I mean, obviously, I yelled at him in front of the entire world because I was frustrated—but like, it’s not my place or his place to force Todoroki into doing something he doesn’t want to do, you know? I just wanted Todoroki to… to make the choice on his own. To know it was okay to not use his quirk, if he was really
doing that on his terms, but denying it because it was like denying his Dad was still giving Endeavor power over him. Does that… make sense?”

All Might appeared thoughtful, plucking up a wistful smile by the time Izuku finished explaining.

“I think it was admirable to have stood up to Endeavor. I don’t think you said anything inappropriate. You were honest, and it was unfair for him to have put you in that position in the first place. However, there was still something about the encounter that… concerned me. The threat of your expulsion.”

Clenching his fists, Izuku glared at his own lap, unsure what to say. It’s not like he could deny the threat was made, and even if he wanted to, Izuku had been too afraid of the possibility it could become real to have really thought about it much at all. Out of sight, out of mind—he hoped they were empty threats, that someone with such a title as the Number Two Hero in the world would not be cruel enough to act upon such words.

“All Might is… a powerful individual,” All Might began, sighing. “And as much as the faculty admire the work you’ve done, they are also not stakeholders in Yūei. Were those on the school board convinced that you posed a harm to the school’s reputation, it would be a hard fight to win. Not impossible, but difficult. Unfortunately, in a world such as this, money talks.”

Izuku didn’t even try to hide the fact that he cringed.

“All Might has a monetary investment in Yūei, but he also uses that as a bargaining chip on occasion. There was a meeting held with the stakeholders of the school this morning to discuss your enrollment… and he was not subtle in his position.” All Might sighed, and guilt squelched around Izuku’s stomach—Principal Nezu and All Might had taken such a chance on him, and instead of just staying quiet he decided to pick a fight with the Number Two Hero… he felt ashamed, too much to meet All Might’s eye.

“However, your article on Friday also could not have been more perfectly timed. I vouched for you, as well as Ectoplasma and Present Mic, and that in tandem with the message of your recent publication was, I believe, enough to stay Endeavor’s attempt to have you removed from Yūei. At least, for the time being. So long as you continue to uphold the integrity of your column as promised in our first meeting with Principal Nezu, there shouldn’t be any sort of case he could try to make otherwise. But Midoriya, if he tries to engage with you again, it is in your best interest not to respond. Come find me. Find someone, a staff member, and let us handle it. Do you understand?”

Throat tight and heart deeply seated in the confines of his stomach, Izuku could only nod.

They talked for a little while longer, ironing out some details—Izuku agreed to take the offer through All Might’s contact with NHH rather than another news station, and he just about died when All Might gave him his personal cell phone number.

“I’ll send you some more information about the second half of the shadowing once I talk with my friend, so just keep an eye out for a message.”

Classes were to be dismissed for the day in another minute or so, and Izuku quickly thanked the Symbol of Peace and said goodbye, but his thoughts were not so neatly collected as his many folders and deposited into his bookbag.

He just didn’t know how to feel about the situation with Endeavor. The fact that All Might had to get involved at all made him want to apologize, but for what? He wasn’t sorry for telling Endeavor
to let Todoroki make his own decisions; he wasn’t sorry for encouraging Todoroki to use his power on his own terms, either.

Izuku had dealt with bullying quite enough in his lifetime to know when to back down or when to apologize. This wasn’t wasn’t one of those cases. He just knew that, even if he couldn’t explain to himself how he did. The whole amalgam of feelings he had equated to one, intuitive resolution.

No matter the consequences, Izuku was not sorry for doing the right thing.
Shōto begrudgingly accepts his Endeavor's guidance on what it's like to be a Pro-Hero, and Izuku's shadowing placement is turning out in a way that is to be expected (read: terribly)

Oh, and Shinsō's here, too.

**Part two of the Hero Killer arc!**

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*No matter the consequences, Izuku was not sorry for doing the right thing.*

Okay—squished in the back of an elevator that was full of enough people to probably break at least five fire codes with the near-suffocating smell of stale cigarettes clogging his throat, doing his best to ignore the three competing conversations that were happening on cell phones around him, balancing no fewer than six coffees in a drink carrier, and trying to fight off the edge of a headache—Izuku *was* actually pretty sorry about one thing.

For the record, he didn’t blame All Might. He didn’t even blame Miyagi-san, who had been more than willing to make a recommendation for Izuku with someone who he called Hoshi Aoki on the fifty-second floor. She was young and whip-smart, a star reporter on their investigative journalist team.

It took Izuku about twenty-five minutes on that floor to learn that Aoki-san stopped working for HNN about two years ago.

The department heads, unwilling or unable to deal with an “unsupervised kid,” sent him down to the thirty-third floor, where he was then introduced to Shirai-san, and then Tajima-san, and then finally, after much complaining from one office to another, Izuku was *assigned* to Kodama-san.

Yoshi Kodama was the Associate Director of Editing for the reporting that went into HNN’s World News, which broadly covered politics, heroes, and other current events that were outside of Japan.

He was also about fifty years old, of a wide build that and a face that was oddly reminiscent of a rottweiler, smoked cigarettes in his office, and insisted on calling him Deku with the same derisive tone that Kacchan used when Izuku had first taken on the nickname ten or so years ago.

> “*First rule of the game—heroes who pick shitty names get shitty reputations. Writers who pick up pseudonyms are no different. You pick the name, you wear the title. Get used to it.*”

…So, it was safe to say the shadowing was a pretty far cry from the model guidance of Aoki-san that he’d been promised.

Izuku watched the numbers of the lift creep up a few at a time to stop again let off some people and make room for others. And then do it again. And again, *and again.* The forty-eighth floor was his target destination, and it felt like he would probably be ready to file for retirement by the time he actually got there.
He had stopped wearing the pass from Yūei that had his name on it after the first two hours, unable to count the number of times people stopped him or glared at him. It was almost as bad as being caught in the halls of Yūei without Shinsō or Uraraka around to help ward off people, but this was worse, because they were all older, professional, and surprisingly intense. Most of the people he encountered seemed tired and overworked, so when they discovered he was that kid reporter Deku from Yūei, they rather shot him dirty, ‘you’re-making-a-joke-out-of-my-profession’ looks, or they did what reporters tended to do best.

They questioned him.

They tested, prodded, and probed with absolutely zero subtly, pumping him for information—largely on Endeavor and Todoroki, which was especially uncomfortable. It got to the point where the constant badgering was bordering on harassment, and that was when Izuku decided to ditch his pass and school uniform jacket.

The elevator released a quiet, diaphanous sound, bringing him back to reality. The forty-eighth floor.

Izuku awkwardly squeezed his way from the back towards the front, running into—so sorry—just about—excuse me, sorry—everyone—sorry, pardon me—but he at least managed not to spill the burning hot coffee. There was grumbling in his wake as the double doors closed behind him, and Izuku felt a little bad, but there wasn’t anything he could do about it now.

He checked his phone for the number of the conference room at which Kodama-san had said to meet, and Izuku sighed before taking off in search of 48-C05.

Honestly, the worst part wasn’t the way Izuku was generally being treated, or his (thankfully) very temporary boss—that was all, fine. Not great, but he could tolerate it. The real issue was just… this time was supposed to be critically important, enough to warrant three days out of regularly scheduled classes, and Izuku couldn’t do a single thing about the fact that he was wasting it. The least he would have asked for was to just watch people write, or call contacts, or conduct an interview or just—something useful.

Izuku had, besides all of the running around it took him in the morning to actually get assigned: removed staples from a stack of memos, waited outside Kodama-san’s office for him to finish yelling at someone with the door closed, shredded some documents that had been locked inside a completely random desk drawer in an unoccupied office, and been sent to fetch coffee for a staff meeting.

It was, quite literally, the lowest of lows. The whole thing could have even been funny if it wasn’t his life.

When he happened upon the long glass walls of the conference room he’d been seeking, Kodama-san was speaking to someone—a young man with glasses, blond hair and sharp features—and demonstrating his quirk.

And that, at a minimum, was the one thing Izuku would get out of this unfortunate shadowing situation; if he couldn’t actually gain any useful career experience, he would at least document all the new quirks he encountered.

Elbowing open the door, he shuffled over to the table and sat down the drinks. Kodama-san spared him a quick glance, grunted “sit over there,” and gestured a chair in the corner. Izuku was happy to oblige.
The room steadily filled with people over the next five minutes, some shooting Izuku puzzled
looks, but he paid them no mind. He had his notebook out, squinting as he watched Kodama-san
use his quirk, scribbling down as many details as he could.

The power appeared to be something minorly illusionary, which in itself was rather interesting.
Illusionary quirks were rare and tended to be harmless, just on account of their inability to affect
enough people to be weaponized, or they lacked enough power to warp one’s sense of reality
convincingly. Between his hands, which were spread about a half-meter apart, it looked like he
created something that reminded Izuku of a snowglobe, a world beyond a glass, some sort of visual
distortion that was startlingly realistic. The scene was of some urban area he did not recognize, or
at least, could not discern from so far away.

It could be light manipulation rather than illusionary, Izuku mused as Kodama-san brought the
meeting to attention, but that would probably require some sort of light absorption and
redistribution quirk, rather than just manipulation—there wasn’t enough naturally occurring light in
the space between his hands to have distorted the light to reform into so stable of an image. What if the—

“Shh,” a woman at the end of the table nearest him turned, pressing an index finger to her lips.

Izuku mouthed a quick sorry and made it a point to keep his lips tightly closed for the remainder of
the meeting. At almost the same moment, Kodama-san snapped at someone.

“Yeah, I know what I said, Hito. Don’t be a smartass. Pay attention and we might actually meet the
deadline this time, understand?”

Sighing, Izuku just prayed that next week with All Might’s research contact would work out.
Compared to this, it’s not like there was anywhere to go but up.

The first day of Shōto’s internship began virtually no different than any other day. He went
through his morning routine, showered, ate a small breakfast, brushed his teeth. Except, when he
slipped on his shoes, he waited for his father at the door.

A driver brought them to the office instead of taking the train to school.

Loathe was he to admit it, but Shōto recognized from the moment they stepped foot into the
building that he had made the right decision in choosing his internship placement. With his
metaphorical mask on, Enji Todoroki became an entirely different person, and Endeavor had not
acquired the title of the Number Two Hero for no reason.

There were already people hard at work by the time they arrived. Shōto just sort of followed along
while his father went through a morning debrief with those sidekicks who worked the overnight
shift, sat in a joint meeting between the Police Force and the new provisional guidelines that were
being set into motion by law enforcement in the wake of the Hero Killer’s reign of terror.

The administrative taskwork took up most of the morning, but before lunch, an alert was sent out
notifying all nearby agencies of a villain attack along the edge of the prefecture. It was something
simple—a bank heist—and the report sounded bland enough that Shōto was unsurprised when his
father allowed another agency to respond to the distress call, but, to his surprise, they did go to the
It was annoying, because as much as Shōto wanted to hate it, taking an opportunity see the paramedics and sidekicks dealing with the clean-up was actually pretty helpful. Where to take anyone who was injured, protocols to observe, the involvement of different levels of authorities depending on the district—it wasn’t the most glamorous of first days, but it was genuinely useful to see some of these mechanisms in action, to better appreciate the many wheels that were operational during any incident such as this. All he had to do was effectively tune out his father’s more seething or arrogant commentary, and it was about as first-class educational experience as they come.

By the time the day was over, they had ended up on the west side of Tokyo, and they turned into one of his father’s joint field offices with some other Pro-Hero agencies instead of returning to his office on the other side of the city.

Shōto was… begrudgingly satisfied, he would say, with his first day of his internship. But, tomorrow, they were going to do more hands-on quirk training. Shōto didn’t know if the prospect made him excited or nauseous. Perhaps both.

“We’ll have an even earlier start in the morning, and there’s some paperwork I have to take care of here,” Endeavor said as he produced some cash and sat it on the edge of his desk. “I don’t think you’ll have anything to gain just by watching me write this out, so go ahead home and get some rest.”

So that was how Shōto ended up commuting alone, riding the Seibu-Shinjuku line and taking it as far as Takadanobaba. Rather than transferring to another line and then walking some amount home, he opted instead to secure some kind of rideshare the rest of the way, whatever was nearest and available.

The sky was darkening by the time he stepped off the platform, Tokyo exhaling the remnants of its diurnal accolades with the fall of night, street lamps and urban vibrancy whisking the city into its second wind. Those who hadn’t already commuted home were wandering their way into bars, habitues of the darker world, so imagine Shōto’s surprise when he spotted the closest thing he’d met to sunshine incarnate standing on the very same platform.

An unkempt, green mop of hair was facing him, the accompanying body turned the opposite direction, towards the wall that listed arrival times of different transit lines. Shōto started momentarily, thoughts chugging along a little more slowly than normal with his particular exhaustion, before his brain started to put together some sense of a reasonable puzzle.

Curious, surprised, and perhaps just the tiniest bit excited, Shōto approached him, carefully edging into his field of vision so as not to startle him.

There was a pronounced slump to his shoulders, and from the slight view of his profile Shōto could glean at this angle, he thought Midoriya looked… sad. Well, maybe tired was a better word—worn down.

It was jarring, because anytime he could really recall seeing Midoriya, he was smiling, or flushed, or covering his face with his hands, or wearing that fierce determination that Shōto found both unsettling and uplifting, somehow.

Carefully, he cleared his throat. “Midoriya?”

It almost startled him when Midoriya looked up; a light jump, a shift in attention, a flicker of
surprise.

Midoriya’s expression went from defensive to something akin to recognition, and within the span of a single second, his face transformed from looking haggard back to his usual cheerful self. Returned was the bright smile Shōto had only recently come to associate with him, restored in full, and it made a weird sort of pressure twist in the space between his ribs to see it in real time. It was… nice. To know that he was the one who elicited such a response from Midoriya; that he was responsible for evoking something so…

Cute, his mind provided, like it was the most natural and obvious thing in the universe.

That—that was new.

“Todoroki!” Midoriya breathed, a happy, startled laugh slipping out of him. “W-what are you doing here?”

It took him a moment to respond. He was still trying to sort through the confusing, knee jerk reaction his mind had invoked less than a second ago.

“I’m sorry,” he shook his head, forcing himself to shove whatever that was off to the side for now. “It’s been a long day. I was just heading home from my internship. My father was responding to the minor incident earlier in Suginami ward and I went with him.”

“Oh! Wow. That’s amazing! Are you… erm…” Midoriya coughed, averting his gaze slightly. “Enjoying working with him? I know that you’re not… erm…”

Shōto adjusted his shoulder strap as he considered how to respond. “It’s fine. My old man is who he is, and while that may include a lot of things I disagree with, it doesn’t change the fact that he is the Number Two Hero. It was… informative.”

“I’m so glad to hear that,” said Midoriya, the words spoken with such disarming honesty that Shōto could not help but believe he meant it. The way his smile widened and eyes jumped to an even brighter shade of green beneath the dull street lamps—it was almost disconcerting. “Even if you don’t see eye to eye, it’s great that you’re still able to work with him.”

How did he stand to be so… open? It was like a door that read vulnerability, something tightly latched for most, had the locks taken out in Midoriya’s case, the handle removed, propped open at all times for whoever wanted to come and go as they pleased.

Unsure of what else to say, Shōto smiled slightly. “Are you here for your internship as well?”

“Well, it’s not so much of an internship exactly as it is just shadowing,” Midoriya nodded, scratching his cheek. “The General Department does things a little differently. But, yes. I was just figuring out what time my transfer was supposed to get here…”

Shōto did not miss the way Midoriya’s posture deflated, just a bit.

Curious, he asked, “Are you not enjoying yourself?”

“It’s, ah…” A pause, Midoriya biting his lip. “It’s… great! Yes. Really interesting. I’m learning a lot. I’ll only be doing this for three days before I do something else for the other half of our shadowing program. Too…bad.”

Raising a brow, Shōto had a sense that Midoriya was not being entirely truthful, but he didn’t want to push the issue. If there was a reason he would be dishonest, Shōto assumed it was a good one.
Instead, he glanced at his watch, and again at the times outlined on the wall. “It’s pretty late. Did you want to share a ride home with me? I’m planning on getting an Uber or Ola from here.”

“W-What?!” Midoriya loudly questioned, looking so scandalized you’d have thought Shōto had just propositioned him. “N-No, no way, it would be really expensive to get to my house from here! I don’t want to impose. But that’s so nice of you to offer, but—no. No, I’ll wait on the train! It’s only going to be…”

Some of Izuku’s conviction melted away when he glanced to the arrival times again. “Um... twenty more minutes.”

“I don’t mind,” Shōto stated, pulling out his wallet, thumbing through the bills within. “I won’t force you if you’re uncomfortable with the idea, but it’s not like it’s my money. My dear Dad gave me more than enough… which way do you live? This should probably be enough for us to both get home.”

Midoriya visibly blanched. “Todoroki, t-that’s, like, 20,000¥?!?”

“Yes?”

For reasons Shōto couldn’t begin to conceive, Midroyia threw up his arms in front of his face to block himself entirely from view, but he conceded with surprising ease. “...Okay.”

That was how Shōto ended up in the back of a regular sedan, the interior dark and smooth with a gunmetal trim and tinted windows, Midoriya quietly situated in the opposite seat of the back. The driver was nice enough and kept the pleasantries to a minimum (which was how Shōto preferred it), and played a light radio show over the sound system.

After a few minutes of silence, Midoriya eventually wrestled his bookbag open and produced the familiar journal Shōto recognized from the Sports Festival. He opened to a specific page and prepared a pen, Shōto watching with interest as he flipped through some notes, ink heavily imprinted on the pages, some more than others but sufficiently packed with information on all manner of heroes.

“How did you develop that?” Shōto wondered out loud, gesturing the notebook. “The journal, I mean. What made you start to just… write out everything?”

Midoriya didn’t answer at first, blinking down at the pages for several long seconds. “I’m not really sure how, it just kind of… happened. I wanted to be a hero for as long as I could remember, and when I was, er, told by my doctor that I would never manifest a quirk, I guess I just needed something to do to keep my mind occupied. It’s sort of silly now…” he spoke the end with a laugh that lacked any trace of real humor. “I used to imagine that if I could understand everything there was to know about heroes, maybe I could still become one.”

“Oh.” Shōto’s gaze fell to the page he currently had open, in which there was a detailed drawing of two hands and all sorts of accompanying scribbles in the margins. He didn’t really know what to say, but felt guilty for having brought it up.

“But it’s okay! Really. I’m…” Midoriya’s lips quirked up at the corners, even as he kept his gaze on his notebook. “I’m okay with the way things have played out so far. I didn’t picture this would be the path I’m on, but I’m not upset that I’m here.”

A question flitted on the tip of Shōto’s tongue, but he wasn’t sure if it was appropriate to ask. He explained as much when he began to speak.
“I hope this isn’t rude of me, but… is it difficult for you to watch other people with quirks around you, or people like myself or Uraraka work towards becoming heroes? When it’s…”

“Not really possible for me?” Midoriya finished plainly, and Shōto nodded. He didn’t seem particularly upset by the question, but it did drag his gaze from his notes to the city outside, watching it roll by from the window.

“Sometimes. Sometimes I’m really jealous of everyone at Yūei for being so extraordinary. But, most of the time, I’m just… grateful.”

“Grateful?”

“Yeah! It’s something I realize more and more as I write, but I could have spent all that time wishing I was something more, you know? Or I could just… be happy with what I do have. I still want to help people, and I think we put too much emphasis on the fact that only heroes have the right to save others. Sometimes you can save someone just by doing something nice for them, or stepping up, or speaking out. I can’t make a lot of difference on my own and it’s not like I’m going to be helping in disaster relief zones or anything impressive, but I try to think now that if I can reach someone with my words, then maybe… maybe that’s enough for me.”

Midoriya’s voice tapered off towards the end, distantly watching the city move around them, and Shōto took the opportunity to quietly observe him as different tonal patterns from Tokyo’s nightscape painted his face in lightning-quick splashes of color.

It all felt like things were out of order, for them.

Shōto felt like he had a sense of who Midoriya was before ever really seeing him, at least in the way that felt superficial and automatic to the first time you meet someone. Instead, Shōto had seen into his personality first, by necessity of the words Deku had written, and he’d gotten so stuck in that frame of mind he’d never really considered going back and revisiting the whole picture, the easy things that most people evaluate first about a person. He felt like he knew Deku before he had ever met Midoriya, and it was sort of strange, necessarily belated, to try to synthesize the idea of him, his personality and keen attention to detail, with the person who sat across from him in the back of the car they were sharing on their way home.

Freckled, fair-skinned, but not unusually pale, wild green hair, and a few inches shorter than Shōto, Midoriya was…

Cute, he supposed. His earlier intuition was entirely right in that respect.

It had just never really occurred to him to… view Midoriya in such a way. At least in the terms that Shōto saw the world, he’d always sorted Midoriya into a few distinct categories: a fellow student, someone who had other people’s best interests at heart, and someone who was incredibly motivated. He’d never really thought about anything about him other than that; perhaps it had been on account of the article, and how uncomfortable it had made him feel to be appraised by someone he didn’t know.

But, he knew Midoriya, at least better than he had before. And he knew him well enough to recognize that he had a nice smile. A really nice, kind smile, one that he wore often and easily.

There was also that shocking quality that lived in his eyes, catching under the light in those circumstances in which he was most determined—Shōto found himself wondering if there were other moments they glittered like that, too. Or is it the inverse? Is Shōto the only one who has seen him when he was so fiercely sure of something?
Did other people see Midoriya this way?

Did other people see Midoriya… this way?

Just like that, all at once, with the full force of being hit by a bus and dragged out by a rip tide, it occurred to Shōto how spectacularly he did not like that idea at all.

He thought about those people he’d overheard in the cafeteria on occasion; or about the people who posted things on Twitter about how they would date Deku in a heartbeat if they were him; or the way he an Uraraka were always so connected to each other.

It made him abundantly uncomfortable—downright angry—in fact, to imagine anyone else imagining Midoriya in that way.

Why?

Yaoyorozu’s voice popped into his mind, unwarranted.

_I believe you’re jealous, Todoroki._

Was that what this was? Or was he just being protective of their new friendship? How was he supposed to know?

Before he could think much further on the subject, Midoriya finally glanced back from the window, face still alight with the city passing by around them. “Sorry about that, I was just thinking about… something. Did that answer your question?”

“Uh, yes.” Shōto managed after a second or two. “I don’t think you need to worry about making an impact on other people, though. You’ve already done so much in such a short amount of time for Yūei and… for me, he considered adding, glancing at his left hand. “…and I think you’ll be able to save some people that even other heroes can’t save.”

A bright pair of eyes blinked at him, surprised, glittering, luminous. He beamed at Shōto.

“Thank you, Todoroki-kun. I’m… just, thank you.”

The Ola dropped them off at Midoriya’s apartment complex first, as it was just a bit nearer than Shōto’s home. Midoriya thanked him again and again for his generosity, and for talking with him and spending the time with him. Shōto was a little puzzled by that; did he not realize Shōto had enjoyed himself? That Shōto was just as grateful to have not sat in a lonely car for a long drive across the city when he got to spend it instead with a… a cute, green-haired, stuttery boy? Midoryia was interesting. Reactive, expressive, and Shōto found him much easier to talk to than most other people. There was just something… earnest, about him.

Privately, Shōto accredited it to his eyes. They were really something, and since he’d first really noticed them, they were hard to miss.

Bright and curious, just like him.

They said good-bye, and Midoriya waved from the curb all the way until they turned back onto a main road. It was gearing up to be a long three days for the first leg of his internship, but he couldn’t find it in himself to be disappointed in his choice, from interning with his father, to taking the train, to opting for a ride-share. His night had ended with much more… more warmth than he had anticipated, a warmth that had little to do with his left side.
The second day of the internship passed much like the first, except instead of going out into the field, Shōto accepted his father’s help on better controlling his fire and they moved to one of the special facilities Endeavor had built to withstand extreme heat. He had a long way to go until his manipulation of the element would reach a more manageable level, but he had to start somewhere.

It took the entire day, breaking only briefly to eat lunch, and Shōto was thoroughly spent by the time he got home in the evening. He was so tired, he barely lamented the fact that he wasn’t able to take the Seibu-Shinjuku line again, dismissing the off-chance that his night would end with some more well-meaning smiles or laughter.

By the third day, Shōto had started to adapt to his father’s rhythm of work. Mornings were for more tedious tasks that required high-level thinking, like meetings, briefings, or performing administrative tasks. Towards lunch time, they would shift into something more hands-on, but his father’s decision today when Shōto returned from getting a quick lunch at the cafe across the street was not exactly what he anticipated.

“Get ready. We’re going out.”

“Yeah, okay.” Shōto took a deep breath. “Where to?”

“If the Hero Killer is following his pattern, we know where he’ll show up next… and we’ll be there to stop him.”

That gave Shōto pause, at least enough to have him falter for just a moment. The Hero Killer—as in, the crazed serial killer with over fourteen deaths and twenty-three seriously wounded heroes? That was... quite a step-up from the recovery of the bank heist and quirk training.

His old man didn’t seem phased, or to even notice, Shōto’s hesitation. He entered the main atrium of the offices, loudly declaring, “We’re taking a work trip to Hosu City.”

**BONUS:**

All things considered, Hitoshi thought his shadowing placement could have gone a lot worse. He had taken a risk in accepting the offer from one of the premier Underground Hero agencies, because there was no real way of knowing with whom he might end up working. It was by Midoriya’s suggestion he ended up doing two, three-day sessions of their shadowing, rather than an extended single placementship—*this is a really good time to try new things, we shouldn’t waste the opportunity!*—so that was how Hitoshi had ended up for the first three days with an underground hero agency, with a plan to spend the second half of the program with a more standard agency.

His quirk was better suited for situations in which the opponent didn’t know not to respond, which
made the first option more attractive. At the same time, underground agencies tend to come with their own set of difficulties, least of which is just the hit to one’s paycheck. Ectoplasma-sensei had framed their lessons leading up to the Sports Festival about the monetary and fiscal constraints that went with such a profession (which was, in Hitoshi’s slightly cynical opinion, intended to discourage he and his classmates from becoming Pro’s like those in the A & B courses). Being a hero is as much about, well, heroism, as it is maintaining a brand. All Might’s brand was easy and consistent—American colors, big bold themes like justice and freedom—and when cities and industries were damaged or destroyed in a villain fight, or, godforbid, people were killed, there was all manner of wrongful death lawsuits or destruction of property that went into the business.

No one in their right mind would sue All Might, it was like social suicide. On the other hand, Endeavor had a legion of lawyers ready to fight any battle for him.

Underground Heroes didn’t have these same luxuries, and had to be more careful as a result. They didn’t get to brand themselves, couldn’t really be anything but the confines of their work. It meant accepting less money, less notoriety, and less direct benefits and security that went into larger, standard agencies.

Hitoshi wanted to be the kind of person who could brush off those things like they don’t matter, but he was nothing if not realistic. Midoriya’s article made a good point—heroes were people too, and at the end of the day, a job is a job. If he wouldn’t make enough money doing it, then what was the point?

It was a conundrum, certainly. He knew his quirk was better suited for underground work, but the money of standard Pro-status was undeniably attractive.

Then again, the mere idea of actively building a brand for himself made Hitoshi want to take a four-hour depression nap. He wouldn’t call himself an introvert, necessarily, but more of a “I-hate-most-people”-vert, which made his tolerance for anything bombastic and showy very small.

Then again again, a private, tiny voice in his head also wanted to use the platform that Pro-Hero fame would provide to... well, be someone that he didn’t have as a kid. It fucking sucked, being told you’d be a villain with a quirk like his, that everyone questioned his motives at every turn, that having his kind of power was somehow wrong or evil. It had been perhaps through nothing less than spite that Hitoshi had made it this far in the first place, to prove all of those people wrong, but... but he cringed when he thought about his time in grade school, alone. Seeing someone on the news or hearing stories about someone who wasn’t all gung-ho like All Might or Endeavor, it was the exact sort of role-model he’d been missing.

And yeah, okay, it is pretty big-headed of him to think he could be great enough to be that role-model for some kids someday: anyone who believed themselves great enough to become a hero had to be at least a little narcissistic. Was it really wrong of him to want to be able to deal with the drama of publicity so he could at least promote some positive change, though? It felt like a dumb reason in comparison to the money or benefits, but Hitoshi couldn’t deny the stubborn voice in the back of his head that wanted to give the middle finger to everyone who doubted him, loudly and publicly, while encouraging people out there with quirks like his that they didn’t have to conform to whatever label society thrust upon them.

Anyway.

That was how Hitoshi ended up shadowing at the largest underground hero agency in Japan, located conveniently in downtown Tokyo. He dressed in plain, nondescript clothes and didn’t really do shit to fix his hair or anything like that; Midoriya had seemed really nervous about what he was supposed to wear to his thing at the HNN, but Hitoshi didn’t really care. It was likely they
would have him change into something anyway.

After some brief paperwork in a surprisingly normal lobby—it sort of looked like a retirement home, if he was honest—he was told to wait for his mentor to come out and get him. It didn’t take long, although it was a genuine surprise to see Aizawa-sensei standing in the doorway with his trademark accessory—eyebags—and a large thermos of what Hitoshi assumed was coffee.

“Aizawa-sensei?” Hitoshi stood, a little taken aback.

The man shrugged, drinking from his cup and gesturing Hitoshi to follow him. “Just Aizawa for the next three days. Or Eraserhead if you really insist.”

“Alright then.”

It was a silent, uneventful walk to the man’s “hero” office, which was about as decorative as Hitoshi would have suspected. There were exactly zero things in the room besides mountains of paperwork, some of which looked suspiciously like student papers, and a few licenses on the wall that verified Aizawa’s identity and authority to work as a hero.

“Sit,” the man said, and Hitoshi complied while Aizawa took his own seat across from him at his desk. “Listen.”

He said nothing, which prompted the 1-A teacher to continue.

“My husband and I’s anniversary is tomorrow, and he was pretty upset that I decided to do this, so first thing I have to tell you is that tomorrow we will be meeting with him for lunch and I really can’t do anything about it. Sorry.”

Hitoshi blinked. “Uh.”

If the teacher assessed Hitoshi’s confusion, he didn’t comment. “I would normally take these six days as a vacation since school is essentially cancelled for the teachers. I like vacations, and I don’t like kids. Don’t make me regret this.”

A little brush of his insomnia hit him, and Hitoshi rubbed at the tired bags beneath his own eyes. He liked that the guy didn’t dance around the subject and got right to the point.

“Got it. I won’t get in your way. What will I be doing?”

“We’re going into the field. I’m going to be working. You’ll be watching. I am not going to hold your hand throughout this so if you have questions, ask them.”

That sounded just fine by Hitoshi. In fact, he didn’t think he could ask for a better match.

During the first day, he learned both very little about his teacher and a whole lot about underground heroics. The entire industry felt different. Stranger, somehow, in that they operated in broad daylight and no one stopped to talk to them, meeting a contact who had a lead on a case in the lobby of a hotel instead of behind some back alley. Somehow, this felt infinitely seedier, like parading around with a deep secret itching the back of his throat and every person who walked by had no idea.

They talked very, very little. After a few confusing visits to different places with no real context for what Aizawa was doing at any given point, Hitoshi eventually found himself asking the questions that burned his tongue, sparingly and carefully, but the man always gave thorough answers.
Small talk was nonexistent. Honestly, Hitoshi was rather enjoying himself.

The next morning, Aizawa introduced him to an impressive backstock of support weapons that were just—there, in the facility. Unlike with most Pro-Heroes, who would have support materials grafted especially for them, there was a wide variety of “multipurpose” support items that anyone could use. This included the capture weapon Aizawa wore daily as a scarf, and it surprised Hitoshi to realize it hadn’t been specifically designed for him.

“Support gear is what it is. It doesn’t have to be flashy. If you insist on engineering it accomplish one specific thing, you can sometimes limit yourself to other possibilities that you didn’t originally consider. Doesn’t mean some support gear is bad, just, you can make a lot of different things work for you if you’re in a bind.”

Hitoshi nodded, picking up one of a half-dozen of the same fabric capture weapon, hands lingering. After a thoughtful pause, he responded, “Did you just make a pun?”

“I refuse to answer that question,” the man answered flatly, turning around and heading for the door. “We’re going to lunch with Hizashi, but he’s not your overseeing your placement so you’ll still be expected to call him Present Mic-sensei. Understand?”

“Yes.”

“Good. Unfortunately, he also has one of my students as an intern, so I apologize in advance for… well, I guess you’ll see.”

That, Hitoshi noted, was not the most reassuring of notes on which to leave the conversation, but he ran through the 1-A roster in his head and considered who they might be sharing lunch with. His best guess was the earphone jack girl, since their powers seemed similar.

Oh, how he wished it had been her.

Aizawa and Hitoshi waited at a four-person table in a small, surprisingly modern cafe, accented by lots of glass panels and smooth marble, no prices on the menu, and the exact amount of aesthetic bullshit that Hitoshi would expect to see trending on Twitter. He’d never set foot in a place like this normally, but what was he supposed to do?

As if reading Hitoshi’s thoughts, Aizawa muttered under his breath, “I didn’t pick the place.”

“Heyyyyyyyyy!” A bright head of blonde hair strolled in, styled back into a tip complete with glasses and a big smile. “Shōta! Sorry we’re late.”

Aizawa said nothing, but he did stand up and give his husband a quick peck on the cheek. In an effort not to stare, Hitoshi studied the guy who had come in after Present Mic-sensei, equally blond, and, if his memory served correctly, equally loud and annoying.

Denki Kaminari. He lost to Shiozaki in the Sports Festival.

“Hey!” the boy greeted with a blinding smile. “You’re that tired looking guy that’s from the General Department!”
Is that how other people saw him?

“Yeah.”

It could be worse, he supposed. He could be seen as that short weird writer kid who is dating Todoroki, which never failed to make Hitoshi laugh seeing as Midoriya could barely stammer through a single sentence in front of the guy, let alone date him.

“Don’t tell me, I can remember your name. I have a great memory.” Kaminari explained, sitting down across from him as Aizawa and Present Mic-sensei took their seats beside each student.

“Is it… Shinsō?”

That surprised him, but he just raised a brow slightly to mask the semi-shock. “Yeah.”

“OH YEAH!” Present Mic-sensei clapped his hands together, shouting loudly enough to scare a passing sever. “Thank you BOTH for agreeing to tag along today! It’s hard for us to get time together that isn’t just work, work, work!”

Kaminari nodded readily. “Of course, man! It’s the least we could do, seeing as you both took as on as interns.”

In a parallel monotone, the other half the table answered, “No.”

“W-What?” that made the younger blond shake his head. “Er, are you guys… related then?”

“No,” Aizawa insisted, squeezing the bridge of his nose with the patience of a saint… or a high school teacher, for that matter. “The General Department students aren’t interning. It may seem like semantics to you, but the nature of their program is essentially different than yours. I explained this in class, Kaminari.”

Present Mic-sensei flapped a hand between them. “Don’t be so hard on the kid, Shōta! He’s doing his best.”

“Can I stay with you once this is all over?” Kaminari stage-whispered to Present Mic, who beamed proudly at the boy.

“You’ve got a lot of prospect, kiddo! I have no doubt Shōta will drag every ounce of potential you have out of you… whether you like it or not. But, yes, you’re welcome to come to me if he bullies you.”

Hitoshi snorted, and Aizawa merely shook his head and opened up the menu on the table. “I don’t bully my students, Hizashi.”

“Mhmm.”

After a brief silence while they looked over the menu, Hitoshi mindlessly stared at a spot on the far wall and waited for their server to come take their order. He was turning around the idea of different Support items in his head, scrutinizing the two across from him. They looked like neon billboards dressed up in leather and spiky hair; there wasn’t enough money in the world someone could offer Hitoshi to dress up like that. Would that be mandatory if he did decide to pursue something more standard, less like the underground path? Aizawa’s line of work continued to seem more and more appealing.

Beside him, the two adults began to discuss something—well, it was more like bickering, really—
so Kaminari took that as an invitation to strike up a conversation.

“So, do you uh… like music?”

God help him.

“Who… doesn’t like music?”

“Uh, I dunno, probably someone?” Kaminari smiled, confused. “I’m just trying to be friendly, dude.”

It was hard to keep himself from cringing. “Trust me, I have more friends than I can handle already.”

Something about what he said must have triggered Kaminari’s interest, because he raised a brow and smiled with intrigue. “Oh yeah? What about a girlfriend? You’ve got a face of a popular guy, yeah. Hmm. Popular with the ladies… I can tell, trust me.”

*Can you? Because I’m fucking gay, dude.*

"No."

“Aw, dangit. I was hoping you could hook me up with some sweet General Department girls that were *oh so longingly jealous of your own courtship,* they would come running into the arms of yours truly!”

“Is that really the best way to get a date?” Hitoshi couldn’t help but ask, doing little to hide his disdain. “Even if I did have a girlfriend, and even if she did have single friends who would settle for anybody, are you really okay with just being someone’s *anybody?”*

Surprisingly quick, Kaminari’s lower lip began to tremble. Fuck. Why does everyone Hitoshi knows cry so damn much?

“S-Shit, I wasn’t serious, dude.”

The blond sniffled and wiped his nose. “N-No! It’s not that. I just… I appreciate you being real with me upfront. You’re cool.”

“What kind of fucking friends do you have?” he scoffed. “At last befriend people who are honest with you.”

“I-I mean my friends *are* honest, I think, they’re just—*ahh,* so serious! You know? All focused on becoming heroes and stuff. Training this and homework that. Five minutes in and you’re dropping knowledge bombs like some philosopher.”

“One, never, *ever* say *knowledge bombs* again.” Hitoshi ignored the fact that the other boy laughed, bright and airy like somehow what he said was *funny.* “And two, why do you think *we’re* here if it’s not to become heroes?”

“Uh, we’re here cause these two lovebirds invited us on their date!” the other grinned, jerking his head to Aizawa and Present Mic-sensei. Aizawa looked like he was praying for the sweet release of death while his husband loudly explained everything he and Kaminari had done so far in their whole *one and a half days* of hero work.

“That’s not what I—forget it.” Hitoshi prayed for patience he did not have, unconsciously
mirroring Aizawa’s forlorn expression and crossing his arms over his chest.

From an outside point of view, it would have looked like the two students were sitting next to future versions of themselves.
Placementships: Trouble in Hosu City! (pt. 3)

Chapter Summary

Whether it’s by a series of really good luck or really bad luck, Izuku, Shōto and Iida experience something that will effectively change everything.

Part three of the Hero Killer arc!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Izuku wasn’t much of a weekend person—he loved the rest and appreciated the opportunity to relax as much as the next guy—but it wasn’t like he was really a party animal. Most of the weekend he spent with his Mom, helping around the house, doing chores, or, more recently, working on his various writing or school projects.

That said, he had never been so happy it was Friday night. Not because he had any grand plans or was going to take on the town or anything like that; he was just glad to put this short chapter of his life behind him.

He was so close. Just another thirty minutes and he’d be on his way home.

But, right now, Izuku was riding down an elevator. Again.

He was alone this time. It was a completely different elevator, in a different building, in an entirely different ward, but at least Izuku could go home once this stupid lift hit the stupid ground floor.

Kodama-san owed a favor to someone in some other department, and they cashed in the I.O.U conveniently twenty minutes before Izuku was supposed to leave. He was literally standing in Kodama-san’s office, presenting the forms for him to sign that demonstrated that Izuku had completed his three day program, when the call came in.

Kodama-san said Izuku could have his signed paper back as soon as the favor was complete, even took the added step to fax it to the front desk of HNN distribution building, so he had to physically be there to pick it up if he wanted to receive credit for the past three days.

The stupid task itself amounted to some sort of last minute stupid delivery that needed to be “in the hands” of the stupid distribution center lead by 20:00 Friday evening, or else they wouldn’t have enough to make it to print for the stupid weekend edition of HNN or something—honestly, Izuku didn’t even care about the details.

Anything to get him home and put the wasted three days behind him.

Once he was finally free of the HNN, Izuku stepped out of the building and looked around at the calm faces of passing strangers. Many were like his own—thrilled to be free of work and school and related responsibilities, breathing a little easier until they had to resume the thrum of the everyday come Monday. It felt like a sign of things finally looking up, a pleasant, uneven breeze
fluttering through the street. However cautiously, Izuku allowed a small, optimistic smile to work its way on his expression.

That was only his first mistake of the evening.

He heard a sound unlike any he’d heard before—it was a scream, half-strangled by an agonizing cry that was guttural, piercing, and positively bloodcurdling; less than human and more than beast, it made Izuku’s hair stand on end as he and about fifty other people turned. The world felt a little like it was moving in slow motion, absorbed in the horror of the first of the surrounding skyscrapers to have the glass blown out.

Perhaps twenty floors up of a building (which, Izuku couldn’t help but note, seemed eerily similar to the one he’d just exited), a massive cannonball shot through the windows with the force of a jet plane, leaving ripples in the steel monolith with a central rupture mark, a gunshot through glass. Blood patterned every jagged, misdirected shard of glass that rained into the streets below, and the source of the explosive force that crashed into the middle of the street landed just shy of a bus.

Full of people.

Screaming, terrified, people, and, oh, god, that could have been so bad—what if it hit the bus, or —no, no, stop. Izuku felt bile edge up his throat at the turn of his imagination, nausea held back only by the skin of his teeth. It wasn’t like he had to look far for a distraction, easily transfixed by what was happening not even fifteen meters in front of him.

If only it had been a cannonball like he originally thought; at least then, the madness would have already peaked. Instead, Izuku felt his blood run cold, limbs frozen, heart constricting in his chest when he realized that the thing he was looking at… it had features, like… a person, but...

Four eyes, exposed brain, gangly, muscular limbs, pale silver-blue skin...

“Nomu?”

It was only when someone fleeing ran into Izuku’s shoulder that he finally snapped out of it.

Without a single moments extra hesitation, he ran.

His feet pounded the pavement, following the many others fleeing the scene, putting as much distance as possible between himself and the Nomu. With eyes wide and desperate, the added confusion of people shouting and buildings shaking and glass shattering and—were those explosions?—it was hard to make much sense of anything. All Izuku knew in that moment was to follow his instincts, a deeply-rooted one that pushed his legs away, committed foremost to survive.

Through the madness, Izuku’s adrenaline had spiked and helped him to not completely lose his ability to focus, and he managed not to trip inconveniently for once in his life, avoiding running into poles or people or parked cars. He recognized a face heading the other direction after stepping to get out of their way, his brain needing just an extra second to supply a name to go along with the memory.

It was Manual: the Regular Hero, and he was sprinting in the direction of the growing hellstorm. ...Alone?

Some nearby hero was corralling people towards an emergency shelter, but Izuku had stopped moving. “Kid, what are you doing, move it!”

It was a nice gesture, but Izuku didn’t even hear him. In as little time as it took for his heart to stop
beating, all his senses had ground to a halt, the world around him knocked off kilter. Behind his lids, the neurons of his brain were popping and sparkling like fireworks, a lightshow of names and sights and dates and facts and figures—

Nomu... multiple quirks, low brain functionality, associated with the League of Villains—but in Hosu City? Why? It's where the Hero Killer was last seen... are they connected? Manual’s Agency is here—it’s where Ingenium was attacked—Hosu City—where Iida’s internship...

“Oh, no.”

In that single, too-long moment of pause, all of the screaming and crashing and sirens had been drowned out by the panicked cadence of his thoughts, whirring around his head. It was as if someone had struck his spinal cord like a tuning fork, nanoscopic reverberations chasing the fear from his chest down his limbs and out through his fingers and his toes.

“No, no, no...”

“Kid!” the Pro called out to him again, effectively snapping Izuku from his reprieve. “Come on!”

Naturally, Izuku proceeded to do the exact opposite as he was advised, spinning away and bolting down the nearest, darkest thoroughfare he could find.

He had zero proof. Nothing but suspicions and gut feelings. But this was where the Hero Killer had been reported as last seen, and now Nomu... Nomu’s brother, or something, was here too? Whoever it was, they looked too much like the one he had seen on the news after the USJ for it to be a coincidence...

Izuku followed the streets as they led away from the madness, maneuvering down each increasingly seedy alley he came across. In an attempt to sort through some of the confusion, he tried to visualize a map of the ward from above, divided into four distinct parts. It was something Ectoplasma had taught them in a recent lesson: standard operating procedures for rescues were facilitated with the point of incident acting as a central point, and the surrounding areas divided by cardinal locations. The “neighboring” directions of the larger city would then be used as immediate evacuation zones.

So, if an attack happened in the north or south end of a ward, people would be evacuated to the east and west; an attack in the east or west meant evacuations to the north and south.

In this case, the havoc was largely contained in the west end of Hosu City, which meant evacuations would lead into the south and north.

Izuku mapped out Hosu City in his head, counting off the directions one by one.

Disaster in the west.

Sanctuary to the north and the south.

If the Hero Killer’s patterns were anything to go by, isolated alleyways, far away from highly trafficked area, that meant...

Bloodshed in the east.

Izuku ran as fast as he could, ignoring the pain in his lungs and burn in his calves. This was too important—if he was wrong? Great. He’d much rather be wrong. Pulse racing, the roaring sound of blood in his ears was a painful crescendo with no end in sight, and it made it terribly challenging to
try to focus and keep running and try not to overlook any of the openings between buildings or down small sidestreets... But if he was right?

He wasn’t willing to take that risk.

Maybe there was some sort of universal tipping scale, a ledger of circumstance written in the stars; he had to imagine that in an abstract, cosmic sense, there was something that documented the horde of good fortunate that Izuku had surely earned and never used. It sat, just waiting to cash itself in when Izuku most needed it, and after only a few minutes of searching, it seemed he was finally being rewarded with just a little bit of luck.

*There!*

What Izuku beheld was a sight more menacing than even the ruodiest of ruby moons, a silence to shame any siren song, a darkness that would only draw an idiot with a death wish into its’ hopeless orbit.

He saw the blade first.

Sharp, scabbed and caked with blood, it pointed to two equally disturbing sights towards each end: the pommel, wielded by a figure of tattered cloak and bandages, a godless smile on their face; the tip of the blade, two young adults, one slumped against the wall and the other facedown on the damp pavement.

Izuku’s first thought was to strategize, which went admittedly poorly. He had no time, no weapons, and exactly one point of reference when it came to *fighting villains*… if you could call running down an alley screaming and trying to wrestle Kacchan away from the Sludge Villain *fighting*.

It may not have been the best experience to go by, but… it sort of worked last time, right?

A catch of light in the steely edge of the sword reflected a tiny beam down the length of the alleyway, and Izuku realized he didn’t have time to question his decisions.

His bookbag and conscious both sat heavy on his shoulders, and he took off running once again.

“*STOP!*”

With all the power of his unimpressive fifteen year-old muscles, Izuku reared back and hurled his bag towards the terrifying vision that was seconds away from sticking a blade through the facedown victim’s neck.

He didn’t hit the mark—not by a long shot—but the sudden disturbance and unexpected projectile was enough to at least force the villain back. Izuku didn’t need to win, or even fight. All he had to do was *enough of anything he could* to keep these two alive.

Breathing so hard he could barely think straight, all he knew to do was stand in front of the bodies on the ground and spread his arms and legs out as wide as he could, trying to put himself between them and the villain.

“S-Stop!” he repeated with as much force he could muster, the impact dimmed by the raggedness of his exhales. “I... won’t let you hurt them.”

Of course Izuku had to be right, this one time. It was Iida behind him, and an added glance to the side evoked a visual of one of the pages, scribbled somewhere in his journals:
Hero Name, Native. Quirk, wind whisperer, minor manipulation of gaseous properties and ability to 'throw voice' into wind, communicate loudly or quietly from long distances. Can be used to eavesdrop long distances by summoning directional winds—longer distance, less accuracy. Approx. 175-180cm, 30 years old, male.

Iida was the first to say something. “H-How?! What are you doing here?”

“Later! We need to get to the street,” Izuku muttered off to one side. “Pros will be able to find us there, can you move?”

Voice unbearably small, Iida admitted, “I-I can’t. Since he cut me, his quirk… Midoriya you need to run! Don’t get involved.”

“What, Iida that’s—”

Louder, his friend had never sounded less like himself. “This has nothing to do with you!”

The figure across the alley grinned in near-lascivious interest, ruby eyes glinting beneath the moonlight and effectively cutting their argument short.

“So you’re Midoriya?” They asked, smile sharpening around the edges, not unlike razor blades peeking between his teeth. A long, malformed tongue unfurled from his lips, swiping up and down the weapon he had drawn. “But that also means you’re Deku, isn’t that right?”

Izuku was a little too taken aback to think of any kind of sensical response. “I’m—how—you... know me?”

“Who doesn’t?” the other asked, reaching into his shredded robes and producing a worn but neatly-folded piece of paper, stained by ink and blood both. As he unfolded it, Izuku’s heart hardened to stone, sinking and dragging the conviction from his shaking arms. It was easily recognizable, even if Izuku couldn’t read the text at that distance.

The Hero Killer jammed his finger into the printed text of his article from the Sports Festival.

“You’re the only one who gets it!”

“Listen to me—!” Iida rasped. “Stand down, Hero Killer! Let him leave. He has nothing to do with this!”

Not even a stone’s throw away, Stain’s upper-lip curled into something of notable displeasure, but Izuku hardly even noticed. His attention was preoccupied, trying to keep his eyes steadily trained on those of the Hero Killer so as to not draw attention to his hands; with fumbling fingers, Izuku tried to type out some sort of message behind his back with his cell phone.

“Midoriya, you have to go. This is my fight, and he will kill you—”

“And you’d already be dead if I hadn’t shown up! That’s not a fight, that’s giving up.” Izuku snapped, throwing a serious glare over his shoulder as he tucked his phone away.

It hurt to hear Iida sound so broken. “B-But he’s mine... I’m the one who should take him down. This has nothing to do with you.”

“If you really believe that… then why are you even trying to become a hero in the first place? You should know that the power you’re given isn’t something to be just thrown away, Iida! There is no you vs. him, it’s us vs. them. Good vs. evil! If I left you to die, that’s not how friends work, and that’s... not how heroes work either. It’s a hero’s responsibility to save people, even if they don’t
want to be saved! So that’s why…” Izuku swallowed, trembling and making no effort to hide it. “That’s why I’ll protect you.”

“Bold words,” Stain praised, and Izuku tensed, anticipating something—he barely blinked and the Hero Killer had become a blur, unbelievably fast and quiet in his movements. Izuku hadn’t even had time to flinch before Stain was in front of him, blade pushed up against the flush curvature of Izuku’s throat.

The metal was still warm from the last blood spilt.

“You’d sooner stand here and try to fight me then run away? How… interesting. So you’re not all talk.” The Hero Killer’s eyes narrowed, crimson slits darkening to the deep, unsettling color of blood. “But your friend is right. I have a duty to kill these two so-called heroes, and it would be… a waste, to kill you. I’m sure you understand.”

Gotta stall for time... keep him talking... Izuku prayed to every god he could fathom that his text made it through to someone, or enough someone’s, that they would figure out what was happening and send help.

“What are you talking about?” Izuku managed with gritted teeth, trying his best not to move. “I don’t... understand you... at all.”

“Don’t be humble,” the Hero Killer whispered, “you may be the only one who understands, who sees the way these so-called heroes for what they really are. They run around and try to pledge their false reigns of courage and bravery, defiling the word ‘hero’. Consider me a fan, Izuku Midoriya. We share the same vision, you and I. How they’ve reduced the title to nothing but a commodity. Another stepping stone to fame and money to line the pockets of their false ideals.”

Chest rising and falling rapidly, Izuku felt like he was probably way too close to dying to be arguing with the guy prepared to kill him, weapon flirting with the skin over his pulse, but he couldn’t just let that go. “Wha—no, I never said… Heroes don’t have to be… perfect. Everyone has the ability to become a hero if they just… just try to do the right thing—”

“But doesn’t that make it worse? That everyone could choose to be a hero, but not everyone does.” A ghost of a smile flitted over the Hero Killer’s expression, as if the words were music to his ears. The sight, so close, made Izuku’s skin crawl. “Take your friend here. He pledged to kill me, you know? To murder me in cold blood for what I did to his brother. Is that something a hero would do? Everyone may have the promise of becoming a hero, but those who misuse that ability must be purged. For a better society.”

“Y-You’re wrong. Everyone… anyone is capable of being a hero, no matter who they are… where they come from… their quirk. Saving someone, helping someone in need… it doesn’t make the bad elements of a person go away, but it does make a difference! People risking everything for the good of others… that isn’t a commodity, and it’s… it’s collective action that gives us a world where most people are safe from harm. By murdering people who are trying to be the best heroes they can be… you take away the possibility that they could ever become better.”

“And yet, it prevents them from becoming worse.” Izuku’s breath caught when the villains sword finally broke his skin, a shallow, thin slit that hugged the line above his veins. It drew only the thinnest trail of blood. Honestly, it was more disconcerting than it was painful, a responding pins-and-needles sensation breaking over Izuku’s skin.

Tainted fire backlit the Hero Killer’s eyes, dangerously red and glittering with twisted conviction as his gaze remained fixed to Izuku’s throat. “Your tenents are rooted in truth, but they are still...
naive. Green as you. You’d best be careful—the world turns its back on people who are too honest. One day it will do the same to you.”

“That’s… That’s not the point, it’s not that—what I….” The words were falling out of him, flayed a little around the edges, syllables sounding off to the soft plops that matched the dribble of blood that had started to run through his dress shirt. “It’s never too late for someone to stand up for the right reasons. It might even be… be the bravest thing someone can do when they’re committed to one way of thinking and recognizing that’s w-wrong. Accepting change, wanting to grow… that might be the most heroic act of all, and you’re killing that possibility.”

If looks could kill, Izuku was sure Stain would have slit his throat with the sharpness of his gaze alone. He seemed seconds away from doing that anyway.

Instead, he uncoiled his tongue once again, removing the blade from Izuku’s neck, who couldn’t help but stagger backwards, reaching for his throat and cradling the line of his wound. After putting a bit more distance between them, Izuku inched closer to Native since he was nearer to Stain of the two, and he spread his arms out again.

“I don’t care that I can’t fight you—” Izuku spat, his borrowed courage making his voice sound much more confident than he felt. “I won’t just let you kill them because you think it’s the right thing to do.”

“As much as I admire your tenacity…” the Hero Killer’s tongue swept down the length of their blade once again, but this time, Izuku’s world tilted.

An atrophy unlike any he had felt before gripped his limbs, legs and arms crumpling like Earth’s gravity had suddenly tripled. He fell face-forward, having barely enough motor functionality to catch himself.

“You are getting in my way. Your intentions, at least, show true conviction—most everyone these days are all talk. You are, as your writing suggested, worthy of staying alive. It’s been a pleasure.”

Without skipping a beat, Stain flipped their sword over in their grip and began to approach Iida. Horrified, Izuku could hardly crane his neck enough to watch the killer advance; it felt like his bones would snap if he tried to push himself any further.

“Wait—wait!” Desperate, Izuku reached after him, his mind an urgent spiral, trying to think of anything else he could say, some other way to stall. If he liked the article on the heroes then…?

“Hero Killer! If you…agree with what I said—” Izuku struggled to hold himself up, but it was at least enough to have him stop, weapon poised neatly above Iida’s throat. “Then… uh… you can’t do this. You can’t, please, it’s not right.”

Stain merely scoffed, turning his attention back to Iida. “Enough talk.”

Come on, move, move, do something, come on. Izuku begged his stupid body to get up, to throw something, to think of something convincing enough to make him stop—

The moment before steel met skin, Izuku’s heart pounded so hard it hurt. He was prepared to squeeze his eyes closed and turn away, unable to watch one of his best friends be murdered right in front of him—Izuku was prepared to do that, but he didn’t.

In retrospect, he was glad for not closing his eyes, because if he had so much as blinked he would have missed the conflagrant light that burned spots behind his lids, turning the damp air of the
alley blistering.

What? But how—?

Izuku squinted, blearily trying to discern what was happening, squinting through the radiant waves of heat that twisted the air like blacktop pavement in midsummer, supersolar and distorted. What he saw convinced him that Stain’s sword must have been imbued with some sort of toxin, or a hallucogenic or… or something! Because there was no way this was happening. It seemed so real, but it didn’t seem possible—?

“Midoriya...” A voice sighed, managing to sound exasperated and amused and serious all at once. Izuku’s jaw dropped because there was only person who sounded like that, who said his name with such perfectly decisive, emotional-emotionless was… but it wasn’t possible, no—how could he be here?

Convinced that he was imagining things or had completely lost his mind, Izuku still couldn’t help but stare in wonderment at the imaginary-Todoroki that stood at the opposite end of the alley, waving his imaginary-phone in Izuku’s general direction.

“You really need to provide more information in a time like this. I was almost too late to stop this guy.”

[APPROX. 3 MINUTES EARLIER]

Shōto stopped, midstride, midbreath, mid-holyfuckisthisreallyhappening-thought. In his pocket, his phone buzzed, and the device felt nearly electric against the fabric, somehow sending a shock straight through to his bloodstream.

Generally speaking, Shōto was not one to monitor his phone too closely, so it was really an incredible stroke of good luck that he even bothered to check the message. There was just something about that moment—chaos tearing through the ward, trying to keep up with his old man and one of his sidekicks, sirens wailing into the night sky—it was madness all around him.

Comparatively, the little vibration in his pocket had just seemed so spectacularly… small. Out-of-place.

Shōto couldn’t help but check.

Izuku Midoriya (20:09):
♀ Current Location

He had exactly four questions, each one flipping by in his head like post-it’s in a stop motion comic.
1. Why him?
2. Why now?
3. Why here?
4. And, most importantly, why \textit{him, now, here, of all times}?

This was the absolute \textit{wrong} time to be worrying about Midoriya, he had to—

\textit{``Shōto! Make haste!''}

\textit{``I—''}

But even his knee jerk reaction told him there was something deeply strange about the situation. Midoriya’s internship wasn’t even \textit{in} Hosu City—what was he doing here? During a crisis, no less? And why send a message without any context, just a location? Midoriya, for all his stuttering and rambling and strange habits—he was never \textit{nonsensical}.

There had to be a reason.

It was either a mistake, or something was wrong.

He was grateful for following his instincts, leaving his Dad to deal with the urgent attacks and relaying where he was heading to a sidekick, because, as it turned out, something was very, \textit{very} wrong.

\textit{``You too, Todoroki?''} Iida asked, his voice strained in a way that suggested he was in pain.

\textit{Not good.}

Nearby, but still much too close to the target for Shōto’s comfort, Midoriya looked up, eyes wide and confused. There was a smear of blood down the left side of his throat, and it didn’t do much to assuage Shōto’s concerns.

\textit{``How did you get here…? Wait!''} the green-haired boy visibly balked. \textit{``Hold on—you’re using your left side?!''}

It took everything in Shōto not to sigh. Now was not really the ideal time for this conversation.

\textit{``I saw you sent your location, and you’re not really one for cryptic messages,’’} he explained, digging his right heel into the ground, eyes focused on the Hero Killer. \textit{``So I figured you needed help.''}

A thin layer of frost spread across the cement, in part to force the enemy further back, but mostly to get better control of the area. Once his immediate surroundings were covered in ice, Shōto created a declining slope that managed to glissade Native and Midoriya both, depositing them as gently as he could manage behind him, nearer to Iida.

\textit{Better.}

Shōto glanced over his shoulder, and while he was genuinely worried by the very \textit{defeated} sight of his class president and the amount of blood Native had lost, Midoriya was his primary concern. He didn’t even have any gear to protect himself, no equipment, no weapons, no quirk—and then there
was the trail of blood down the side of his throat. Did he try to fight? Was he out of his mind?

Later—worry about that later.

“Everything’s okay,” Shōto promised. “The Pro-Heroes will be here any minute.”

Invoking the left half of his power, Shōto unleashed a cataclysmic tempest of flames, trying to get a measure of the opponent’s speed. He dodged it without hesitation, which was disappointing but not surprising; no way a crazed killer earns a reputation like his without having the skill to match. Shōto was trained to be on par with many Pro-Heroes, and he could tell that this wasn’t going to be easy.

“T-Todoroki!” Midoriya said, and like Iida, it sounded like he was struggling to speak. “You can’t let that guy get your blood. He… he controls his enemy’s bodies by ingesting it! Don’t let him get close to you!”

Clenching his jaw, Todoroki nodded imperceptibly and secured his footing. “That explains the blades—”

The words were barely out before a one such dagger was flying towards his face, just grazing the skin of his cheekbone beneath his left eye.

“You’ve got some good friends, Ingenium,” Stain praised, leaping into closer range, and Shōto staggered back a bit with the unexpected shift.

Fuck, he’s fast—with barely a second to spare, Shōto managed to bring up a pillar of ice along his right side to block the incoming swing of a switchblade. The attacks were unbelievably quick, not lacking in strength to make-up for his speed. It was on par with Bakugō’s explosions, and Shōto hardly had a chance to react before noticing the sword swinging above his head, catching a glint of moonlight in the dull blade.

Two offensives in a row had forced Shōto back, weighed heavily into his right side and forced to pivot onto his left, leaving him easily unbalanced.

“Todoroki, move!” Midoriya called out, just fiercely enough to elicit a sense of déjà vu from the events of the Sports Festival.

A feign?

No sooner did the thought occur to him then was a rough grip reaching forward, fingers clawing at his chest to drag him in. A horrid, hot breath of air exhaled over his skin, damp and stringent. A sinewed tongue lashed out, attempted to take the blood from his cut cheek, but Shōto’s body responded with defensive instincts, erupting with flames, chasing off the close contact by the barest of margins.

From behind, Shōto could hear Iida, his voice distant over the roar of flame and blood in his ears.

“Just… stop it. Why are you doing this? His fight is with me!”

Shōto had half a mind to tell him to shut up, but he couldn’t break focus for even a second. If he did, he had little doubt that in those precious moments the villain would find a way to make an opening. It was taking everything he had just to hold his ground.

“I’m the one who should stop him,” Iida continued, the words pained and uneven as they dragged over the back of Shōto’s mind, those corners of his consciousness that could afford to pay
attention. Everything else was a stream of movements, actions and reactions—counter, backpedal, offensive surge, sidesweep of ice, block—

“I inherited my brother’s name. He’s my responsibility…”

Shōto followed through with his evasive maneuver’s momentum and released an open-handed burst of fire from his fingertips, scorching the walls and ground without apology. The flames were still difficult to control, like matches to forest brush, and it felt like he was constantly toeing the edge of losing control like he had in the stadium, when Midoriya had pushed him last time.

“You’re Ingenium now? Strange,” Shōto deigned in response to Iida’s claim. Forcing a series of cryonic pillars to block a frontal offensive, Shōto added, “The Ingenium I knew never had a look like that on his face.”

Right now, Shōto could not bother with using gentler words or being sensitive to Iida’s contrived sense of revenge, no matter how suredly he recognized it, no matter how entirely familiar it was to hear words spoken in such a way. With such resentment. Shōto understood, better than he cared to admit, but this wasn’t just about Iida—it was about keeping Midoriya, Native, and himself alive, too.

Exhaling a breath of chilly air that had settled in his lungs, Shōto muttered in afterthought, “You’ve got a dark side… guess my family isn’t the only one.”

“Blocking your field of vision to keep me away? Rookie mistake,” taunted Stain, easily cutting through the thick slabs of glacial walls Shōto had put between them.

“Come and get me then!” he responded, unwilling to show even a moment’s weakness—until a sharp, eviscerating sense of white-hot pain flared down his left forearm, a lightning-quick pair of daggers embedding themselves deep into the muscle there. A fresh spray of blood decorated his clothes and feet.

He was thankful for the adrenaline, because while it felt about as agonizing as pressing live-wires into his nerve endings, the pain was only secondary to Shōto’s awareness. The need to protect the three behind him was more pressing than the pain.

And, the sudden, incoming attack was pretty high on his priority list, too.

I can’t dodge, there’s not enough time, if I misstep the villain could hit Midoriya or Iida—

Except, Midoriya wasn’t behind him anymore. “Todoroki, look out!”

A force of weight pushed him aside, and Shōto barely managed to catch himself from stumbling completely into the wall.

Exhaling raggedly, Midoriya was on his feet again, standing just shy of where Shōto had been, sleeve torn down his arm and fingertips dripping blood.

“That was too close,” Midoriya admitted, almost a giggly kind of breathless as he gripped his arm. While Shōto wanted to fucking backhand him for doing something so reckless, he decided to file the violent impulse for later. Backhands could and would be given freely once they were all for sure not going to die.

Instead, Shōto made it his focus to put distance between them and Stain once again.

A carefully aimed column of fire drove the villain back, at least for just a moment.
“I don’t know why, but I can move again,” Midoriya explained, stepping back a bit when Shōto returned to the center of the width of the alley. “His quirk has some kind of limitation.”

Shōto would indulge this conversation, so long as Midoriya wasn’t trying to jump in front of any more swords. Figuring out the villains quirk would help to at least even the playing field.

“A time limit?” he questioned, at the same time grinding his molars together with so much his force it made his temples hurt; it was a measure to keep from crying out while he tore the two switchblades from their cozy home in his arm before tossing them off to the side, immediately following the agonizing sensation with a rush of fresh flames, managing to perform only a minor cauterization. It wasn’t enough to stay the bleeding entirely, but at least Shōto wouldn’t suffer from severe hemorrhaging or go into shock—not yet, anyway.

“Maybe,” Midoriya continued, looking at him with blatant concern. “But I was the first one freed and the last one immobilized. I have a few guesses why: It might have to do with how much blood is consumed, but, I doubt that… Unless he was straight up drinking the other’s blood, he wouldn’t have been able to get much more than mine. It could be limited by how many people his quirk is affecting, or it varies based on the type of someone’s blood.”

“Oh, so you figured it out, huh? Bravo.” A maddened flicker settled deep inside the killer’s eyes, a prickly smile splitting their face. “You really are a brilliant one, aren’t you? This is why it would be such a shame to kill you, you could spread our message with such power.”

“Don’t say—it’s not ours!” Midoriya retorted, tone a mix of fury and indignation. “You’re insane if you think this is the right way to fix the world!”

Stain seemed less than impressed. “If you can’t see the difference between these ‘heroes’, can’t admit the waste of the space and resources they impose upon real heroes, then you’ve been blinded by a rose-tinted reality.”

Adding threat to the words, the villain readied one of his many weapons, likely about to throw one of the smaller blades tucked in his mangled wares.

Shōto stepped forward on instinct, holding an arm to block Midoriya from Stain’s line of sight.

“...Todoroki?” he questioned, his voice small and tinged by surprise.

“What is it you even want, Hero Killer?” Shōto demanded, temper rising with the increasing pressure of the situation. “What do you hope to accomplish by killing them?”

Midoriya stepped a little closer, enough that Shōto could glean his rolled-up sleeve. It revealed, thankfully, a shallow wound from his earlier stunt in pushing Shōto out of the way.

“He wants to make a better world,” Midoriya explained, voice carefully even. “But he can’t. You can’t, Hero Killer! You can’t make a better world by killing people. There are better ways to fix something that’s broken then destroying it. What you want is reinvention, but you can’t just force that—this isn’t a machine or a video game, you can’t just reset everything. Maybe this society is broken or bent out of shape, but wanting to make the world burn isn’t going to make it stop. That’s not how things heal.”

Shōto had to believe Midoriya was smart enough to know that inciting the rage of a serial killer was not going to earn him any added points if they all ended up dead. He hissed, “What are you doing?”

Without looking away, without breaking the tenable intensity that practically radiated off him in
waves, Midoriya answered: “Buying time. We have to hold until the Pros get here.”

For a beat, Shōto considered arguing—no, you should get the hell out of here and try to take Native or Iida with you—but he knew taking the time to have that conversation would only leave them more vulnerable. They would have to stand united on this if they were going to have a chance.

“I have a plan.”

Out of the thousands of questions and even more doubts Shōto had in that moment—are you out of your mind, do you have a death wish, what the hell is wrong with you—all of the uncertainty faded with just the briefest of glimpses in Midoriya’s direction.

One look, and that was enough.

It was the same way he had looked during the Sports Festival. The same one that Shōto couldn’t unsee everytime he closed his eyes. Familiar, soulfire green, the sight of that gilded viridescence would never fail to make Shōto unreasonably breathless no matter the given situation.

It was both electrifying and terribly frightening to see—because it wasn’t just confidence. Anyone could be confident; it was more motivated, more directional, than just flat confidence.

It was conviction.

Insistent, Midoriya’s lips twitched into just the tiniest of smile, and Shōto almost managed to forget the very pressing life-or-death situation in which they found themselves.

“You want us to take a pretty big risk,” Shōto conceded, strangely calm. “Alright.”

“I’ll need a minute,” Midoriya added, rolling up his other sleeve. Out of seemingly nowhere, he produced his… journal? “Can you try to keep him busy?”

Grimacing, Shōto could only nod.

I hope you know what you’re doing…

Shōto pressed his right heel into the ground, creating a matrix for a bombardment of spear-tipped ice, guiding the frost up each of the walls to try to limit the villain’s mobility; ahead, Shōto conducted an incendiary column of fire, stealing the oxygen from the remainder of the alley, forcing Stain to dodge. As ever, Stain was quick to avoid the attack by going on the offensive. He sprang above the path of fire, landing on a dilapidated balcony before readjusting his momentum and crashing down with renewed fervor.

Shōto could just barely hear Midoriya muttering to himself, and Native said something in response too. It was too difficult to hear them, and he couldn’t really afford to turn around and look.

Stain was rearing up again for another move, and Shōto readied his arms to block whatever sort of attack was coming. Internally, he tried to analyze the situation, figure out how to determine the villain’s weak spot. His versatility and the speed were the real issues, because Shōto couldn’t actually hit him, just kept him back enough, but his own arms were starting to tingle, a rebound of hot and cold that told him he was pushing a little too hard.

A slight sob broke his concentration, coming from behind him.

“S-Stop… I can’t watch this… please… run away.”
At the moment, Shōto didn’t have the patience to try to convince Iida that they weren’t going to leave him behind, especially not now. Clearly, trying to reason with Iida wasn’t working—he needed to have the sense knocked into him.

Housed deep in Shōto’s head, and much deeper in his heart, an echo chamber rang with the memory of a voice that had forced him to see the same sense that Iida was missing; a voice that had pushed him to his absolute limits. With just six simple words, two sentences, it was a voice reached him in a way like no one had before.

It’s **YOURS!** Your quirk, **NOT** his.

The fact that they were all in such danger—that Midoriya had been injured and was still trying to figure out a way to stop this crazed killer—it was all the inspiration Shōto needed to find his own voice beneath his steaming anger.

“**You want to make your brother proud?**!” Shōto shouted, flames erupting from his left hand when the Hero Killer busted through his most recent frost blockade. “Then stand up and **be** Ingenium! Become the hero he wanted you to be!”

Shōto would have sworn he heard Midoriya let out just the softest of laughs, but it might have been his imagination.

“Well, now I **really** can’t fuck this up.”

With a smile, Midoriya added, “I trust you.”

Transitioning his weight back to rear his strength, Shōto lunged forward with both right arm and foot, hitting the ground and producing a wall of ice as high as the sides of the buildings that bracketed their secluded alley. The exertion made his throat close, like he’d tried to drink freezing lake water, but Shōto merely gnashed his teeth and readied for the Hero Killer to break through the barricade.

It took everything in his power not to **stare** at what was happening in his periphery, trying to keep his focus ahead as he anticipated the Hero Killer’s movement. Midoriya was climbing atop a garbage can, and without skipping a beat he leapt for the ladder that hung from a rusty balcony. There was a fabric wrapped around one of his arms like a tourniquet, and he had something secured between his teeth—**was that a knife?** It looked like one of the two the villain had thrown at Shōto earlier. Quickly, Midoriya pulled himself up the rungs until he was on the lowest level of the fire escape.

Just as he hauled himself up the last of the ladder, the wall was cut down. Shōto stood his ground
and let loose a scorching array of fire that at least was enough to counterpoise the villain’s assault.

He had to levy a quick riposte glacial wall to stop Stain from retreating back again, and Shōto could feel his fingers start to numb slightly, but he needed to chase off the exhaustion until this was over.

But, goddamnit, this was nigh impossible. Something had changed in Stain’s movements, they’d become… not sloppy, but wild. It vaguely reminded Shōto of a raging animal, unrepentant in his assaults, one after another after another. Shōto had to keep backing up, to try to keep even some amount of distance between them.

The Hero Killer ducked and rolled, over one of Shōto’s offense spouts of flames, and the maneuver allowed the killer to maintain his forward momentum. As such, he managed to get much closer —too close—and Shōto braced for the puncture wound, the splitting of skin and the sharp agony of metal.

“RECIPRO BURST!”

The movement was so fast, Shōto actually did miss it.

He blinked when the wind in the alley stirred, and one moment, a blade was centimeters from slicing into his skin, and the next, Iida had launched himself forward, delivering a kick to Stain’s blade so hard with his armored legs the metal snapped.

He finished the move with a turn, using his other leg and engine to deliver a swift roundhouse blow to the villain’s face, driving him back into the alley.

“I-Iida!” Midoriya called out, sending him a wobbly smile. “You’re okay! Thank goodness.”

“I’m… I should never have involved you in this… both of you. I’m sorry.”

“Please, not this again,” Shōto shot back, sharper than necessary as Iida returned to his side. Internally, Shōto’s instincts were still reeling, having gone from certain he was about to be mortally wounded and now overcome with relief that Iida was on his feet again.

Iida sniffled, and the sound made Shōto uncomfortable. He didn’t mean to have been so harsh on his classmate, but his temper…

“I’m not going to send you away, but I am sorry you were hurt because of me. I’m fine. But I won’t allow either of you to shed any more blood for me.”

Releasing a hard, hollow chuckle, Stain dragged himself to standing, half-submerged in the darkness of the other end of the alley. He flipped the pommel of his broken blade over.

“You can’t go pretending to be a hero now. You’ve already shown your true nature—you’re nothing but a fraud. You’re the sickness that infects our society, that ruins what it should mean to be a hero.”

“You’re a lunatic,” Shōto rebuffed, hovering in front of Native as best he could while holding his ground. “Don’t listen to this murderer’s nonsense, Iida.”

“No, he is… completely right. I don’t have any right to call myself a hero. I am not a single one of those things Midoriya talked about… brave, wanting to be better… I thought the most courageous thing I could do was to kill someone. I’m no better than him. But even so… I have to try. I can’t give up.”
Shōto’s gaze followed a trail of blood that ran down the class representative’s clenched fist, dripping onto the pavement below that had already been scorched and frozen a dozen times over.

“If I give up now,” said Iida, his tone wrecked and hurting and still intent. “Then the name Ingenium will die with me.”

“Tsch,” Stain’s expression twisted into something wicked. “Pathetic.”

Shōto saw the attack coming a mile away, his senses pushed to the limits of their awareness between the adrenaline and near-death experience. It had him alert to everything, every miniscule movement, every shift in position, down to the brush of fabric over skin.

He stepped in front of Iida and forced his left hand forward, a cascade of fire pouring from his palms and superheating the small space of the alley.

“Don’t be stupid… you’re just a bunch of kids…” Native coughed, still down. “He’s only after me and the one in the white armor. You need to run, stop fighting back!”

Under his breath, Shōto replied, “I don’t think he would let me leave even if I wanted to.”

Iida positioned himself like a runner preparing for a 100-meter dash.

He dropped his voice a bit. “Midoriya said we need to get him under the balcony?”

The pair exchanged a quick nod.

Visibly incensed, the Hero Killer lunged forward with this tongue wildly darting out between his teeth, eyes on Iida for his next move.

Iida met him halfway, using his armor to negate the larger slash of Stain’s broken sword, but the villain produced a second knife from one of his many holsters and stabbed straight through Iida’s hand.

His classmate let out an agonizing sound, but didn’t draw away or recoil, instead using the force of his engines to push Stain along the ground. Shōto, meanwhile, was using the opportunity to kneel, his right hand meeting the pavement and working in tandem with the rest of his right side, exhaling a wintery breath of air.

Violent stalagmites of ice rose all around the duo struggling in close-range, narrowing the path to limit Stain’s ability to escape, and Iida backed away at the last moment for Shōto to almost completely box him in a cavern of icicles.

“You don’t learn,” the villain mocked, readying his sword to swing through the nearest blockade of ice, but Shōto hardly even heard him.

He was much more interested in what was going on above Stain to pay his taunts much mind.

Midoriya’s was holding something that was too small to discern in one hand, wielding the knife Shōto had spotted earlier in his other. He ran the blade down the side of the unknown object, like a woodworker might do to whittle a spear, and ran the object all over the sides of the fabric before holding it up and out, corner to corner.

And then, in a single, fluid movement, Midoriya stepped up onto the balustrade and vaulted over the side of the fire escape, the cloth spread in front of him, landing on top of the Hero Killer in a messy, confusing tangle.
“Midoriya!” Shōto called out, unthinking, because… because… did Midoriya just jump from a fucking fire escape? Wait, no, that wasn’t important right now—what was important was that the green-haired boy was practically wrestling with the villain to get the blanket over as much of his torso and head as possible.

With the advantage of his ambush, Midoriya did manage to at least get the cloth over the villains neck and arms, but he was essentially holding onto him from behind in a strange sort of backwards hug, and Stain was undeniably stronger than him.

Hands to his sides, the Hero Killer’s movements were largely restrained, but he forced his weight back into the wall behind him, smacking Midoriya’s head into the brick facade with a sickening crack.

And then, he did it again.

Fuck, holy fuck. At that rate he was going to kill Midoriya.

He would not let Midoriya die at the hands of this fundamentalist, homicidal maniac. Not after what he’d done for Shōto; not considering all he could still do, all the people he could still help.

Midoriya wasn’t like him. Really, Midoriya wasn’t like anyone, and the poorly timed realization evoked in him a fear unlike he’d ever known.

Ice won’t be fast enough, Shōto thought in a panic, to make a column at that height with his current energy levels, and fire—he could use fire, but what if he hurts Midoriya in the collateral?

“Todoroki!” Iida snapped sharply. “I need you to freeze my engines. Don’t ask questions, there’s no time, just don’t cover the exhaust holes!”

Shōto quickly complied with Iida’s instructions, and then Iida took off running.

“RECIPRO EXTEND!”

Iida blew forward with startling velocity, a blur of blue and white that vaulted over the surrounding ice with incredible dexterity.

With the blanket over Stain’s face, and the added, precise frontal assault, a warm-relief spread over Shōto’s aching chest like calm tea mixing with a summer thunderstorm.

Exhaling, he watched in quiet awe.

“Go, guys.”

Armored leg met covered face without so much as bracing for the impact, and the startling, satisfying crunch of bones rang out like a gunshot in the painfully quiet alley.

Stain slumped forward, collapsing onto the ground, defeated.
“Are you sure you’ll be okay, Native?” Izuku asked, wincing when he tried to put pressure onto his right leg. It must’ve gotten messed up when he jumped from the balcony…

The Pro Hero chuckled and shook his head, turning around and offering Midoriya his back and shoulders. “I’m good as new, kid, but you took a nasty couple of hits out there. Let me at least carry you ‘til we find the authorities.”

Although it was tempting to decline, Izuku tested his leg one more time and barely managed not to whimper at the flare of pain up his body. Instead, he conceded with a simple, “...Thank you very much.”

“Really, it’s the least I can do,” Native reassured.

Behind them, Izuku could hear Todoroki and Iida finishing up with securing the hero killer. They’d been mindful of Midoriya’s advice not to remove the cape from anything besides his head.

Once they caught up with him and Native, Todoroki glimpsed up at him with an inscrutable look, before his attention shifted to Native.

“Did you say this was your... cape?”

The Pro sighed. “Yes, I had no idea why your friend here needed it but it’s not like I was really using it laying down.”

Iida leaned back slightly. “And what did you *do* to it, exactly, Midoriya?”

“Ahh, well…” he hummed quietly, exhaustion hitting him hard now that his adrenaline was fading. “I guess it started because I had this pen Hatsume gave me, it’s got this synthetic nano-fiber technology in it that acts like… well, I envisioned it like an exoskeleton, like how bugs have, but basically it reinforces anything it writes on with an nearly-indestructible material. I used Native’s cape instead of paper—thankfully it was thin and long enough—and the mesh circuitry reinforced the fabric of the cape so it wasn’t just something to cover the guy’s eyes, but I *did* have to cut off the end of the pen to dump out as much ink as possible to make sure the circuit would hold, I hope Hatsume isn’t not mad about that—”

“Breathe, Midoriya,” Iida reminded.

“O-Oh, um, r-right. Um, sorry. So basically… the network that reinforced the cape would have made it impossible for him to cut his way out of it, as long as all of his knives were covered.”

Todoroki and Iida were both silent, when Native groaned and finally piped up: “What the hell kind of pens are they giving you at that school, kid?”

Izuku just coughed. “Eh, it’s a long story…”

By the time they reached the opposite end of the alley, Izuku felt like he was seeing the sun again for the first time (ironic, because it was still nighttime), but street lamps and lit buildings were a fresh reminder that the world was not entirely contained in the restrictive nightmare of that dark, bloodied thoroughfare. What’s more, they hardly made it to the street when there were heroes running up to them.

“You there!”

“Hey, are you alright?!”
“Those injuries look serious…”

“There was a report from Endeavor’s agency that there might be danger in this… you’re kids…?”

“Hold on, is that... the Hero Killer?!”

The four of them—Izuku, Todoroki, Iida and Native—exchanged a few wary glances.

It was Izuku who eventually answered with another cough. “That’s, um... another long story.”

They took turns in debriefing the heroes on the situation—explaining who they were, how they got there, what happened to the villain. Towards the end, Native let Izuku stand again, leaning slightly against a pole in the street to keep the weight off his injured leg.

One of Endeavor’s sidekicks approached him. “The ambulances should be here any minute, kid. You did a great job all things considered.”

“Aha, um, thanks,” Izuku averted his gaze, flattered but unsure of how to accept the praise.

Honestly, I didn’t do anything special, I just… improvised, and got really, really lucky.

The words were a cluster of sense in his throat, and Izuku tried to clear it so he could properly respond, but—

“Get down!” someone shouted, and Izuku barely had time to turn to see some kind of flying creature coming for their small gathering of people. Heart stopping, Izuku’s eyes widened in horror—was that another Nomu? This one was yellow-skinned, had some sort of muzzle-type apparatus on its face, and, most notably, had huge wings. It wasn’t a quality of the Nomu’s Izuku had ever seen before, but it had largely similar characteristics otherwise: an exposed brain, unnaturally colored skin, and it was moving in, really fast—

And then, all at once, his senses became a rainstorm. Everything was too loud and too intense, rocks and dirt hitting him from above and below; a sweeping wind crashed over him like a raging tide, knocking him beneath the water and turning over the gravity—the sky was sideways and the buildings were on the ground and a white-hot pain flared into his left side, a chorus of knives hitting the crescendo of pain with just the worst kind of accuracy, pin-point pressure building and it was way, way too warm in that spot…? Definitely blood. Izuku imagined that someone had taken to slowly pressing his insides into a paper shredder.

It took one full breadth of a second for Izuku’s mind to catch up with the disorientation of his body. All of his senses had become chaotic, hellflame searing into his nerves, but he felt like he at least had a pretty reasonable excuse.

The Nomu had grabbed him. And now it was trying to escape.

Those weren’t knives, either, but talons, squeezing his midsection together with enough pressure to make him feel less like a human and more like a stress ball for a monster.

If he tried to move at all, Izuku was just about inviting it to eviscerate his insides. Instead, desperately, he cried out, “H-Hey! Let me go!”

“MIDORIYA!” voices called from the ground below at almost the same time, and an icy grip of fear reached into his chest and dragged his heart down through his stomach. Oh, god, Iida, Todoroki—he didn’t want them to have to see this, not after how much they’d just gone through together. Their shared experience had felt like a victory just seconds ago, but now…
What did it plan to do with him? Would he die before they even hit the ground?

No sooner did the thought occur were they falling, falling towards the pavement, its grip still iron as Izuku saw the ground rush to meet him, and he could do nothing but squeeze his eyes shut and brace for impact.

Then, a voice cut through the panic, growing louder with each bloodthirsty, dripping cadence, the syllables fanatical and unapologetic.

“The word hero has lost all meaning in this society. The world is overrun by fakes and criminals like you, who chase petty dreams.”

His weight shifted, no longer trapped in a vice but held, while at the same time, a spray of blood painted the side of his face, the tang of hot copper coating the back of his throat and making his stomach roil.

The Hero Killer…? How did he get free?

And, more importantly… did he just save me?

They had careened along the sidewalk, kicking up gravel and dust as the Nomu took most of the brunt of the crash, but even with the cushioned fall and Stain holding up most of his weight, Izuku could still barely move.

“You must all be purged,” Stain said simply, ripping his knife from the side of the Nomu’s face. From the side, Izuku witnessed drool pour from his mouth, appearing just this side of feral as his lips split into a maniacal, haunting smile. “Everything that I do, is to create a stronger society.”

Words scathing, sutured together by malcontent and the scourge of wicked devotion, a horrific rush of dread spread over Izuku’s entire body as Stain finally released him, rising again.

“What are you all doing, standing around like fools?” another voice called from afar, and Izuku flinched when he heard it. “The villain must have flown this way.”

Stain was pushing Izuku into the ground, hard, so there was no way he could turn around and verify (not that Izuku could move much with all his injuries at that point anyway). The point was, he didn’t need to turn to know who had spoken—Izuku knew that voice.

“Hold on, don’t tell me that is…”

The same moment Izuku thought the name, the Hero Killer said it outloud.

“Endeavor.”

It was spoken like a curse, a threat, and a promise all at once.

His hold on Izuku finally let up, and the teen leaned back slightly, just enough to watch the villain’s mask slip-off.

In retrospect, Izuku very much wished it had stayed on after all.

The Hero Killer was… disturbing to look at.

Not in a superficial sense, although that didn’t help: his eyes wide, pupils red, Stain had scar tissue raked over his nose and marred the skin surrounding his eyes; spit dribbled down his chin as he
ruthlessly and scathingly appraised Todoroki’s father from his place beside Izuku and the downed Nomu.

That was frightening enough, but what Izuku meant by disturbing was much more overwhelming and unsettling than just appearances. Seething, callous and cold as death’s hand round his throat, an aura of sadism suffused the very atmosphere, closing off his airway, making it impossible to breathe. It was not simply hatred, and it was not something that came in waves, like the shoreline, or the way you wave goodbye as the tide rescinds into the sea; this sort of resentment came in waves that were closer to drowning. It was being thrown backwards and dragged under an undercurrent of someone else’s bloodlust, and suddenly forgetting how to swim on your own but being too afraid to open your mouth to scream for help because it would certainly choke you if you tried.

“You false hero.”

The words were ice, laced straight into his veins, leaving pneumonia in his lungs.

“I’ll make this right.”

The world took on a red-tint around the edge of Izuku’s vision, like the killer’s own extreme prejudice infected his sight.

“These streets must run with the blood of hypocrites.”

He couldn’t breathe, couldn’t move—

“HERO! I shall reclaim that word! Come on, just try and stop me, you fakes!”

It was like listening on the other side of a glass, a gateway that kept Izuku out of his own body, frozen by the words of devils spoken on the tongue of man.

“There is only one man I will let kill me. He is a true hero.”

He was insane, definitely unhinged, but god why did it hurt so much to hear, why was it so terrifying Izuku could practically feel all of Stain’s knives in him again, twisting and tearing at all of the places he’d been cut before.

“ALL MIGHT IS WORTHY.”

And then, just as abruptly as Izuku had been snatched into the air, it all stopped. The Hero Killer stopped. His knife landed on the ground with a loud clang, echoing in complete silence as all the heroes, sidekicks, and students watched in mute terror.

In fact, no one managed to move at all until an ambulance finally came wailing down the street, sirens blaring, startling all of them.

Izuku blinked, unseeing for several seconds, the silhouette of the man outlined still in the middle of the sidewalk. Did Stain… save him? Or was he going to kill Izuku? Hold him hostage? What was the point in all of that? Why didn’t he try to flee?

None of that mattered right now, and it wouldn’t be for over a day later that Izuku and the others would learn of the broken rib that punctured his own lungs, causing his body to slip into shock.

Loudly, EMTs began to call out to them all, giving directions and allocating the wounded to different trucks with different resources. Straight ahead of him, Izuku realized that both Iida and
Todoroki had been knocked back at some point, both sitting on the ground with looks that mirrored his own.

It was like communicating through Native’s quirk, whispered words lost to the breeze and beneath the chatter of adults.

*Are you okay?* they all asked each other, but none of them really answered.

Until, Endeavor broke their mutual line of sight. “Shōto, how did you find this place?”

Todoroki’s eyes were wider than usual, a little frantic when they managed to find his father’s face before quickly flickering back to Izuku’s.

Dully, Izuku couldn’t help but think of all the pages in his notebook he’d spent describing that pretty, panicked face. He was so glad that Todoroki had come to save them, but he had that cut on his cheek, and, worse, fear in his eyes.

“Midoriya,” Todoroki breathed the sound of his name, though Izuku couldn’t hear him until he started to get up, and then he wasn’t *getting up* at all but staggering over himself to stand, *running* in Izuku’s direction.

And he didn’t know how to react because he had never seen Todoroki look so… so *affected*. He appeared almost ready to cry, stopping in front of him and practically falling to his knees, urgently rubbing the blood from the Nomu off the side of his face.

“God, Midoriya, you almost… *I thought...* ” he muttered, focused intently on brushing the blood from Izuku’s hair and checking his wounds, breathing raggedly. “Please, don’t do that to me again. Please.”

“I—I didn’t…” he began to say, but words were hard and Midoriya’s brain had used all of his intelligence for the day, vocabulary conveniently evaporating along with what remained of his energy. It just felt really nice, and he was more than happy to revel in it just for a moment, eyes slipping closed.

Considering the day Izuku had, he was going to allow himself this tiny indulgence, pretend Todoroki’s concern wasn’t simply kindness but had some genuinity of affection behind it. That it wasn’t just a worried peer helping him, but that this was the touch of his beautiful, smart, kind *boyfriend*, whose fear had been the same Izuku had felt when Stain nearly lacerated his shoulder. That his fingertips were loving, in the way they left chilly impressions over Izuku’s red cheeks, especially refreshing considering they’d been sticky and caked with blood, warm and fresh and entirely not his own. Izuku pretended that the heat from his other hand, soothing the sting left behind the curve of his neck where Stain had cut him, wasn’t just from his quirk, but was rooted in fondness, too.

Invested as he was in the five-second fantasy, Izuku didn’t even register the tiny sigh of relief that slipped out of him.

Izuku’s imagination had taken over when he eventually found the will to open his eyes, his hurting, pining heart mistaking Todoroki’s friendly smile as one of admiration. It was almost easy to forget about how awful their night had been, the semi-private moment making it all seem worth it.

Izuku would happily pretend that all of this—it was his. Just for a few more seconds.

Finally, when a paramedic came and insisted they look over Izuku’s wounds, he found it in himself to say something.
I love you, I love you, I’m so in love with you it’s killing me—

“I’m… sorry, if I worried you.”

Todoroki seemed surprised by that, eyebrows raised as he helped Izuku stand (read: basically scooped him up and put him on the stretcher himself).

The last words Izuku really remembered before passing out were ones that he’d heard before.

“As long as you’re safe, don’t be sorry.”

Chapter End Notes

ugh sorry for the delay on these!! I was going to split it up into two chapters but three just ended up working out a little better-- thanks for reading!! hope you're all doing well!!

Next time: Hosu City Aftermath! The Police Force aren't happy about three kids taking down the Hero Killer, Izuku is thoroughly bummed, and Shōto doesn't know what to do with all of these FEELINGS!!

pluuuuUUUSSSSSS ULTRA! ꒢_CTX (˘(_˘)˘ )
Chapter Summary

Recovering from their fight with Stain, Shōto, Iida and Izuku are given a joint space in Hosu City General Hospital, Room 509.

Together, they overcome worry, confront fears, dabble in totally legal gambling on an cotton-based economy, and start on a new path forward!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

*Midoriya has exactly eight freckles on his cheeks.*

Shōto would know. He had counted them at least a dozen times by now.

Seated quietly on his cot, Shōto had one leg pulled up to his chest, the other dangling towards the floor. For the past hour he’d been seated like that, measuring the seconds by the steady *blip* of the ECG that filled the room with the echo of Midoriya’s heartbeat. He faced away from the windows, away from the orange afterglow of Hosu City’s nightscape that warmed the edges of the room like blown glass. It would be hours before the sun would even attempt to rise, but Shōto paid the city beyond no mind.


It was, at present, very late, or very early, depending on who you asked. Unless you’d fallen asleep and woken up at some point in the night, Shōto counted it as being up late; if you had asked him on that given Saturday morning in particular, he would have told you it was very late.

He couldn’t sleep.

And, honestly, even if he could, Shōto didn’t really want to.

Hospitals already weren’t exactly at the top of Shōto’s list of favorite places, and his experience in the burn ward nearly ten years ago did not exactly help. It wasn’t like they were anxiety-inducing or anything, just, uncomfortable. The smell of chemicals and texture of cheap linens were constantly pressing on his senses, and like being stuck in one of those horrible weeks where every day just seems *off.*

The evening hours had gone by in a blur, all of the activity sputtering to an abrupt stop sometime between midnight and one. For hours, though, it felt like the sliding door to their room might as well have been replaced with a revolving one: one minute, Iida was there, the next, he was gone for some scan or another, or some attendant would be walking in to check on Midoriya, or to redress his own arm, or to inform him that his father was *insisting* upon transferring him from the Hosu General Hospital to their family’s private physician, to which he had to ask them to relay, in the most polite of terms, that his old man could fuck off.

The police had already come by twice, once within thirty minutes of when they’d all been admitted and again around one in the morning. They questioned Iida, and him. Separately. Jointly.
Midoriya still hadn’t woken up.

Hadn’t, since being put in the ambulance after the Nomu had nearly taken off with him.

Well, it did take off with him, it just didn’t get very far. What if Stain hadn’t stopped it? What if Father didn’t show up and draw away the Hero Killer’s attention—would he have killed Midoriya? No, no. Shōto squeezed his eyes shut and rested his head against his knee.

*It doesn’t matter. He’s fine now.*

Fine as anyone could be, given the circumstances. From Stain, Midoriya had suffered only minor injuries, but those in conjunction with what happened afterwards... he’d gone into shock from blood loss.

Shōto would not learn until a while later that, had the talons gone any deeper, they would have likely torn open one of Midoriya’s kidneys. The way things ended up, however, was just a wide but thankfully shallow puncture wound.

Shōto was grateful for the joint room. There had been too many occasions in just the past several hours where he had feared that each of his friends would not make it, so to be able to see them both with his own eyes, to be able to *hear* Midoriya’s heart beating or the groan that Iida gave when an attendant came by to check on his wounds—it provided Shōto some peace of mind.

Peace of mind that was, he knew, totally irrational. The primary physician that was overseeing all three of them had said Midoriya was expected to make a full recovery—there would be a couple of scars here or there, but once his blood transfusions were over and cleared for possible infections, he would be fine. Shōto knew that.

Even so, the prognosis meant very little to him until Midoriya opened his eyes again.

*His hair curls a little bit at the ends, too.*

It was just... the thought that things *could* have been so much worse had been haunting him. That all it would have taken was just a few added seconds here or there between Stain, the Nomu, his Dad's arrival, and Midoriya may not have woken up.

Shōto wouldn’t say it was worrying him, not exactly. The feeling was a little more nuanced than that. There had been so many little *what if’s*, and the realization of how devastatingly *few* mistakes it would have taken that would have led to them all dying made Shōto’s head and heart ache. More than anything, he was left feeling deeply confused. He knew that worrying was probably natural, but that didn’t account for all the other weird feelings he had—why his thoughts were all so foggy like steam that swelled in a compact space, pressing in on his lungs, making the air a little too thick to breathe comfortably. The condensation of Shōto’s present circumstances felt of water vapor, dripping from his fingertips, the way it clouded a mirror after a hot shower. Palpable, sticky, not quite one thing, not quite another thing—Shōto didn’t like feeling this way.

Or maybe he was just being dramatic. The lack of sleep wasn’t really helping his ability to reason right now.

*Just wake up already.*

“You know,” a voice said, and Shōto jumped upon realizing that Iida was, in fact, awake. He sounded exhausted, but wore a small smile on his face as he sat up in his bed, squinting in Shōto’s general direction without his glasses. “It’s ill-advised to get less than eight hours of sleep a night. We’ll be lucky if we get half that—why not try to rest while we can?”
“I—” Defensive, Shōto averted his gaze, glaring at a spot on the floor. Why was his face so hot? There wasn’t anything to be embarrassed about. “I’m just not tired.”

“Yes, Neither am I,” Iida sighed. “But we should at least try… I think it’s to be expected, after the traumatic experience we three shared, some difficulty with sleep… I feel as if I can still hear the Hero Killer’s voice in my ears.”

“Oh.” Shōto raised his head, understanding taking a moment to reach him, only to lower it to rest on his knee again. “Right. The Hero Killer.”

“Well, of course—what else?”

A pause.

“I... couldn’t sleep because of Midoriya.”

Iida made a sound of understanding before reaching around his bed. “Why didn’t you say so? The nurses said we can request they turn down the volume if it was bothering us.”

Frowning, Shōto just continued to watch on, quiet. He measured the rise and fall of Midoriya’s chest even after the nurse came to answer Iida’s request—they didn’t completely silence the machine, but turned it down to something barely above raindrops on a windowsill. After a few minutes, Iida yawned and wished him good night.

Shōto could only ignore the demands of his own body for so long, and he knew the energy he’d spent in the fight earlier would catch up to him sooner or later, but he was damned stubborn. Even after pulling back the covers and laying down properly, Shōto blinked past tubing and over a medical tray, counting four freckles on his right cheek. The other wasn’t visible anymore from this angle, but he knew there were four there, too.

It was a little difficult to pin down when exactly Shōto woke up the next day. He remembered getting up and moving around a few times, vaguely, but couldn’t really remember why—wound redressing or something—but consciousness didn’t really settle in until he was made to exit the shared room.

Iida was being tended to by a nurse when he left, and Midoriya was still sleeping, just as he had been all night. There were some witness statements he needed to sign that police brought over. His phone, wallet, and other personal effects were also returned to him, and he was instructed to eat before returning to his room—both to stretch his limbs after such intensive use the day before, and because he really did need to eat something.

The whole of the shuffling to-and-fro took about two hours, give or take, and Shōto was so preoccupied avoiding eye contact with anyone who could even remotely resemble his father that it took him a whole three seconds to realize he was already back in his room—oh.

Midoriya was awake.

Behind him, the view from the window framed the branches of a tree, its leaves rendered splendidly in oil paint, the brushstrokes of a breeze captured in its image. Shōto swore the color was more vibrant than it had been before, like the day outside had been waiting for Midoriya to
wake up before bothering starting up again.

And then, god—he wasn’t just awake. He was beaming.

“Todoroki!”

Four syllables. His own name. That was it, and Midoriya’s voice managed to turn his surname into something completely different, something foreign and delicate and radiating with happiness.

“Midoriya?” Shōto’s own response tumbled out of him, thoughtless, reactionary. Relieved.

“You’re… you’re awake.”

The other boy looked like he was about to fall out of the bed just from his enthusiasm alone. His hair was sticking up in the back from being in bed for so long, and his skin was definitely more pale than usual, but the real kicker was the presence of his bookbag. Well—actually, not his bookbag, but the contents of his bookbag, unceremoniously dumped in his lap. Pens had rolled between his legs and there were random pages and crumpled pieces of paper half-littered all over him. In his hands, he held a familiar journal and an All-Might themed pencil.

“Yeah! Azumi-san, erm, my primary nurse I guess—she just left. I was so worried when I woke up and you weren’t here! Iida just left to go get some kind of scan... I’m just so glad that you’re okay!”

Shōto swore he felt the world shift, just a little. Briefly. Entirely. For just a second or two, the room became kaleidoscopic, transitioning from the same sterile, dull space it had been into something much bigger. It was still just as colorless and drab as it had been before, but the shapelessness of the beds and the alien equipment provided a sort of... backdrop. Somewhere between clouded ivory and frosty grey, Shōto could now appreciate the way the lackluster world brought out the glow of Midoriya’s smile.

It was akin to comparing fluorescent bulbs to bursting starlight. They were similar—but so, so different.

“So… uh… h-how long has it been?” Midoriya cleared his throat, glancing down at his notebook. Shōto didn’t even realize he’d been holding his breath until Midoriya continued to speak. “I don’t even know what time it is. I, um, hope I didn’t worry you too much… Iida said you both got barely any sleep.”

Right—Right. Relax. He’s fine. You’re fine.

Glimpsing towards the clock before walking towards his own cot, Shōto said, “It’s been close to fifteen hours, but that doesn’t particularly matter now. How are you feeling?”

“Ah, well, thank you. I’m—I actually feel really good, all things considered!” Midoriya’s cheeks pinked, and Shōto didn’t miss the fact that his smile widened as he tried to duck his head.

“I can see that,” he remarked with a small chuckle, gesturing the mess of school supplies scattered around him. “You really don’t waste any time, do you?”

Scratching the back of his neck, Midoriya made no make any attempt to defend himself.

“I can’t help it… There is so much to write about now! I feel like I can’t waste a second, especially while some of it is still, uh, really fresh in my memory? I mean, there’s all the analysis I want to do for my own research—I have like twenty new entries I need to do, but in terms of deadlines, Go Beyond! Weekly will definitely want to cover this. I’m guessing Nejire has probably already
emailed our whole staff asking if anyone wants to write a last minute story to cover what happened. And, I just… the first few days of my internship were, uh, very… hands on, so there wasn’t really any chance for me to work on actual writing.”

Shōto raised both brows, but Midoriya didn’t stop talking.

“And this—something like this doesn’t happen everyday. This is a story the world really needs to hear. Deserves to hear. In a really weird way, the whole thing that happened yesterday feels like a sort of… silver-lining? N-Not that I’m glad we went through it or anything! But… Iida was dealing with all of that himself. He’d had been driven towards doing something that wasn’t like him at all, because he was hurting… but he realized his mistake and tried to make it right. And then, you came and saved us, and Native too. You used your fire, Todoroki!”

The last part was as much a statement as it was an exclamation, like Midoriya himself still didn’t believe it. Shōto glanced at his left arm, flexed his fingers into a fist and uncurled them again.

“Yes.”

In his mind, he heard his mother’s voice again. Nothing would make me happier than to watch you move forward with everything you have. “It’s hard to control. But I don’t want this to hold me back anymore.”

Beaming, Midoriya nodded. “I’m happy for you… ah, b-but I won’t write about you in the article of course. I was just going to sort of mention what you did, if that’s okay, but I can leave the details out. Or if you don’t want to be mentioned at all, that’s—”

“I don’t mind.” Shōto held up a hand so he didn’t launch into another accidental rant.

That seemed to take the other boy by surprise, blinking repeatedly. “R-Really?”

“Yes. I didn’t really know you before, when you asked to write another article about me, but now we’re friends.”

If Midoriya’s smile were any brighter, Shōto would have needed to squint.

“Well… if you’re sure… I actually, um.” Biting his bottom lip, Midoriya glanced down at his lap again. “I actually started writing some of it. It’s just a first draft! But… would you like to see?”

Now Shōto was the one surprised. He never really considered the possibility of reading Midoriya’s material in any context outside of Go Beyond! Weekly, and the unexpected prospect actually excited him.

Accepting the journal, Shōto sat back in his cot for a moment.

“It just starts, uh, at the top of that page. Yep. Um.” Midoriya coughed, and Shōto noticed him playing with his thumbs.

Hero Analysis! Weekly: The Hero Killer’s End
Everything casts a shadow, when you think about it.

Even the brightest light, the truest cause, the mightiest hero—we can create endless good, but there is always going to be the part of us that are dark, too.

And I wonder, can we shine a light on that? Should we? Or will we spend our whole lives chasing shadows if we try?

We, as humans, seek balance, wherever and whenever we can find it. And when something upsets that balance, it’s part of our natural impulse to want to right that wrong.

It’s an urge that is built into the very fabric of our lives—most careers are made with this principle in mind.

If our car breaks down, we can call a mechanic to fix it; if our pipes burst, we can hire a plumber to replace the pipes; if we get sick, we go to the doctor and they help us get better.

But how do we go about treating a problem that is so deep that its reached each and every one of us? Who is responsible for making it better?

How can humans fix the problem when humanity is, in fact, the problem?

Stain, the Hero Killer’s solution, was to treat the world as his patient, and cut away the infected areas. Amputate society until only that which remained possessed the most righteous of intentions. His diagnosis came from a sentiment that startled me, for how similar it was to my own: there are heroes, and there is a Hero. A Hero is the ideal, the model, the brightest beacon in a sea of darkness; and then, there are heroes, the people who roam the streets and work for agencies and live their lives and have their families. There is a distance between these things, and Stain’s solution was to discard of those who did not exhibit all of those qualities of a Hero.

I saw this conviction in him this weekend, in Hosu City, when he was apprehended. He had tried to kill the Pro-Hero Native, and Tenya Iida, Class Representative of 1-A, younger brother to Pro-Hero Ingenium had also gotten injured when he found Stain the Hero Killer in an alley in the back streets of Hosu City.

[Note to self: Fill in narrative stuff here later (Jω^)’]

Shōto had to chuckle to himself, just a little, and continued reading. There wasn’t much left.

As strange as it sounds, for all his violence, the Hero Killer wanted more than anything for humanity to thrive. His attacks were all done with the belief that he could reverse the plague on humanity by killing off those who carried the disease.

But, if we are going to accept the state of the world as being defunct, there are better
ways to solve the problem. This is, more than anything, where his philosophy, and subsequent solution, are flawed—not just in his unthinkably violent method for “fixing” society, but in labeling the state of the world itself as a problem.

We don’t live in a world of Heroes, of infinite sunshine and perfect golden horizons. Our society is one with many fractures, fissures, and failures, and as such, the spectrum of morality is largely gray, leaving very little on either end of the scales of what we conceive as “good vs. evil” or “light vs. dark.” The Hero Killer’s solution was to do away with anything that had been sullied by even the slightest shades of black, to cut away the parts of the world that don’t meet the standards of a true Hero, but to force society to meet that standard is not only unrealistic, it is cruel. His is an ideology that does not allow for imperfect people with imperfect quirks and imperfect motivations; there is no room for mistakes or personal failings, which means, in turn, there is no room to grow. What he propagated is a veiled system of beliefs which acts as a justification for committing murder. Were we to widely adopt such a philosophy, society would certainly do away with anyone who is not a Hero, but it would follow that with that away with the same possibility of seeking or, perhaps more importantly, granting forgiveness.

I won’t pretend I have all the answers, but I know what I know, and what I know is this: I would rather live in a flawed society, one that accepts kindnesses of every shape and size from anyone, regardless of their motivations. The intention behind a hero’s actions are certainly important, and we all should strive to walk a more Heroic path, but it is the real-world impact that heroes make that is greater than just a well-meaning cause. Whatever motivation drives someone to make a difference, we should accept that our world is better for them having been a part of it with as much grace as possible.

I would rather live in a broken world, where light shines through all the little cracks, bringing hope that we can maybe help each other heal, than live in a completely perfect world, where there is no room for mistakes.

After all, it’s because of this darkness in us, between us, that allows our stars to shine.

That was the end of it.

Not for the first time after reading Midoriya’s writing, Shōto’s chest ached, just a little. It wasn’t because the words hurt, but, rather, that he felt a little like he mourned the loss of reading the words for the first time just as soon as he finished. Reminiscent of the way sunshine feels on your face, the moment Shōto reached the end, the warmth was hidden by the clouds again.

“It’s a little rough right now, and obviously missing the actual story-story of what happened to us... but I figured that would be easier to type out, I wrote out as much as I could remember from the sequence of events on another page,” Midoriya explained quickly, words speeding up. “And maybe it’s, like, too broad of an approach, I guess? I don’t want to take away from the message behind the article, but there’s also something really satisfying for me… having stood beside you guys back there. I’m not in 1-A and since I don’t have a quirk, sometimes I feel like I’m… intruding? Or occupying a space that I don’t have any right to, or trying to be something that I can never really be not and it was just—um, s-sorry I got carried away again ahah. Sorry. What uh, did you… think of it?”

“I realized this is the first time I’ve ever read something of yours while you were physically here,”
Shōto began, voice carefully even. He handed back Midoriya’s journal. “I don’t know if I’ve ever actually told you, but your writing is… It’s a little overwhelming. The world does deserve to read this.”

Voice small, Midoriya averted his eyes. “O-Oh yeah?”

“I’m not very good at compliments,” Shōto explained, something Fuyumi and Yaoyorozu had both pointed out to him on separate occasions. “But the Hero Killer is a lunatic, and yet, he was right in that there are things wrong in our world. But murdering people isn’t the right way to fix it. I’m grateful that you shared this with me, Midoriya. I know you write for everyone, but this somehow felt different. Good-different, that is. And—wait—w-why are you crying!?”

“S-Sorry!” sniffling, Midoriya tried to wave off Shōto’s concern as he wiped his eyes with the back of his arm.

Shōto had already gotten up, and he inched a little closer but was unsure of what to do. Had he upset Midoriya with something he said? Should he apologize? Try to comfort him? A hug… felt like a lot, if Shōto were being honest, but his fingers still twitched with the urge to do something. It was like when he’d wiped the blood from Midoriya’s face; it wasn’t really something he thought about, his hands just did it on their own. But unlike then, there was no obvious red smattering his cheek and eyelids and forehead. Midoriya’s injuries were sort of all over the place—even putting a hand in the wrong place could hurt him if Shōto misjudged.

His shoulder wasn’t injured, right? Shōto could just give it a nice, reassuring ‘friend’ squeeze, right? Natsuo did that to Shōto sometimes, although rarely, since Shōto wasn’t especially fond of unwarranted physical contact.

Vying for the safest option, he decided to mimic the movement of his older brother and reached for Midoriya’s shoulder—except, Midoriya chose the same time to turn his body and angle his head down.

And so, Shōto ended up patting the top of Midoriya’s head.

“Uh.” His hair, Shōto noted, was remarkably fluffy. “There… there?”

“I’m fine,” the other boy let out a wet chuckle, still clearly crying. “S-sorry. I get e-emotional e-and ‘m just really happy.”

Now Shōto was tremendously confused. “Er—happy? You’re... crying.”

“N-Not because I’m sad,” Midoriya laughed and tilted his chin up, and Shōto made the mistake of meeting his eyes—wide and glittering, he wore a smile that was practically shameless in its blatant vulnerability. “I just… I think some of it just hit me that we could have died and we didn’t and this is all just... t-thank you, Todoroki-kun. Thank you. It means a lot to hear that...”

It was the sort of smile that bypassed the skin and seeped right into his soul; the sort of smile that made Shōto’s chest hurt again, but it was different than before. Less of an ache, more of a buzzing, thrumming, thrilling thing.

And maybe he was a bit of a masochist, because Shōto found he didn’t really mind the pain.
Izuku was taking a brief break from writing, in part because his hand was cramping, but mostly because his doctor had scolded him for not resting properly. It wasn’t his fault he was positively wired right now, okay, he really couldn’t be blamed for it. His nerves were just—and his thoughts—and his heart—

It was a bit of a mess for him. He’d woken up so confused, the last thing he remembered was the warm press of Todoroki’s hand against his cheek, and then everything was different.

They lived. They did it. That in and of itself was astonishing, but combine the rush of almost dying with the memory of Todoroki after the Nomu, and to then wake up and have a real, meaningful conversation with your… definitely-not-getting-out-of-hand crush, and everything was all—well.

It was a lot. Good, but a lot.

“Midoriya, it’s your turn.”

Iida’s voice cut into his daydream, and he blinked down at the edge of his bed. “What—? Oh, right. Sorry.”

Izuku’s arms were mostly uninjured from the fight, save some scratches and more than a few healthy, purple bruises, but it had been his his legs that accounted for the brunt of his injuries. Seeing as Izuku couldn’t stand at the moment, Todoroki and Iida had brought over chairs to sit beside him. Comparatively, the 1-A students were basically in opposite standings; Iida’s face had gotten cut up a bit, but thanks to his armor, most of the damage was contained to just his arms and particularly his hands, while Todoroki’s left arm and cheek had both felt the force of Stain’s blade, but he was otherwise uninjured.

It was for that reason, with one working sets of hands between them, Iida and Todoroki were on one team and Izuku was on another.

“So this game is called Seven Bridge?” Todoroki asked.

Nodding, Izuku smiled as he laid down a set of three. “Yeah, my mom loves this game. It’s a type of rummy game, if you know those. We play it all the time when we just need something to do. I do like Uno better, but this is easier to just pick up a game since you just need a regular deck of cards. Azumi-san led me them from the nurse’s desk!”

Iida jabbed his casted hand towards a card that Todoroki held for them both. “We should try collecting these, because of the suit. I can’t believe you’ve never even heard of it. It’s a very common game.”

“I know this may come as a surprise to you both,” Todoroki replied as he drew a card. “But my father didn’t exactly sit us down and teach us card games.”

Izuku nearly choked, and Iida levied Todoroki a concerned look.

There was a brief pause, and, equally deadpan, Todoroki amended, “That… that was a joke.”

“Oh,” exhaling, Izuku didn’t realize he’d been holding his breath. “Oh!”

Belatedly, he laughed, a big burst of sound that was more surprised than anything. “Okay! Pff—Todoroki! I didn’t know you had a sense of humor!”
“My father is an easy target.”

Iida looked mildly bemused, but also like he was struggling to keep a straight face, and Izuku had to cover his mouth with a hand to not laugh too loud.

“Todoroki! You should respect your father figure! He is the Number Two Hero, even if you don’t see eye to eye.”

It was difficult for Izuku to remain tuned into the conversation, as somewhere in Iida’s chastisement, Todoroki glanced his way while he was letting out a rather loud laugh and he tried to cover his mouth, embarrassed. Cheeks pink-stained, Izuku dropped his head and pretended to focus very hard on his cards.

As the two proceeded with their turn, jokes and lecture all wrapped up, there was a light knock on their door. It was quickly followed by the appearance of Izuku’s very kind nurse, Azumi-san.

“All three of you awake, in the same room, at the same time? It’s like a miracle,” she hummed before walking in, moving over to Izuku’s monitor and recording some figures down on his chart. “I wanted to do a quick check of your vitals before—”

The door opened again, this time without the knock or kind face waiting on the other side.

“...before that,” the woman muttered lowly, shooting the three of them an apologetic look.

The very subject of their previous conversation, Todoroki’s father, was standing in the doorway, along with Iida’s internship supervisor, The Regular Hero: Manual.

“Nice to see you’re all awake at last. How are you feeling, Midoriya?” Manual asked, but Izuku almost missed the fact that it was addressed to him. On either side of him, the two Todorokis glared intently at one another, and it was rather distracting.

“U-Uh,” Izuku cleared his throat. “I’m feeling really good! Thank you. It’s an honor to meet you, Manual-san.”

“Oh, that’s very kind of…”

Izuku missed the rest of Manual’s statement, wilting under Endeavor’s whip-sharp stare when he turned it from his son onto him.

“What do you want?” Todoroki asked, setting the cards down on the edge of Izuku’s bed.

Simply, Endeavor said, “We need to talk.”

“So talk.”

“Erm…” Manual coughed, gesturing towards the door. “It’s not us, that needs to talk to you. That will come later. For now, though—”

A towering figure entered the room, and Manual introduced them. “This is Kenji Tsuragamae, the Hosu City Chief of Police.”

There were about five things that flashed through Izuku’s head in that instant—oh my god the Police Chief? His quirk must be something canine-based to manifest with an appearance like that. Why did he come here? I wonder what sort of mannerisms cross the line of human and animal? But before he could even half-attempt to answer his own slew of questions, Izuku realized that Iida and
Todoroki had both stood up respectfully upon Chief Tsuragamae’s entrance and he quickly scrambled to do the same.

“Now, now, no need to get up,” the man held up a hand, motioning for him to stop. Grateful, Izuku managed a small smile as he sat back—standing right now would have been a bit of a challenge impossible—and his nurse gave his arm a supportive squeeze before exiting the room.

Once the door shut behind her, Chief Tsuragamae let out a low breath of air, studying the three students carefully. “So you are the ones who brought down the Hero Killer, woof.”

**Woof?!**

*Is that involuntary? Does something trigger that sort of response? I wonder if—wait, wait, pay attention!*

“Yes, sir,” Iida gave a small bow. “This is Izuku Midoriya, Shōto Todoroki, and I am Tenya Iida.”

The man let out a low grumble of acknowledgement. “Mmm... that’s what my officers tell me. Since you are all students of Yūei, I’ll make this brief, then. I’m sure you already know that when superpowers were still becoming the norm, the police attached high importance to keeping consistent standards of justice and managing crime. That’s what prohibited the weaponization of quirks in the first place, woof, which, in turn, acted as a catalyst to the ultimate creation of hero as a profession. It was designed from day one to exist complementary to the efforts of the police.”

Izuku’s mind was moving a million miles an hour when Chief Tsuragamae paused, lips pursed, like he was trying to taste the words on his tongue before speaking them. This was all basic hero history—why bother recounting this to them?

“It is thanks to the early ethical standards set forth by the first generation of heroes that we can permit individuals to use their incredible force and powers, many which can easily kill others, in a way that enforces accountability on the user, woof. Even against the Hero Killer, for uncertified individuals to cause injury with their quirks without specific instruction from a guardian or supervisor... it is a clear violation of those rules.”

Oh no. Izuku’s eyes widened, and, unnoticed by him, his heart monitor began to protest loudly. No, no, he must be—he must be misunderstanding. There’s no way this was what he was thinking, right?

“The two of you,” continued the chief, “and the Pro-Heroes Endeavor and Manual, must therefore receive strict and swift punishment.”

Before the words were even fully formed, both Todoroki’s had something to say.

Well, Endeavor’s wasn’t so much as words as it was a sharp grunt, clearly angered by the notion, whereas the younger Todoroki looked incensed and clenched his jaw.

“Wait a minute! If Iida had done nothing, Native would be dead right now!”

Looking torn between appreciation and remorse, Iida’s brows were knit together. “Todoroki...”

Todoroki didn’t appear to have heard him, and Izuku was vaguely reminded of some of the pent up rage of which he had been on the receiving end during the Sports Festival. It brought back memories, but they weren’t particularly good ones.

“Would you really have had us follow the rules and just watch while people were killed?” he
demanded.

Knowing Chief Tsuragamae raised a brow. “I see, so you think it’s alright to bend the rules, so long as everything works out in the end.”

Izuku winced at the bitter sting of his words. This was really happening, wasn’t it? Iida and Todoroki both used their powers for good reason, but the chief was clearly right; it was as obvious a violation as any, and there are serious reprimands for acts of vigilantism, no matter the age of the person involved.

After a pregnant pause, Todoroki eventually managed to grind out a few words. “…Isn’t it a hero’s job to save people?”

“This is why you are not yet a full-fledged hero, woof.” The chief didn’t seem particularly pleased to be condescended by a fifteen-year old and shot Endeavor a disapproving look. “I would have expected the Number Two Hero and the top hero school in Japan would have taught you better.”

That seemed to spend whatever remaining threads of patience Todoroki had, his fists white-knuckled and shaking by his sides. “You damn mutt—!”

“T-Todoroki! Stop it! He’s absolutely right,” Iida insisted, partially positioning himself between Todoroki and Chief Tsuragamae.

“Mind your manners, Shōto,” warned Endeavor, voice underpinned by what Izuku could only assume was a veiled threat. “I didn’t create you to become a degenerate.”

Had Izuku not been looking so intently at his two friends, he might have noticed the Number Two Hero’s deliberate pause, the turn of his head, the very intentional grimace sent in his direction.

Manual echoed Iida’s sentiment. “Please, just let him finish explaining.”

Clearing his throat, the chief continued, meeting each of their eyes evenly. “What I’ve told you is the… official position of the police force. And the commensurate punishment will happen if this is all made it to the public, woof. All three of you would all be applauded by the masses and media, but the two of you would be harshly punished for illegal use of your abilities.”

The man nodding towards Todoroki and Iida, and Izuku’s throat constricted painfully. No, no—this wasn’t fair. What sort of punishment? They both had so much potential. How could the chief not see that?

“On the other hand,” Chief Tsuragamae hummed, his tone turning almost… wistful? “If this were to not be made public, the burn scars would support Endeavor being the hero who saved the day, and all of what we’ve discussed already would end here. There were few witnesses, so the investigation into the violations could stop here, woof… but that would also mean no one could ever know about what happened in that alley.”

No one?

“You two would essentially get off scot-free,” sighed the chief. “And Endeavor here has agreed to comply with the cover story, but…”

“The story would end there,” Izuku finished, speaking for the first time since their introductions were made. He felt… surprisingly calm, considering the offer in itself implied, essentially, the police’s authorizing a mass conspiracy to mislead the public.
Izuku tried not to think about that sticking point and instead focused on the chief’s steady frown. “Rather the two of them get in trouble but everyone knows what we did, or all three of us never speak about it again. Meaning… I can’t publish anything about it. That’s the terms, right?”

“Wait—but—that’s not fair at all!” Todoroki intervened, his tone a rumble of fury, a barely subdued storm threatening to unleash at any moment. “Midoriya has written most of an article already, and it’s really… important. The same way the one was when the news of Ingenium was made public, his story could be detrimental to how the events are framed to the public.”

“Stop it, Shōto. All he has to gain is a larger readership at the expense of stunting the careers of two young heroes.” Endeavor’s arms, which had been crossed over his chest, bulged a bit when his fists tightened, the muscles under his suit tensing down his biceps. He turned his head, glaring at Izuku from the side. “Unless you want to be responsible for ending the name Ingenium? Or preventing my son from accomplishing his dreams?”

“That’s not Midoriya’s fault. He should at least be acknowledged for what happened, if he hadn’t figured out where to look for Iida and Native during the Nomu attack, not only would they both be dead, but the Hero Killer would still be out there! It’s thanks to him that you have him in custody at all.”

Endeavor’s jaw clenched. “Did you forget why we were there in the first place? It was the plan from the beginning to take him down.”

“I mean no disrespect sir,” clearing his throat, Iida bowed slightly to the Number Two Hero. “But that has little bearing now. Your attempt to apprehend the villain may have been successful, but we will never know. The only thing that matters is that because of Midoriya, Stain was stopped. And he saved my life.”

“I am not forcing you one way or the other.” Chief Tsuragame seemed almost as troubled as the 1-A students. “The choice is up to you all.”

Endeavor seemed to grow more irritable as the conversation went on, and his voice was a hollow, pitch dark sound. “You should be grateful the police would even consider something like this.”

Todoroki’s words were colder than his ice. “That must be easy for you to say when you’ll be taking credit for something three children did, isn’t it?”

“Do not presume to speak to me like that.” Endeavor’s flames surged, just a bit, through all the crevices running down his hero costume. “You have nothing to lose by this offer.”

Lips thin, Izuku felt a little ringing, echoing in his chest, like someone had dropped a hammer down a chute of metal walls. Tinny, crashing, keen, the sound was building up to something, a pressure roiling in his throat like he couldn’t quite breathe properly.

He tried very hard not to think about it right now.

“I understand. Please, excuse our actions, and we will leave the rest to you.”

Todoroki turned to him, a look of flashing uncertainty appearing in each of his eyes, furrowing his brow into something uncharacteristically scrutable. He looked different, with his guard down momentarily. One eye was confused, a blue curling sea; the other, the color of smoldering charcoal, heat draining from their depths.

“But—what about what you’ve already written?”
At that, the quirkless student’s lips curled up at the edges softly, shaking his head.

“Your father is right. There is a lot that writing can do, more than I ever thought possible, but… it’s also true that the words I write on these pages aren’t stopping villains or arresting killers.”

Glancing down at the front of his journal again, Izuku’s focus extended far beyond the cover, into the abstract corners of his thoughts. “I know there’s real value in what I’m doing, and I’m not going to stop supporting heroes however I can, and I’ll—I’ll never be able to actually save people. Not like you guys. Heroes protect, doctors heal, and words… those can wound and heal, too, but more than anything, I feel like words… guide. My writing won’t mean much if there isn’t anything that remains worth protecting, and I physically just can’t be the one who does that. I’m not like you guys, or All Might… I’m not the one who protects people.”

“Midoriya…” the class representative said, the sound splintered, regret and relief and repentance, and so much more, wrapped up in the unspoken question of his name. Are you sure?

Beside him, Todoroki said nothing, his own expression returned to its usual state of indecipherability. Izuku found himself smiling wider, almost out of habit.

He waved his hands and tried to laugh it off. “What’s with those faces? Don’t feel sorry for me! Really. It’s like I said back there Iida, it’s not me vs. you, it’s us vs. them. And if a win for me means a loss for you both, then that’s not a win at all. I’d rather we all become better, together.”

Iida sniffled, and blinked several times. It appeared he managed to hold back his tears only by biting his lower lip. “M-Midoriya, thank you. As a friend and editor, I can appreciate how much work you put into your stories, and this would have been a huge opportunity… so please know I respect and admire your decision.”

“You’re really willing to give up this opportunity?” Todoroki curled his hands into fists at his side, unfurling them again and repeating the motion. “For us?”

Nodding, Izuku felt a bit of bitterness for the wasted words he’d put on paper, a bit of annoyance and anger and sadness, too. He was only human, but those emotions—they didn’t matter. Not in the long run. Not in comparison to his friendships; not at the cost of seeing Iida live up to his brother’s name or Todoroki forge his own title on his own terms. No article would ever be worth that to Izuku.

The resigned but happy look on his face was nothing but genuine when he firmly said, “You can make it up to me by becoming really great heroes, okay?”

Each of the 1-A students exchanged a look, pausing for several seconds. They turned to Chief Tsuragame and bowed, demonstrating their agreement with Midoriya’s decision, and the chief seemed satisfied at last.

“I know it’s unfair, that none of you will be recognized for the good you’ve done, that the world will never read the headline about the three of you who took down the Hero Killer.” With a very low, almost recumbent, bow, the chief finished, “So, while it may be a very small token gesture, at least allow me, as someone else who works to protect the peace, to say thank you.”

All three boys shared a look, the display of deference taking them by surprised, especially after the man’s earlier severity.

Todoroki pursed his lips and turned his head slightly to the side.

“...Please start with that next time,” he mumbled, and Izuku had to suppress the giggle that
threatened to bubble up his throat. Was Todoroki embarrassed? Izuku could not recall ever seeing him act sheepish before, and he found it really unfairly adorable.

Following the chief’s expression of gratitude, there was a small but tenable shift in atmosphere; a sense of finality spread over the room, taking shape as the light chatter of voices, suffusing the air with the same artificial calm that was brought on by the scent of clean linens. Like the fizzle that followed a firework, or the foam that sinks into a soda after being poured into a glass, or the lazy waltz of dust motes in a wispy, halo ray of sunshine that streamed in from the window, things were... settling. Reaching peace, though fresh and tentative, and presenting them all with paths forward.

Izuku listened quietly: to the chief give his goodbyes, to Manual scold Iida for all the trouble he caused, to the wordless conversation happening between Todoroki and his father, spoken in a language of icy glances and stiff mannerisms.

In all, Izuku was disappointed. Happy, too.

It reminded him of when Kacchan’s quirk manifested, actually—Izuku had been overjoy to learn of his childhood friend’s amazing quirk, but it had been hard not to feel a little disheartened when his own hadn’t yet made itself known. Obviously, at the time, he thought it was just a matter of waiting—that notion wouldn’t be crushed for another few months. This had that same vague sense of a good-bad thing. Because, it was a good thing, in all. A great thing. Izuku couldn’t even imagine a reality in which he would have ever sacrificed his friend’s futures just to publish a piece of writing would. Not only would it have been incredibly selfish, it was downright inconceivable.

The bitter sting would fade, he knew, so he tried to at least keep himself together for awhile. It would do nothing but make Todoroki and Iida feel guilty if they knew how much it hurt to know that their story wouldn’t be shared with the world.

It’s not like Izuku was gearing up to laud the nightmarish experience over anyone’s heads anyway. It had just felt very… validating.

He was quirkless, and he survived.

He was quirkless, and he made a difference.

He was quirkless, and Stain was wrong, and Iida had overcome a terrible darkness, and Todoroki had saved them and pushed Iida to fight for the right reasons and—

And no one would ever know.

It wasn’t the end of the world. Truly. But Izuku couldn’t shake the sadness, too fresh in the pit of his stomach.

Todoroki had to make a phone call. Iida had another test. An hour had passed in the blink of an eye, and Izuku found himself alone.

His gaze wandered to his lap, the wild shape of his hair casting small shadows over his face. He’d long since put down his hand of cards and took up his notebook, though he didn’t open it, just brushed his thumb over the surface.

Hero Analysis for the Future.

For the Future. Everything for a price, he supposed.
After lunch, Izuku was allowed access to his phone again. Azumi-san brought it to him, only to discover it was entirely out of battery.

“A patient left this behind awhile ago and never reclaimed it,” the young woman explained as she produced a cable from her pocket and began to unwind it. “We have about a dozen extra chargers in our drawers at the desk for things like this. Just let me know when it’s fully charged so I can put it back if anyone else needs to use it.”

Grateful, Izuku nodded. “Thank you, Azumi-san. I don’t suppose my Mom…?”

She pursed her lips before answering. “Well, your mother was notified shortly after you were admitted, but was working at the time and said she couldn’t get away. She said she would come as soon as she could, but we haven’t heard word of her arriving yet.”

“That’s okay, she’ll probably come soon,” Izuku hummed, sensing her vague undertone of worry. “My Mom takes care of elderly people who aren’t quite going into hospice, like, at-home care. Sometimes they need her to stay overnights so she’s probably just been stuck there for awhile.”

Azumi-san tilted her head to one side as she switched Izuku’s IV, a small smile on her face. “Alright. I’ll keep an eye out for when she shows up.”

They were quiet for a little while while Azumi-san did her work, Izuku phasing in and out of watching her and trying to think about what he would write for Tuesday with the source of his current inspiration thoroughly squashed.

Eventually, he thought to ask, “Does my doctor have any sort of idea of when I can leave?”

“Right now he’s predicting Tuesday. You didn’t get many deep wounds, but there were a lot of them, and the stitching in your abdomen is going to take some time to heal from that… Nomu, right?”

“Yeah, that’s what the news calls… them? It? I don’t really know anything about them besides what I have in my notebook.”

The woman made a face of evident distaste, and Izuku could practically imagine the shiver run up her spine.

“The fewer details I know about those—things—the better.”

Izuku laid back down in his bed and tried to get comfortable with little success. He was markedly more tired than he usually would be for how much he slept, and for the fact that it was the middle of the day, but apparently that was to be expected according to Azumi-san.

He’d just been toeing that fragile line between sleep and waking when his phone began to buzz. It wasn’t a number he had in his contacts, but it was in the Musutafu area code so he picked it up.

“This is Izuku Midoriya speaking.”

The voice on the other end was perhaps the only one he wanted to hear as much as his Mom’s.

“Young Midoriya! Thank goodness you’re alright.”
“A—All Might!? I didn’t—wait, you have my phone number?” Izuku blurted the first thing that came to mind, startled and quietly panicking because oh my GOD ALL MIGHT HAS MY PHONE NUMBER! I’M TALKING TO ALL MIGHT ON THE PHONE!?

A short chuckle came through the other line, followed by a cough. “Yes. I gave you mine, and when I realized I didn’t have your’s I found it in your school file. I hope you don’t mind me calling—I assume you’re still in the hospital?”

“I—um, yes, sir! I don’t mind at all. How did you…?”

“Ah, well, it comes with the territory. During any major incident, most heroes in the area are notified of what’s going on, and—I don’t mean to brag, but I’m sort of a big deal.” He paused while Izuku let out a sputter of laughter. “Kidding, kidding. Anyway, it’s just part of the work. I get regular updates from the police on major developing cases, and the events of Hosu City were multifaceted. I couldn’t believe when I heard… you know, you really have a tendency of being in the wrong place at the wrong time. I’m sorry I can’t be there, I feel at least partially responsible if it was the internship at HNN that landed you in Hosu City in the first place.”

“Well, you could say I’m always in the wrong place at the right time, too! Please don’t apologize, I’m going to be fine. Are you… erm…” Carefully, Izuku considered how to ask All Might the following question—he really did not want to lie to the Symbol of Peace, if he could avoid it.

“Aware of how I was injured? Todoroki and Iida and I were all there…”

“Well…” All Might let out a huff, like he’d just taken a seat and could feel the aftershock down to his bones. “I saw Endeavor’s press statement about thirty minutes ago. I also know he wasn’t being honest, if that answers your question.”

“Ah… well…” Izuku didn’t know what to say to that, but he felt a tiny bit glad that at least All Might knew the truth. It didn’t really make any difference in a real sense, but he admired All Might so much; the idea that he wouldn’t have to pretend that it wasn’t real to All Might provided some comfort.

The older hero relieved Midoriya of the burden of thinking of something to say. “Now I know how you were injured, but not the extent of what exactly happened. What is your condition? Do you have any sense of when you’ll be discharged? ”

“Not exactly, my doctor is guessing I’ll be able to get out Monday, or maybe Tuesday. I fractured my leg but they’re able to repair most of the damage pretty quickly… they have some procedures that are like, a watered-down version of Recovery Girl’s quirk, and that’s been helping. But with the blood transfusions at the same time, it’s like, taking my body a bit to accept the healing, if that makes sense?”

He was met with silence. For a moment, Izuku wondered if their call had been dropped or if he’d accidentally unplugged his phone from the wall, rendering the device dead, but after a quick check it appeared the call was still very much on-going.

“Um, A-All Might?”

“I—right, sorry…” the Symbol of Peace sounded a little dazed, but his voice returned to its usual sharpness after another second or two. “I just—I didn’t realize it was that bad. Thank god you’re alright.”

“Oh… well, yeah. I owe a lot to—” he coughed. “Endeavor. I would have definitely been dead without him.”
All Might managed a laugh at that, and Izuku grinned proudly, privately, for having made the man laugh. Talking to his idol on the phone was surprisingly easy… it was unfortunate that it took him being laid up in a hospital bed for it to happen, but Izuku couldn’t say he harbored any regret for his choices in the past twenty-four hours as they continued to chat.

They discussed the internship Izuku had suffered through from Wednesday to Friday, though Izuku largely glossed over how disappointing of an experience it had been—he didn’t want All Might to feel responsible. It wasn’t really any single person’s fault anyway; just bad luck, something Izuku knew well.

Mostly, Izuku took the opportunity to talk through the quirks he observed during his time there, avoiding the topic of writing and reporting.

All Might seemed to pick-up on Izuku’s overall lack of enthusiasm, however.

“If you’d like to talk more extensively about any part of the experience, I’m glad to listen and contribute how I can to make the experience more… worthwhile. It’s a bit hard when my expertise is always on the other side of the camera—or paper. Whatever medium the news is talked about,” he sighed, evidently frustrated. “As for the next few days… I haven’t spoken with my old colleague since last week, but when we did discuss your shadowing, it had been under some rather strict requirements. There’s very little flexibility, unfortunately, and with the timing of your injuries and healing… if you’re unable to leave the hospital… I’m afraid you won’t be able to meet them.”

That… actually hadn’t really occurred to him. “Oh.”

Right, of course. That made sense. Izuku blinked, mind blank. He’d been so preoccupied with the activities of the present he hadn’t considered what this meant leading into the weeks to come.

“Young Midoriya?”

“Er, sorry, just zoned out! I’m here!” he said, perhaps a little too forcefully. “That’s too bad… but it makes sense. I understand. Yeah.”

There was a pause.

“Young Midoriya, it’s okay to be disappointed.”

“I—” Izuku was prepared to brush it off, but his voice caught. His resolve wavered just a bit, and without so much as taking a breath in, his thoughts began to spill out in the form of barely-coherent words.

“I... know. But being disappointed isn’t going to change anything about the way things are, right? I’ve dealt with disappointment my whole life, and fixating on it never really helped me accomplish anything. I’m super thankful you even helped me get the connection in the first place, like, how lucky am I? You’re All Might! And you’re already helping me so much. That’s why… that’s why I want to keep doing the best I can with what I have, because that’s what got me this far. I don’t want to mope, I still want to reach as many people as I can. So I’d rather just focus on what I can do… which I guess is probably just keep writing, at least for now. I’ll make up for the lost time last week by writing while I’m here.”

Izuku could hear the smile in All Might’s voice. “You’re more mature than most heroes I know, young man. Just don’t forget to make sure you’re taking care of your own feelings during all of this. If you want to save people’s hearts, you can’t afford to let your own suffer in the process.”

“Thank you, All Might,” Izuku’s ribs swelled just a bit, admiration making him feel almost giddy.
“I won’t forget.”

“Good. Now, tell me what you’re writing about for this next week. I have to keep up my end of the bargain as a teacher, you know.”

After a brief explanation of what Izuku had wanted to write and his subsequent inability to do so, All Might expressed his own frustration with the situation but ultimately agreed with Izuku’s decision.

“Besides, better to not challenge things with Endeavor right now. He’s still looking for an excuse to have you removed from Yūei, and I have little doubt that there would have been some story construed about how Yūei was to blame for your being in Hosu City for a school-sanctioned activity. Fill in the rest with possible rumors of student endangerment, encouraging students to take up vigilantism, et cetera. I may be paranoid, but I would put little past the man when he’s driven towards something.”

No, Izuku wouldn’t put it past him either; it took startlingly little effort to recall the awful, prickly feeling of having those bright-blue eyes scrutinizing him.

“I didn’t do it for that reason, but that is a good point… Anyway. For this week, I guess I might just try to write about someone again. Keep up with the standard—I think in one sense returning to a sort of ‘normal’ might help people, too? Getting back into a routine, what with the scare of Iida’s brother and all the other heroes. I just… I want to do something that I feel like would be helpful.”

The two spoke for a little while longer, joking lightly about the idea of anything at Yūei ever being normal. It was a little funny, once Izuku thought of it that way. All Might had to go shortly thereafter, and it was with a lightness in his chest that Izuku wished him well before hanging up the phone.

He may not be allowed to share with the world what happened in that alley, but there was a long path ahead that he still could explore, and it’s not like he had to face it all alone. He had All Might in his corner helping him through navigate through all the madness, his Mom who put everything she had into supporting him, and all of his friends.

With that in mind, Izuku was confident he could do anything.

________________________________________

Except, okay, he couldn’t do this.

After receiving the devastating news of his test results, Iida left that evening to stay at home with his family, and Izuku became hyperaware of the fact that he would be spending the night in a room with Todoroki.

Alone.

The thought alone made his face burn, and Izuku was grateful Todoroki had gotten up to get some food so he could process this information in peace.

He wouldn’t call it a panic, necessarily. A panic was—exhilarating? Bad, but sort of thrilling? This
was—oh god, he didn’t know what this was. Maybe he was dying? He felt like was dying.

Relax, relax. Izuku just had to approach this rationally. First of all, their beds were plenty far apart. And they had technically shared the room last night, too, and that had been easy! Except, Iida had been there, and Izuku had been totally unconscious when they arrived at the hospital... but this wasn’t *that* different. Right?

Right.

Izu had no reason to panic. He just had to relax, be himself.

*Just don’t accidentally broadcast your feelings over the hospital P.A. system or throw copies of your journal from the freakin’ roof of the hospital and you’ll be fine.*

Yeah. Izuku could handle this.

“Midoriya? Are you alright?” Todoroki asked, having returned in the midst of Izuku’s dissociative panic, and moved very close and very much into his line of vision.

He could not handle this.

“Ahhhhhh *yup,* totally, totally fine!”

Todoroki leaned back, pulling up a seat beside Izuku’s bed like he had earlier that day.

“Alright. Your heart monitor is rather, er, erratic. I can get a nurse if you need.”

Please, just get me a different personality and I’ll be A-OK.

“Nooo, ah. Must have just been day-dreamy—I mean, *dreaming.* Daydreaming.”

Expression blank, if not slightly confused, Todoroki just nodded and pulled out the deck of cards they’d been using earlier. It took Izuku much too long to realize it was he was, once again, responsible for his own social undoing—earlier, when they played Seven Bridge, Izuku had offered to teach them both how to play poker, too. But Iida was gone—did Todoroki still want to learn?

Neither of them said anything, but Todoroki did take out the cards and prepared to shuffle them, but stopped after cutting the deck and instead just sat them down again.

“Something wrong?” Izuku asked, reaching for the deck out of habit. Maybe Todoroki wanted him to deal?

Lips pursed, the other boy sat back and watched Izuku’s hands carefully. “I don’t know how to shuffle them like—that.”

“Ohh, okay. Makes sense... so, um, poker, yeah?” Izuku’s throat was so *dry,* and the laugh that he choked out sounded the way sandpaper must taste. “Promise you won’t go play this for money anywhere!”

“I have no desire to gamble,” answered Todoroki. “But I would like to learn. Seven Bridge was... *fun.*”

Unable to resist, Izuku snorted, just a little. “You say *fun* like it’s a cuss word, Todoroki! Your siblings and you had to have fun growing up, even if it was only sometimes, right?”
A ghost of a smile tugged at the corner of Todoroki’s mouth, and Izuku considered ripping the stupid ECG from where it was attached to him so it would stop outting him so freakin’ loudly.

_Gah—why does he have to be so good-looking?_

“I guess we did. They would play outdoors a lot. I would join them… on occasion. That was nice.”

_Phew, see, you’re all good. Just talk to him like a normal human being. All you have to do is just don’t look into his eyes, or think about how he somehow makes 1-day unwashed bed head look good, or reflect on the tiny, awful, hopeful little voice in his head that had adored how Todoroki had tried to stand up for him in front of the chief, or the fact that he thinks you’re a good writer, or that he actively held an arm out in front of Stain, or how nice it felt when he held your cheek after the Nomu—_

Wait, what was he supposed to be doing?

Izuku had gone on auto-pilot, and as a result he’d probably shuffled the deck at least five or six times by now. Privately mortified, he tried to force his thoughts to follow a different trajectory, though he couldn’t stop himself from turning just a shade of red that would have put All Might’s Silver Age costume to shame.

_Stupidstupidstupidstupid—_

“Oh, so,” he cleared his throat and dealt them each two cards. “We’re going to play the version I like best, because that just… makes sense? This is called ‘Texas hold ‘em’, like, you know, All Might’s Texas Smash! That’s part of the reason it’s my favorite… but it’s also just pretty fun, too. Heh. Okay. So these two cards are yours—don’t show me! And try not to reveal with your face if you’ve got good cards or not.”

As told, Todoroki peeked at his cards so that Izuku would not be able to see them.

“I have no idea what qualifies as a good or bad cards,” he noted, expression perfectly impassive.

Grinning, Izuku nodded. “I’m getting there, but I have a feeling you’re going to be a natural at this. Okay, so these cards in the middle are called the community cards. The face-up ones are technically part of both of our hands—public knowledge. And then we reveal these face-down ones, one-by-one, as we play. Now, what makes a good poker hand, there’s certain guidelines for that…”

After a rather extensive explanation on Izuku’s behalf, Todoroki seemed to get the gist, and they tried to play a round.

“Oh, we’re supposed to place bets, just for, like, incentive to judge how confident—or ‘fake confident’ we feel with our hands. Obviously we wouldn’t play for money… is there anything in here we could bet with?”

They both looked around the room for a moment, and Todoroki got up and looked around since Izuku was otherwise indisposed. Eventually, he picked up a container that was almost overflowing with—

“Cotton balls?” Izuku laughed. “Pfft. Okay!”

So, that was how the two ended up playing Western poker, and by extension, attempting to monopolize the cotton ball market of Room 509 by trading back and forth from their respective stockpiles of puffy, white currency. Of course, Todoroki turned out to be really good at poker, fast
to learn the strategies and impossible to read; Izuku at least had experience so could see through some of the more obvious tactics he employed earlier on.

The longer they played, the easier it was for Izuku to forget some of the more, erm, *distracting* aspects of Todoroki’s presence, falling into more of a natural rhythm of conversation. His ECG wasn’t whining quite as furiously, and Izuku even got the other boy to openly laugh when, in the thrill of a narrow victory, he threw his arms up and knocked almost the entire deck of cards onto the ground.

“Oh, that’s another popular game—” he chuckled through his apology, trying to gather the ones around him while Todoroki collected the rest without complaint. “Fifty-two card pick-up!”

“This is considered a *game*?” asked the other boy, rolling his eyes and laughing as he collected a majority of the cards, and Izuku could practically feel his blood pressure rising at the sound; hopefully Azumi-san wasn’t coming to check his vitals anytime soon. “Maybe I need to rethink how I define *fun*.”

One hour became two, and at nearly the third hour, the cards had been set aside, night proper having settled across Tokyo. From their window, a diffused orange glow tinted the glass, lampposts and neighboring buildings casting a sort of twilight over their strip of city that neighbored the hospital.

They returned the room to its earlier condition, apologizing for the wasted cotton balls—apparently those couldn’t be reused, which made sense in retrospect. Settling into their crinkly, stiff hospital cots, the green-haired boy was oddly reminded of what it was like to have a sleepover when he was a kid in a way, except his heartbeat was a blatant and stubborn barometer for his present stress levels. Right now, it was rather calm.

“Some people call this the witching hour,” Izuku hummed, studying the dark contrast and warm glow past Todoroki’s bed, definitely *not* sneaking any glances at the boy in his periphery. “I don’t know where that term comes from. I should look it up…”

Todoroki angled his head in Izuku’s direction, raising a brow and glancing at his phone. “I usually just call it 11.”

From the windows, shredded flecks of prismatic gold painted his face and caught in his eyes—like someone had folded up the sun into one of those paper snowflakes children made, cut little patterns into its surface, sprinkling the solar dust over his cheekbones, making him look, at least for a moment, prettier than Izuku had ever seen him. Or had ever seen anyone.

And Izuku—someone who mumbled as a habit, wrote notes for a hobby, voluntarily became a writer for the school newspaper—he was more than a little speechless.

Just, wow.

Okay. Maybe his crush was a little bit, possibly, *perhaps* a little out of control.

“Midoriya?” the other boy said his name like a question, and honestly, it didn’t even matter what he wanted. Todoroki could have asked if he was allowed to stab him, and Izuku would have thanked him.

Voice barely managing not to crack, he answered, “Y-Yes…?”

The other boy lifted his left hand, gazing at it, forming a fist. He unflexed his fingers slowly. With bated breath, Izuku waited, wondering if this was going to be something about Endeavor again—
was there more that Todoroki hadn’t originally told him? The thought terrified him.

“I think I’m cursed.”

“W-What?!” Izuku’s eyes widened. “Where did that come from?”

“I noticed the burn scar on your hand from when I lost control at the Sports Festival while we played cards… and thinking about Iida, too… why do people’s hands always get hurt when I’m involved?”

For just a beat, the room was silent.

“Todoroki, stop—I’m… pffft… I’m not used to hearing this many jokes from you!” Izuku cackled, wincing as the laughter disturbed some of the stitchings in his side, but he powered through the discomfort and kept giggling til there were tears in his eyes.

The other boy sat up in bed. It was almost even funnier because he “This isn't a joke! First the burn, and then Iida’s hand… am I the Hand Ruiner?”

“Oh my god,” Izuku was breathless by the time he managed to get himself under control, shaking his head. “Todoroki, I think you need to go to bed. I definitely do after that.”

“I—okay. So you don’t think I’m cursed…?”

“No, oh my god, you’re perfect, of c—it! freezing mid-sentence, Izuku’s eyes snapped open, suddenly mortified. Crap, crap! He’d let his guard down too much, how did he let that slip out?! Hastily, he flipped so he was facing the other direction. “O-of course you’re not cursed. Erm. A-Anyway… Good night!”

Todoroki sounded concerned. “Midoriya, your heart monitor is—”

“I’m just fine, I promise! Good night!”

After a long pause, Izuku’s heart swelled in his chest when he heard a low chuckle and the tell-tale sound of crinkly sheets.

“Good night, Midoriya.”

Meanwhile…
“ALL MIGHT IS WORTHY!”

Pause.

The news footage was shaky, but there was no mistaking some key figures in the scene. Still-framed, the image enhanced on the downed Nomu, the enigmatic, quirkless Yūei student, and the unmasked Chizome Akaguro, the moment his bloodlust was unleashed.

“Three Nomu,” muttered a heavy-set man, huddled over a computer monitor in a far corner of the dark, disconsolate room. He adjusted his thick-rimmed glasses, and resumed typing with vigor.

Along the opposite wall, an incorporeal figure stood in well-tailored threads, gaze narrowed at the jarring brightness of the screen. Seated at the accompanying desk was a masked man, wildly accessorized with all manner of medical equipment.

“Tomura was unhappy to learn that this child was present during the attack,” hummed the masked man. “Can you ensure that he doesn’t do anything rash, Kurogiri?”

“It is done, sir.” A small bow. “If I may ask, in the event Tomura is resistant...?”

“Why am I interested in the first place?”

Kurogiri’s silence was answer enough. In fact, the entire room had stilled; Dr. Tsubasa’s fingers had stilled over the keyboard.

“I have known many heroes, citizens, police, scientists, villains... by now, there are few who manage to hold my attention. Izuku Midoriya is an exception.”

All for One rested his chin against his hand, examining the screen.

“And exceptions make me curious.”

Chapter End Notes

thanks for reading!! your loving comments and supportive words mean the world to me!!

I wasn't planning on this being a stand-alone chapter, but when I realized that Izuku and Shōto actually do canonically spend one night in the hospital together, alone... I couldn't not write it all out!

NEXT UPDATE: School shenanigans! Featuring Momoiro, Kiribaku, AND it's time for finals?! 1-A has to fight their teachers... what about 1-C? And what exactly are these villains plotting?!

(ง •̀_•́)ง PLLLLLLLLUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUS ULLLLTRA AAAA!!!!!!
Chapter Summary

Now back to Yūei, the students have to start preparing for exams. Izuku struggles to find the perfect topic for his final project and feels deeply unsettled about the Hero Killer’s rise in popularity. Shōto witnesses a part of a strange series of coincidences and has a revelation.

Uraraka says: it's all according to keikaku! (Japanese for, 'plan')

Shōto was on his way to Yūei, and the smooth hum of the train was making him sleepy.

It was through a haze that he had even gotten to the station in the first place, the blur of his surroundings not even really registering while he made his way to school, mind preoccupied with reliving the events of the past week. The days since his discharge had been plenty taxing—emotionally, physically, mentally—and they had cost Shōto every remaining ounce of his patience.

His father had been relentlessly angry and demanding both, and he had pushed Shōto in those days following the events of the Hero Killer harder than he’d ever done before. The trainings were endless, exhausting, all-encompassing.

Shōto sighed, allowing his eyelids to slip closed for a moment. He didn’t drink coffee, but mornings like these made him consider the potential benefit of some added caffeine to his system.

There was little wonder as to what had brought on the added push to Shōto’s trainings.

*Your behavior was unacceptable. Disrespecting me in front of the Police Chief is already too far, but to lash out at the Police Chief himself—what has gotten **into** you?*

Shōto scoffed at the memory.

*Nothing*, he had answered.

And it was true. There was nothing different about him, besides that he was more vocal in his derision; the feelings themselves were not at all new.

He’d actually lost track of the number of times he had to stop in the middle of the regiments, barely supporting himself on his hands and knees or splayed flat on his black, choking down gasps of air or forcing down the bile that edged up his throat. Sometimes, it was hard to tell if it was him hitting the ground, or if the sound was imaginary, an echo of his Mom’s head smacking into a wall. The harder he worked, the blurrier the lines grew; one minute he was breathing heavily, and the next, he felt all of eight years old, or eleven, or thirteen again—gritting his teeth and pushing on if for no reason besides spite alone. He hurt in places he didn’t even know he had, and if not for pure exhaustion, Shōto would have probably been too uncomfortable to fall asleep.

The left side of his body had a much higher tolerance to burns compared to most people, just as his right side had a high threshold for frostbite, but he wasn’t immune to either by any stretch of the imagination. After enough conditioning, his body would adapt to handle most of the fiery rebound,
like it had adjusted to do with his right side, but he had a ways to go before that would be the norm.

Fuyumi had come to his room each night that week, quiet, a first aid kit in hand. With her quirk—
temperature manipulation, rather than elemental control—she cooled some bandages and wrapped
his burns, all while wearing a patient smile on her face. They chatted about mundane things: if
Shōto wanted anything particular for dinner that week or if he needed anything from the store; if
she had found time to catch up on a shōnen they both liked, or if there was anything interesting
going on with her students. She never asked him for details, and Shōto didn’t really want to talk
about it—why bother discussing something that was old news to both of them?

It was all Shōto could do, over the course of that week, to not allow himself to be overcome with
the numbness of ice that constantly threatened to recurse his bones when he was irritable, to draw
himself back continually from his past. Even now, from the turn of his idle thoughts, his right hand
had grown stiff with a fine layer of frost.

Old habits.

Shōto rubbed his left hand with his right, cooling his bandaged palm with ice-tipped fingers. It
soothed the ache, however distantly.

*It’s your’s. Your quirk, not his.*

He had to remind himself of those six words multiple times. It was perhaps a bit childish, but it
helped. Shōto found himself on more than one occasion wondering what Midoriya was doing.

The universe must have been listening, because not five seconds later did a buzz in his pockets
cause his eyes to blink open again.

*Izuku Midoriya (06:50)*

*I hope you’re having a good morning! ^-^*

[Image attached]

Unconsciously, Shōto smiled at the screen. He was unused to having someone to talk to so early.

Or at all, really.

Exchanging text messages with Midoriya had started more-or-less by accident, though Shōto had
initiated the contact; he texted Midoriya Tuesday afternoon, inquiring as to whether his discharge
from Hosu City hospital had gone according to schedule, but instead of receiving a regular message
back, Midoriya had mistakenly sent him a picture of a keychain. Evidently, his mother had
surprised him with the gift once he was cleared to leave the hospital, and the picture had been
meant for Uraraka, who Midoriya had also been messaging at the time Shōto had attempted to
contact him.

After a lot of frantic, unnecessary apologizing on Midoriya’s part, Shōto’s assumption about the
keychain were quickly corrected. It wasn’t just *any* keychain, but a limited-edition All Might
promotional keychain that was an add-on item to the new Golden Age: Go Beyond! merchandise
line debuting in a specialty store for hero collectibles, conveniently located halfway into the next
prefecture over. Midoriya spared no details as to why this particular keychain was like a gift from
God, down to the grade of plastics and manufacturer’s details. If there was a digital equivalent to rambling, Midoriya had perfected the art.

The misunderstanding that led to the conversation had been a little funny, in retrospect, and they talked a few more times that week for... well, for no particular reason. Shōto didn’t mind, really, and the collective conversations were punctuated quite nicely just now, by Midoriya sending a picture of the very special keychain proudly hanging from his backpack.

Shōto Todoroki (06:51)
I’m sure All Might would be flattered. And, thank you. You too.

The police chief may have been eager to write off their behavior that weekend in Hosu City as reckless, but Shōto couldn’t find it in himself to feel an ounce of regret. Well, maybe besides that Midoriya had to scrap his article, but considering what he could have lost had he not acted quickly —

Izuku Midoriya (06:53)

I am! Thank you!

Shōto would gladly do it again.

The stop for Yūei came up shortly thereafter, and he managed to drag himself out of his seat, through the station and down the short distance of Musutafu separating him from school. He kept his eyes forward as he made his way up the lengthy Yūei walkway, vaguely absorbing the sounds and sights around him, hands buried in his pockets. Fittingly, the day was about as gray as his mood, thoroughly overcast, the slight threat of rain coiling thickly in the atmosphere and dampening his lungs. It felt strongly like one of those days, where the best thing that could happen was just for it to be over.

When he was perhaps ten steps shy of the stairs, a voice popped into his ears like sparkling water, effervescent and soft both. Shōto stopped walking, blinking a few times before peering around the side of one of the decorative columns in the front of the building.

Seated on a ledge with his notebook in his lap, an unmistakable head of green hair was bent forward, laughing, struggling to keep his volume down but putting up a valiant effort with the way both hands covered his face. Shōto found himself smiling, a brow raised as he took note of Shinsō, lying facedown in the grass, presumably the source of Midoriya’s amusement. Texting Midoriya a few times had been nice, made the bubble of his home life feel a little less insulated, but Shōto now realized just how much of a far cry it was from the real thing.

Taking a moment to adjust his bag, Shōto glanced at his watch. Class would begin in about ten minutes, and he usually preferred to be early, but he decided he could afford just another minute or so.

Walking around the structure, he cleared his throat and waved. “Hello, Midoriya.”

The other boy’s posture shot up, ramrod straight, his eyes wide for a moment before the recognition set in. As it did, the sight was unbelievably gentle, like rays of sunshine sinking into the skin, or a harmonic chord played on a piano in an empty room. His smile bloomed, startlingly bright, unapologetic and distinctly for him.
“Todoroki! Good morning!”

Shōto’s own hands felt strangely damp and itchy all of the sudden, and he rubbed them together before approaching.

“Is he alright?” Shōto asked, stopping a bit shy of where Shinsō was laid out.

Shrugging, Midoriya said, “In an existential sense, probably not. But as far as why he’s lying on the ground… I just told him that I read a study where people who get a lot of sleep are more likely to die at a young age.”

“Then let me sleep,” grumbled the boy on the ground. “It’s the least you can do.”

“He hasn’t slept in almost three days” explained Midoriya, fighting back another laugh when Shōto raised both brows in concern. “He has insomnia.”

A groan of acknowledgment rose between them—idly, Shōto had to wonder what this might look like from an outside perspective. Shinsō was pale enough to mistake for a corpse, and on the ground like that… it made for an amusing mental image. They were just a dozen candles and a pair of dark, hooded robes short of performing some kind of ritual sacrifice.

“How are you feeling?” asked Shōto, meeting Midoriya’s eye. He was sincerely curious; Midoriya looked much better, his skin regaining its usual pink undertone, his usual gray uniform replacing the hospital gown he wore in Shōto’s recent memory.

A familiar tactic by now, Midoriya ducked his head before answering. It was a mannerism Shōto had started to pick up after they played poker: whenever Midoriya was dealt a good hand, he almost always did the same thing. “I’m—good! Well. A little tired. But good! I didn’t sleep super well those nights in the hospital, and I’m kind of hungry ‘cause I didn’t have time to eat breakfast, but I’m glad to be back to Yūei. We have a lot of work to do in 1-C in preparation for our exams, so I’m trying to get into studying mode!”

“He says, like he doesn’t already get a perfect score on every quiz or piece of homework.” Shinsō turned his head at long last, glimpsing up in Shōto’s direction. The two met eyes, and, consistent with Shōto’s earlier mental image, he couldn’t help but think he looked a little more like a ghoul than a human.

He decided not to share that thought out loud, glancing back towards Midoriya. “I didn’t know you did so well academically.”

Midoriya scratched his cheek, looking the other way. “Oh. Um. Yeah! It’s sort of… how I got into Yūei in the first place. Since I don’t have a quirk… being a good student is my one special thing, I guess.”

That wording struck Shōto as strange, and he tilted his head to the side for a moment. Before he had the opportunity to question him, Midoriya changed the subject.

“How did the remainder of your internship go? You mentioned that your Dad was pushing you pretty hard…”

Shōto glanced down at his bandaged fingers, flexing them slowly and then unfurling them again. “It was acceptable. Challenging, but I learned a moderate amount.”

“That is the most bland answer to any question I have ever heard in my entire life,” Shinsō pointed out. “Your quirk may be half-and-half but your personality is 100% lukewarm.”
“Aw, ‘Toshi, don’t be mean.” Izuku poked his friend with the edge of his shoe. “Anyway, I’m glad you got something out of it! I’m sure all of it will be worth it once you become a Pro.”

As if it took fighting of the entire mass of Earth’s gravity, Shinsō shambled to his hands and knees, groaning. “God, how you are always so positive this early? Disgusting.”

“Thank you!” Midoriya shot back, a cheeky grin in place while he stood up and tucked his journal away. “I try.”

The short student then repositioned himself, grabbing his friend from beneath the arm and tugging on him to get him to stand. “We’re going to be late, you can try to will yourself into dying in class.”

“Yeah, yeah. And now is when you cue the inspirational speech about how great I am to help motivate me or something.” Shinsō shook him off, but gathered his own belongings and began to steer them towards the entrance. “Save it for lunch. Today is gonna be rough, I’ll need the pick me up later.”

Midoriya chuckled, and Shōto caught sight of him laughing from the side as he followed after his friend. Maybe, he decided, he didn’t really need to start drinking coffee just yet after all. His mornings were turning out just fine on their own.

Classroom 1-A was filled with excited murmurs by the time Shōto arrived—even Bakugō seemed to be engaged in what appeared to be only a slightly begrudging conversation with Jirō, surreptitiously brushing a hand through his hair. Shōto maneuvered to his desk, the low chaffe of conversation winnowing over him like a steady summer breeze; acknowledging its existence, he was unable to really process any of the lingering meaning before the words were briskly gone from his mind.

“Wow, you did what during your internship?”

“What exactly did you see at Mt. Lady’s place?”

“It wasn’t a big deal, I just helped escort some folks…”

“IIDA!” loudly, Uraraka’s voice carried above the others, the brunette throwing herself at the class representative and hugging him tightly around the middle. “Oh my GOD, I’ve been so worried!”

“Now, now,” Iida gave his friend a quick squeeze before holding her out at arms’ length, hands firmly on her shoulders. “There is no need for such outbursts. Your concern is appreciated, but I am perfectly alright. I must remind you that we have to speak at respectable level for a classroom!”

“Oh yeah, that’s right,” Kaminari gaped, slinking his way to the back of the room, eyes flashing back and forth from Iida to Shōto. “You two went through the most! You guys got attacked by a real villain!”

A mix of awe and concern, Sero added, “Yeah, the Hero Killer… I’m glad you guys made it out alive. Seriously!”

“How was it? Your Dad saved you guys right—and Deku, too?” continued Kaminari.
By now, almost all of the class had begun to converge near Shōto’s desk, and Iida had sidestepped away from Uraraka to stand near him.

Yaoyorozu turned, a little waver of sadness coloring her tone. “I was worried.”

“I heard Endeavor saved you three?”

“Guess that’s what you’d expect of the Number Two Hero, though!”

“Tsch,” scoffed Bakugō barely glancing their way. “I’m surprised the guy didn’t manage to kill that shitty nerd. Guess your Dad’s to thank for that one.”

Just barely, Shōto resisted the urge to roll his eyes.

“Bakugō, c’mon,” said Kirishima, exasperated. “Be a little sensitive, that whole thing had to have been really scary!”

Distantly, Shōto had to remind himself that this was for the best.

You guys can make it up to me by becoming really great heroes, okay?

“Yeah. He saved us.”

“Scary,” Ashido remarked. “And I saw on the news that the Hero Killer was connected to the League of Villains! God, imagine if he had been at the USJ.”

“Ugh. Don’t say that, it’s freaking me out.” Crossing his arms over his chest, fighting a visible chill, Ojiro frowned. “Thank goodness you’re both alright. And what about little Deku? Is he okay? I read the column when it was posted on Wednesday, and I was surprised when he didn’t end up making any sort of comment about the Hero Killer getting arrested, considering that big piece he published on the subject two weeks ago…”

“Well, I mean,” Kaminari rubbed his chin thoughtfully. “You guys saw that video that’s going around? It makes Stain seem like, really tenacious and single-minded. Deku is an awesome writer but like, the way they make the Hero Killer sound so cool—going against that could really hurt his popularity.”

Uraraka was already rolling up her sleeves before Kaminari was finished, looking like she was about to beat the blond into the ground. “What is wrong with you?!”

The boy balked, taking a step back. “Huh? OH. Iida! I’m sorry—shit—”

“It’s alright. I understand how one could see him... that way.” There was a heavy, awkward pause. Shōto followed Iida’s line of sight as he studied the bandaging over his own arm. “But it’s over with now! The events surrounding the Hero Killer should only push us all to want to become better heroes. That starts with starting our lesson punctually! Let’s go—to your seats, everyone!”

Unable to help himself, Shōto chuckled just a tad when Iida moved his arms in that familiar, stiff fashion that looked like he was trying to help an airplane land on a runway rather than direct his classmates to his seats. Even as their classmates groaned and complained, they all complied with the Class Representative’s instructions.

“Still a tad disappointing. I would have liked to read the Hero Analysis! take on Endeavor bringing down the Hero Killer.” Tokoyami hummed, mostly to himself. “Not that reading about Mirio Togata wasn’t illuminating.”
“Oh, yeah. *Dang*, what a quirk that guy has...” Sero said, almost dreamily. “He could kick my ass and I’d thank him, honestly.”

“*Gay,*” Kaminari whispered. Sero just shrugged.

Nearby, Tsuyu tilted her head to the side. “Hmm, well, every quirk does have a disadvantage though. His seems to be really versatile, but Deku-chan pointed out in the article that he has to give up practically all of his senses to use his ability...”

Before the class could break out into a more intense discussion, as they had a tendency to do in the wake of anything Midoriya published, Aizawa-sensei appeared in the door with his signature eyebags and unwashed hair.

“I don’t care about whatever it is you’re talking about. We have a lot to cover today, so pay attention.”

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Ectoplasma-sensei hadn’t arrived for homeroom on time, so Izuku and Shinsō continued to catch each other up each other on their respective weeks.

“So, you were saying—Aizawa-sensei took you with him on a night patrol? How was it?!”

The indigo-haired boy rubbed his eyes and yawned. “Exhausting… but good. Really good. I liked how straight-up he was with me about everything. The capture weapon *sucks* to learn though.”

“That’s great, Shinsō,” Izuku said sincerely. “I feel your quirk would be really well-suited for underground hero work.”

“Thanks,” his friend replied. “Aizawa said the same, more or less, but that I was also sloppy as shit and I need to get a grip on more than just my powers if I wanted to advance, but that I had the potential to do so. He said, maybe I could… well...”

“Get into class A or B?” Izuku quipped a quick smile. His friend’s aspirations to move into the Hero Course were not a secret. “I know you can do it!”

“We’ll see,” Shinsō rolled his eyes, but managed a well-meaning, half-hearted grin. “And what about you? I saw the news coverage about the Nomu, that was fucking crazy.”

“Ah, yeah... it was...” Izuku’s voice tapered off, the stitches in his side itching at the memory.

“Life-changing and terrifying, honestly. Iida was attacked by the Hero Killer and when I found him in Hosu City, I texted as many numbers in my phone with my location and Todoroki showed up. We all almost died and then I was grabbed by a Nomu and now there’s that video going around about the Hero Killer and I have so much I want to say but I don’t know if I can because what if the Chief of Police comes after Iida and Todoroki as a form of punishment? There’s too much at risk but it’s driving me crazy because it’s wrong—people who see that will misunderstand! It could inspire copy-cats or almost paints the Hero Killer as a martyr and it’s not that I don’t see his reasoning, it’s still not an excuse to kill people! Oh and also Todoroki held my face and we played poker because I thought maybe I would get over my crush if we just became better friends and I honestly think I somehow just fell more in love with him!?"
Izuku didn’t really say that. He wanted to, but he didn’t.

“...it was pretty crazy,” he finished instead, lamely, fully aware that several classmates had turned to eavesdrop.

Thoroughly dissatisfied with Izuku’s refusal to gossip, his classmates returned to carrying on their own conversations.

“As for the rest of the internship... it was alright, but not great, if I’m honest. I didn’t get to do any writing the whole time while I was at HNN, and my supervisor there was a total jerk, but his quirk was sort of interesting, so I at least got to take some notes on that. I had the form in my jacket when the Nomu grabbed me so it got shredded and blood on it so I’m hoping to stay after class and explain to Ectoplasma-sensei. Do you think he’ll still give me credit?”

Shinsō’s eyes were wider than Izuku could ever remember seeing them. “Uh. One. That all really sucks. And two, yeah, I’m pretty sure you’ll be given a free pass considering you were attacked by a fucking monster.”

Izuku sort of suspected the same thing, but he was glad to hear it didn’t sound like he was trying to make an excuse. If ever there was a time that missing school work could be forgiven, he felt like this was definitely one such instance.

Ectoplasma-sensei entered the classroom a half-second later, and Shinsō returned to his seat quickly while the rest of the class quieted down.

“Apologies for my tardiness everyone, thank you for waiting. I was making copies of this assignment, but Present Mic had conveniently just broken our main photocopier by trying to see what would happen if he tried to email himself a copy of water.”

The class was completely silent.

“I wish I was kidding,” their teacher continued as he handed out a stack of papers. “Anyway. We have to talk about your exams. All of you are required to take the primary written exam, which will cover all of the core academic subjects from the past few months. You’ll see on the sheet that all of your teachers are providing in-school and after-school office hours to help review any materials you need, but they will only be available during these time slots, so speak to them sooner rather than later if you want to review.”

Izuku’s eyes scanned the list, taking note of Ectoplasma-sensei’s instructions.

“Additionally, you must create an independent project that reflects the knowledge you’ve learned in your studies so far. The grading rubric is on the back—” he paused while half the class flipped over their pages, “—but you’ll notice the criteria is very broad. You can make a presentation, design an activity, work with the Support Department to design a costume or a support item, coordinate another internship, so on and so forth. As long you showcase why and how the particular project highlights at least one of the subjects covered in class, we are willing to be open-minded. You’ll have the remainder of this morning’s lesson to discuss amongst yourselves, or ask questions. The more you are able to incorporate into your project proposal, the more likely your project is to be approved; submissions are due this Wednesday at the end of the day. Depending on
what you come up with, the final due date to submit or present your project may fall anytime between next Monday and next Friday—generally speaking, the more ambitious the project, the more likely you are to be granted additional time.”

A girl in the front with scaly skin raised her hand. “Sensei, are we allowed to work together?”

“You can work collaboratively on coming up with ideas, or you can help your classmates with their projects, but it will be one grade per ‘finished project’. So if you and Agoyamato, for example, worked together to come up with a criticism for the escape procedures for a historical villain incident, like the ones outlined in your Heroics textbook, only one of you could be graded for the completed essay. But if you worked on distinctly separate ‘components’ of the project that could be graded individually, that would be acceptable. That might look like one of you designing a hero costume and the other designing a weapon that goes along with it.”

Izuku was practically buzzing in his seat as Ectoplasma answered a few more questions. Naturally, Izuku only had about a billion ideas, and it took getting out his notebook and letting his pen fly across the page that he managed to keep his composure. (He did start muttering, but virtually everyone in 1-C, including their teacher, had learned to tune it out and they all proceeded without skipping a beat.)

Finally, Ectoplasma-sensei dismissed them from their seats so they could talk amongst themselves, and Izuku basically rocketed over his desk to go rattle off ideas to Shinsō.

“Oh my god this is going to be such a cool project we can basically do anything we want as long as it’s approved! I was thinking of maybe writing a special, comprehensive quirk analysis—you know, 1:1 comparisons from type to person. Oh, or I could do everyone in our class, or maybe 1-A and 1-B would be more interesting? Oh or what about an essay! Oh my god I could write an essay about All Might! I could talk about the development of his signature moves overtime or—or maybe his costumes throughout the years! Shinsō!! This is so exciting! Shinsō—Shin, are you listening?”

It took him a few added seconds to realize that his indigo-haired friend was, in fact, asleep.

“Pfft,” Izuku laughed. He mercifully decided to let his friend continue to snooze, seeing as Shinsō hadn’t slept in literal days. Instead, he used the free time to go back to his own desk and start outlining all of his different competing project proposals; it’s not like Izuku had any shortage of ideas that he could write about.

To the surprise of no one, for Izuku, that class period flew by. Shinsō slept through the entire thing, and Izuku had to catch him up to speed as they walked towards the cafeteria.

“Annnnnyway. That basically covers everything! So, what do you think? What will you do for your practical project?”

Shinsō gave him a look that could only be described as contempt or loathing, but Izuku was in too good of a mood to mind.

“I’ve been awake for like, five minutes. I don’t know yet.”

“You’re no fun.”

Shinsō scrubbed a hand down his eyes. “Go flirt with Todoroki or something, I’m too fucking tired today to deal with you.”

“Okay, okay, I’ll stop,” Izuku huffed, embarrassed at the mention of the 1-A student. “I was just
excited.”

Yawning, the purple-haired boy carded a hand through his messy hair. “I—I know. Ugh. Sorry, I’m not meaning to be such an asshole. I’m just tired. After spending all that time with Aizawa, of course I have some ideas. I dunno. They might be dumb, since I can’t really think clearly right now.”

“Well, if you want someone to give you feedback…” Izuku offered, the last word spoken with a sing-song hum and a matching, knowing smirk.

“Don’t make that face. I hate when you make that face.” Shinsō groaned.

In response, Izuku’s smile just widened.

Watching his friend’s posture visibly wilt, Izuku knew he had won.

“Fine. When Ectoplasma-sensei was explaining, I was originally trying to think of some way to do something involving 1-A, since I know Aizawa-sensei now, but they’re all still mostly fuckers as far as I’m concerned so that’s out.”

“Hey! Uraraka, Iida, and Todoroki are in 1-A! Don’t be like that.”

“I said mostly, didn’t I?” Rolling his eyes, Shinsō waved him off. “Anyway, other than that, I don’t really know… maybe try to figure out something that could complement my quirk, but I’m sort of drawing blanks. Like, I’m learning how to use that capture weapon, but that won’t meet the criteria for the project. And honestly, if I want to compete against the Hero Course kids I’m going to need more than that.”

“Oh!” Izuku dropped his fist into his other open hand. “Why don’t you try to build yourself a Support Item, then? We could talk to Hatsume, if you want.”

“Hatsume… that’s Crazy-Eyes, right?”

Izuku glared at him, and Shinsō held up his hands apologetically. “Geez, it was a joke! Yeah. Fine. Talking to Hatsume sounds like a good idea.”

Both 1-C students had brought their own bentos, so they skipped the lunchroom entirely and went straight to the Support Department. The door to Hatsume’s workshop was slightly ajar, and, tentatively, Izuku poked his head inside. The scene was less than reassuring: it was pitch black. There was a small sliver of light that cut through the room like a sun-tipped blade, sourced from the crack in the doorway, but otherwise it was impossibly dark.

“U-Um, Hatsume…? Are you… here?”

No response came at first, and just when Izuku was able to suggest they head back to the dining hall, a loud, flinty sound shattered the silence like glass in a jet stream. Izuku swore his heart leapt right into his throat.

“Well, well!” The lights flicked on, and Izuku nearly fell over in relief. Hatsume walked around from behind a colossal robot-mech of some sort, almost reaching the ceiling, her whole body
patched with black grease and dark dust.

She swung an oversized wrench over her shoulders in a way that, Izuku supposed, was probably meant to be congenial. To him, it seemed more threatening than anything. “If it isn’t Writer Deku! Have you finally come to take down my official interview? Or perhaps you need more ink? Maybe a lesson on how to properly tie a tie?”

“What’s wrong with my tie?” Izuku looked down at his uniform before shaking his head. “Wait, no, nevermind. Um, well—several things. First, since you brought it up, I may have… accidentally… perhaps… broke the pen…? So I don’t need any more ink. Ah. Haha. S-Sorry…”

Nervously, he felt his muscles tense, wondering how many swings it would take from a wrench that size to kill him, but to his surprise Hatsume just grinned even wider.

“So you were using my baby after all! Prototypes aren’t meant to last for very long anyway. Thanks for trying it!”

Izuku felt a squirm of guilt in his stomach at that, because it’s not like there was anything actually wrong with the prototype. He’d be surprised if the finished product could have withstanded Izuku cutting off the end off with a serial killer’s whetted blade. “Well… I’m glad you’re not mad…”

“Mad? Nah.” Walking to her work bench, Hatsume propped up the wrench against the wall and used a rag to wipe off her hands. “My babies are all made to be used, Writer Deku! I’d be more upset if you forgot about it and it just sat in the bottom of your bookbag forever or something. So, what can I do for you? Do you and your leering friend need a place to hide for another lunch period?”

“Leering?” Shinsō quoted, raising a brow. He had taken to leaning on the doorframe, not fully following Izuku the first few steps into the workshop.

Of course, not wanting to strain the already tentative friendship they had with Hatsume, the quirkless student put up his hands and forced a laugh. “Ohhh, she’s just joking, Shinsō. We wouldn’t want to upset Hatsume, since we’re going to be asking her a favor, right?”

“More specifically, I wanted to ask if you would do me a favor,” Shinsō corrected, approaching an adjacent bench to Hatsume’s and taking a seat. “We have finals the week after next, and I want to design a support item for myself. The only problem is, I don’t know shit about support items, so.”

Lips pursed, the pink-haired girl narrowed her gaze and examined Shinsō carefully, not unlike a museum curator trying to discern the legitimacy of a painting or sculpture. Izuku had no idea what she saw in her hawkish attention, but after a quick semi-circle around where he was seated, she returned to her bench.

“Nope. Sorry. I don’t have time to work with any 1-C students right now. I can ask Power Loader if anyone else in my class has time.”

“Oh.” Shinsō didn’t seem angry, necessarily, just surprised. “Why? Midoriya is in 1-C.”

Now it was her turn to look surprised. “Who’s Midoriya…?”

“That’s me,” Izuku sheepishly raised his hand. “My real name, that is. Izuku Midoriya.”

“Huh. Well, Writer Deku has a nicer ring to it anyway.” Hatsume’s eyes gleamed knowingly, but they were quickly getting away from the subject. Izuku just dismissed the tangent and got right to the point.
“You can call me whatever you want, Hatsume, but why won’t you work with Shinsō?”

She rested her knuckles on her hips and sighed. “It’s not personal, I assure you. But I’ve got to look out for me, and right now with my own exams around the corner too, and working with some of the Hero Course students who want to make adjustments to their full costumes, I’m stretched a little thin. At some point, Mei Hatsume original products are going to be flying off the shelves, but that requires branding and marketing and working with people who promote my babies! General Studies are usually totally welcome in my workshop, but this isn’t a good time, and I have to keep my priorities in order. Deku here is an exception, because I’m marketing to him, and ultimately, all of his readers across the whole hero industry!”

Shinsō held his hands up, gesturing for her to stop. “No, I mean, I don’t want you to do it for me. I’ll make it. Can you just help me get started? And maybe let me borrow your space?”

Izuku volunteered immediately when Hatsume continued to appear skeptical. “I’ll help! I can, uh, pitch ideas or be your assistant for the time being!”

Shinsō sent him a grateful look while Hatsume mulled it over.

“Hmm... A consultation? I guess we can use the rest of this lunch period and tomorrow’s to talk through some things, since next week is when my schedule will really change anyways. But—I will agree only on one condition!” Sparring no theatrics, Hatsume spun around and pointed directly at Izuku. “Writer Deku! I want you to test out some more of my new babies! All the more to inspire you for my debut article, whenever that may be.”

Hatsume’s chaotic, but well-meaning, energy was sort of infectious, and Izuku found himself beaming and nodding along, practically bouncing in place. “Yeah! Okay! I can do that.”

So long as the inventions didn’t kill him, Izuku was genuinely curious to see all of the things she could come up with; the pen she had given him on a whim had basically saved his life, even if he hadn’t really used it for its intended purpose.

For the remainder of the period, Hatsume cleared out space on her own workbench for Shinsō to set up shop, casually passing a few things into Izuku’s hands every now and again and instructing him on how to use the invention properly.

It was during a moment of “downtime,” while Izuku was between removing some electromagnetic inserts from the soles of his shoes and stuffing his face with curried rice, that his phone startled him, buzzing in his pocket.

Shōto Todoroki (11:51)

Will you not be coming to lunch today?

Izuku wasn’t—he wasn’t freaking out at all. Pfft. No way. He had some control over his emotions.

(It didn’t sound convincing, even in his head.) Nervously, he picked at his bottom lip while he thought about how to respond.
Izuku didn’t receive a response after that, the absence of which he proceeded to overanalyze to the point that it occupied his attention well into their next lesson. And the next one. And, basically, for the whole day.

Did I make him mad? Wait, why would he be mad? Did he want to spend lunch together? No—maybe? No. Very unlikely. Probably just curious? Maybe the silence wasn’t even anger, maybe his phone died, or maybe he just didn’t have anything to say in response? Should I have not included the bit about tomorrow? Maybe that was too much information—

“Midoriya,” was all Shinsō had to say, and that was enough to get him to zip it for a few minutes at a time before the anxiety started to creep up on him again.

At the end of the day, the pair of General Studies students went back to Hatsume’s workshop to firm up a few details on Shinsō’s part, and, more imminently, for Izuku to pile up his book bag with all the different gadgets and gizmos Hatsume had picked out for him. He managed to awkwardly shrug it all into his shoulders once his bag was packed to the limit, the pink-haired engineer watching on with knowing delight.

Honestly, Izuku just prayed that nothing was going to explode on his way home.

Friday came with a handful of oddities for Shōto, least of which was being approached by Uraraka mere seconds after sitting down at his desk.

“Good morning, Todoroki! How are you?”

“Fine,” he answered, raising a brow. “Did you need something?”

The brunette pulled out her phone and thumbed through the screen for a moment. “Well, not exactly. I was just wondering if you wanted to come with me and a few of the GB!W folks tonight. Remember, I mentioned we sometimes go out for boba? This is going to be our last ‘real’ meeting since everyone’s going to be busy with studying. Next week there’s just going to be a super short meeting and then there’s just a goodbye celebration thing Nejire is hosting for our last Friday before the summer. So far, me, Iida, Shinsō and Deku are all going. We have a few more maybes, but that’s it for now.”

“Oh.” Shōto let that set in for a moment, and he couldn’t remember if there was anything he was supposed to do tonight. If he did have something, it was probably something his father arranged, thereby something Shōto deemed unimportant. “Yes, sure. I’ll go.”

“Great!” Beaming, Uraraka returned her attention to her phone. “Deku did end up sharing your number with me, so I’ll just go ahead and add you to our group chat. Does that sound okay?”

“Er, sure.”
Not even a second later, Shōto’s phone buzzed, presumably satisfying Uraraka’s request.

(XXX)-XXXX-XXX (08:21)

Hey! I just added Todoroki-kun to the group chat. Say hi everyone! He’s gonna come with us later.

He quickly added Uraraka’s number to his contacts, to make the conversation less confusing.

Tenya Iida (08:21)

Welcome, Todoroki-kun. Uraraka-san, please don’t text during school hours.

(XXX)-XXXX-XXX (08:22)

mfw when you get yelled at via text about texting during school hours-- anyway, hey. Shinsō here.

Izuku Midoriya (08:23)

Oh, hi! Right, we were going to do boba today. You’re definitely welcome to come, Todoroki-kun!

Ochako Uraraka (08:23)

All according to keikaku!

Izuku Midoriya (08:24)

Wait Uraraka what do you mean???

Shōto Todoroki (8:24)

Thank you. Just let me know the details of when and where and I’ll meet you all accordingly.

Iida looked about ready to blow out his engines, and Shōto suspected he and Uraraka were seconds away from receiving some demerits only for Aizawa-sensei to arrive. Class began per usual, everyone taking their seats, and Iida seemed at least pacified that the texting ceased.
Shōto waited at the end of the Business Department’s hallway for the *Go Beyond! Weekly* meeting to conclude. It was strange, he realized, that the only time he had been in this part of the school in the months since he has been enrolled at Yūei was, ironically, for the express purpose of seeing the staff of the newspaper, not to actually utilize the business services offered by the school. In a way, he almost felt guilty for not taking better advantage of the resource, but in a more practical sense, those same resources would be wasted on him.

He would never really be in a position where he had to worry about his finances, whether that be a stock portfolio or a retirement fund or the like. Vaguely, Shōto was aware that his family did not come from modest means, but the degree to which that differed from his classmates was still largely opaque to him. He knew, for instance, that not everyone came from families of repute like he, Iida, or Yaoyorozu, and that on more than one occasion his classmates had seemed to balk at things they talked about, but otherwise it wasn’t something that came up often.

The doors to 1-K opened after a few more minutes, and Midoriya, Uraraka, Iida, and Shinsō exited together, the first two chattering happily while the latter two followed in a pleased and muted silence, respectively. A few others filed out behind them, but they moved en masse directly towards the stairs.

Shōto waved while their group of friends approached, not wanting to interrupt their conversation.

“I think it’ll be a nice complement to Nejire-chan’s editorial!” Uraraka said, her tone carrying just a hint of finality before she turned her attention to Shōto.

“Hi, Todoroki! Thanks for waiting.”

Shinsō and Iida met eyes, pointedly, but the glance went unseen by him. Instead, Midoriya had just greeted him his usual, pretty smile, which Shōto did his best to return with a smaller version of his own.

“Hello,” he greeted after a pause. “How was your meeting?”

When no one answered, Uraraka bumped into Midoriya’s side.

“Hu-h? Oh. Oh! The meeting was—*great*! Good. Yep.”

Clearing his throat, Iida gathered all of their attention, moving his arms as he gestured first to his phone, and then to the stairwell. “I must apologize to you all! I received a text from my mother during the meeting and she said some family stopped home to surprise us with a visit. I must head back at once, so I will not be joining you.”

“Oh. Well, okay, have fun—” Midoriya said, but the Class Representative was already halfway gone.

Shinsō scratched the back of his neck, looking the other way. “Ugh, bad timing, but I’ve got to do something for my parents, too.”

“W-well we could always—”

Uraraka had her cell phone out and answered a call. “What’s that Mom? You need me home right away? I’ll be right there! Sorry, guys—bye!”

“Wait—you guys can’t just—!”
By the time Midoriya got the last word in, they were completely alone in the hallway.

“That was an unusual series of coincidences,” Shōto commented, almost amused.

Midoriya gripped his bookbag straps tightly, gazing suspiciously at the stairwell where their friends had just vanished just seconds ago.

“Yeah… it sure was.” Sighing, Midoriya turned his direction, gazing at their shoes. “I guess since everyone else was busy, we should probably just go home—you probably have stuff to do and—”

Shōto held up a hand to stop him. “I’d still like to go. I canceled my evening plans already.”

“O-Oh… c-cancelled?” Gaze wide, the 1-C student’s gaze seemed far-off for a long moment. “Oh, well, you can still do whatever you had to do, hah, you don’t have to spend the time with me… Unless you want to! Which if you don’t is totally fine—”

“I want to.” Shōto tried to sound firm without seeming angry or annoyed, because, truthfully, he wasn’t. He just wanted Midoriya to understand that he was being sincere without worrying unnecessarily or rambling. “I don’t know the place you all usually go to, so why don’t you lead the way?”

Completely red in the face, Midoriya paused for several seconds before his whole expression transformed with a beaming smile.

“O-Okay! It’s not far from campus, so let’s uh—get going!”

As promised, the walk wasn’t very far; Shōto would have guessed less than fifteen minutes, but he also hadn’t been paying very close attention to the time. The first part of walk was mostly quiet, Midoriya occasionally mumbling to himself, when Shōto got a text message from Yaoyorozu regarding studying for final exams. Evidently, she was having other members of 1-A over to her house, but Shōto didn’t particularly need the extra studying so he declined.

Once the subject of exams was brought up, however, Midoriya seemed especially excitable. The remainder of the walk passed quickly as he talked and talked, Shōto happily listening and responding when appropriate.

“So we have the option to do almost anything for our final project! Shinsō is going to be making some kind of support gear with Hatsume’s help, and as long as Ectoplasma-sensei approves it, I think it’ll turn out to be a great tool for him to use! But I can’t tell you anything about it, sorry, I’m sworn to secrecy! Heh. So between that and studying for the written exam and writing for the paper and testing out Hatsume’s crazy inventions—that was the deal for her to help Shinsō—I’ve had like, no time, so it’s really nice that Uraraka planned this! I really needed a break before we shift into exam mode …Well, it was nice, even though she flaked. For my own project, I was thinking about doing a deep dive into All Might, but that would be way too much to cover in a week, so I might focus-in on something specific, like a particular period or age. I could compare his signature moves, I’ve always wanted to go through them one-by-one and it would be such a good opportunity to ask him questions the next time I see him… And here—this is the shopping street. It’s that place with the big orange sign in the front.”

Shōto said nothing, taking a moment to allow all of that information sink in and following Midoriya’s instructions. The 1-C student had a sort of incredible capacity for jumping around from one subject to the next without breaking so much as to breathe.

Once he gathered his thoughts, Shōto said, “Hm. Examining some of All Might’s more iconic
battles could be interesting on a meta-comparative level, but it would probably be more applicable to the assignment to pick apart a single incident and talk through the strategies, conflicts and resolutions. Something like… maybe the fight he had with Blue Agent could be really interesting, especially since the terrain put All Might at such a notable disadvantage.”

When he received no response, Shōto glanced to the side. Midoriya looked a little dazed.

“Something wrong?”

“Just trying to figure out how you’re so… perfect…” Midoriya shook his head, quickly adding, “so perfectly able to recall! Uh! His fight with Blue Agent. I mean. Most people aren’t able to just pull up facts about All Might like that when talking to me… besides maybe Kacchan.”

Now Shōto was the one confused. “Bakugō?”

“Yeah, heh, don’t tell him I told you, but he’s a total All Might fanboy! He just hides it really well… ah, and I mean it, please don’t tell him I said anything. He probably would actually try to kill me.”

“Noted.”

“Anyway,” he tapped his chin while they approached a brightly colored cafe, neon signs making it very evident that they were open, had boba, and seemed like the kind of place his sister might like. “I just didn’t expect you to respond so… thoughtfully.”

“Do I usually respond… thoughtlessly?” Shōto wondered aloud, curious, but Midoriya was immediately waving his hands back and forth.

“No, no! Guh. Why does everything I say come out wrong? I just—I didn’t realize you liked All Might!”

“Oh.” Shōto blinked, grabbing the door as Midoriya opened it. “I used to watch him on T.V. with my mother when I was younger. I don’t know if I continued to follow the news on him because I’ve always looked up to him, or out of spite against my father.”

Midoriya seemed taken aback, and he began to laugh abruptly. In an attempt to keep his volume down, seeing as they were now standing in line in a cozy, vibrant, crowded facility, he ducked his head and covered his mouth. Shōto noticed that the 1-C student was several centimeters shorter than him and the difference was only more pronounced when he dropped his head like that.

“Sorry, sorry. I don’t think I’ll ever get used to hearing you talk about Endeavor like that.” Midoriya half-whispered. “All of this is to say, thank you for the suggestion. I’ll definitely keep the fight he had with Agent Blue in mind if I end up doing that for my project. Our proposals are due on Wednesday so Shinsō and I at least have the weekend to think things over.”

Shōto nodded to show he’d been listening, but he was busy studying the menu so he would be ready to order when he got to the front of the line.

They had strawberry. Excellent. That made his choice very easy.

Midoriya had also taken to reading the menu, so Shōto looked around to get a better sense of their surroundings. The shop was larger than it appeared from the street, though it was evidently popular as there were only a few tables left at which they could sit. There were orange boba with cute, shoujō-anime-worthy eyes painted onto the crisp, white walls, with several iterations of the shop’s name outlined in a bright contrasting blue all around, along with different little facts about the
business. The more he saw, the more less Shōto wondered why Midoriya and their friends would come to this particular cafe; it was just the right appropriate amount of cute that suited them perfectly.

*Them*. Was Shōto included in that *them* now?

They both ordered and paid respectively—Shōto did consider offering to pay since he knew Midoriya came from modest means, but he didn’t want to appear disrespectful. Midoriya seemed more than willing to pay for himself anyway, happily ordering some kind of customized matcha something-or-other.

“Sooo, uh…” Midoriya cleared his throat while they waited for their drinks. “Got anything planned for this weekend?”

Shōto considered his schedule. He did have quite a lot going on that weekend.

“Yes.”

There was a long pause, and Midoriya’s lips thinned. “Ahh. Well, anything, erm, fun?”

“Oh, you mean, like, social activities? Not really. I will be visiting my mother tomorrow, although I don’t think that’s the kind of ‘fun’ you’re referring to.”

“You’re going to see your Mom? I thought, you know, all that you told me about at the Sports Festival, you weren’t…”

“I went and saw her the weekend after that, actually,” Shōto said, amending Midoriya’s assumption. “I’ve been visiting her whenever I have a day off. Things are… better now. I feel much happier with her in my life again.”

Midoriya began to say something, but the clerk preparing their drinks called their names, and Shōto volunteered to grab their orders. When he returned, Midoriya was standing on his tip-toes, looking for a table.

“Thanks!” He took the drink from Shōto. “And… not just for the drink. I mean, thanks—for hanging out. I know Uraraka and the others were supposed to come too and I hope you weren’t too disappointed that they all… conveniently vanished… but I’m glad we still got to do this. It’s nice to take a break once and awhile.”

Shōto, a bit surprised, was about to assure Midoriya that it was fine, but he stopped when he noticed the green-haired boy’s expression. His smile held all of its usual glow, just as bright and earnest as ever, but there was a sort of unguardedness about it, because of which, Shōto swore, he could see the actual stars in Midoriya’s eyes.

It was so sudden, and sincere, that Shōto felt compelled to look away, his own pulse quickening.

He was—he was being silly. Why was he reacting like this?

“Anyway! Um! There’s a table back there,” Midoriya said, shuffling forward, but Shōto didn’t follow him right away, just watched the space between his shoulders as he moved further into the cafe.

There was always something about him—*something* that kept Shōto guessing—but for once, in that moment, it felt a little more discernible. It was the answer to the endless question, the source of light that mystified Shōto on occasion, the fire that stoked the flames of Midoriya’s constant and
fierce conviction.

He had noticed before, all of these little features about Midoriya, but this was the first time he could see the little fiber threads that pulled him together, green and soft stitches, grass after a thunderstorm, seaglass along the shore.

Kindness.

That was it.

It seemed too simple. Maybe it was too simple. But that was it. Midoriya saw the good in everyone; he’d even seen it in Shōto when it was so deeply buried beneath the resentment he’d had for his Father, he himself hadn’t even known there was anything left. For so long, Shōto hadn’t known what he was doing, or even who he was trying to be, because letting go of everything—his resentment for his father, the scarring around his heart where his mother had once lived, the absence of Tōya at their dinner table, the lonely days spent inside the training hall rather then with his siblings or even making friends. Losing all of that meant Shōto would have to redefine himself, and while it was miserable, it was familiar. Comfortable, in a twisted kind of way. Shōto kept chasing his own personal darkness because, who was he supposed to be without it?

But then, Midoriya made his way into the mix. He made himself vulnerable on purpose, turned it into his strength, and drew it out of everyone around him, too. Shōto wasn’t immune, and soon, things started to take on different shapes. It wasn’t like clearing out a house and selling all the furniture, it was freshening the upholstery or dusting out the cobwebs; persistence and kindness together eventually nettled its way past all of Shōto’s carefully built walls.

And then, before he even noticed, he had made a home out of someone he never even meant to let in.

And now? Shōto was standing in a cafe, with orange boba wall decals painted onto the walls, watching that same person lead him to a table, a bounce in his step and a sureness to his smile that made everything feel like it would be okay.

When Midoriya realized Shōto had not followed, he stopped and glanced over his shoulder, cheeks still pink.

For the first time he could recall since he was maybe a grade schooler, if that even counted, an abrupt and alarmingly coherent thought skimmed over the surface of his mind.

I wonder what it’s like to kiss someone.

“Coming, Todoroki?”

I wonder what it’s like to kiss you.

Izuku wrinkled his nose in displeasure when he sat down and tried his drink. Todoroki noticed, brows rising into his hairline.

Shrugging, Izuku dismissed the look. “I just asked for light ice, not no ice. It’s kind of warm.”
“Would you like me to cool it down?” Todoroki reached his hand forward, but paused, the offer hanging in the air like the dust moats that breezed by in the setting sunlight.

“Oh—right! I forgot you could… yes, if you don’t mind!” excited, Izuku pushed his cup towards Todoroki and his left hand closed around it. Like a child watching a magic trick, Izuku’s eyes sparkled with mystified interest, and then Todoroki passed it back.

“How’s that?”

Starting with a cautionary sip, Izuku smiled fondly and nodded. “Much better. Thank you.”

“My father had me because he thought the combination of his power and my mother’s would make the perfect quirk. It’s always funny to me when I use it for everyday things, though. Feels sort of… ironic.”

That caused Izuku to bubble with a laugh. “Hey, a quirk is a quirk. My mom’s is attraction of small objects, so basically a minor telekinetic quirk but only with small things in a relatively small radius. She could use it to do anything, but she uses it for cleaning all the time! If it makes your life easier, then why not?”

“I suppose that’s true,” Todoroki said. “Unless of course you’re using it to save someone’s life. Then you’ll get into trouble.”

Chuckling, Izuku chewed a boba. The comment reminded Izuku of something that had been bothering him, and he carefully decided to broach the subject (only after he looked around to make sure no one was eavesdropping).

“Hey, Todoroki…” Izuku leaned across the table to keep his voice down. “Can I ask you something, uh, about Hosu City?”

The other boy nodded, wordless.

“Well… I’ve been really unsure how to feel about this,” he admitted. “I was thinking about the thing I wrote about, erm, what happened. You know, what you read while we were in the hospital?”

“Yes. I’m sorry again about that.”

Izu shok his head, but smiled to show he appreciated Todoroki’s sympathy. “No, don’t be. I would do it again, too, if I had to. But I’ve just been… I don’t know. Frustrated by the video that has been going around about the Hero Killer. Have you seen it?”

It took the other a moment to respond, drinking his tea. “I’m familiar with it, yes.”

Izu bit his lip, looking down at his drink. “I don’t regret the choice I made for your sake and Iida’s… but I really dislike that video. I feel like, they mischaracterize the homicides as something to be admired… and it worries me. I know I can’t do anything about it now, but it just makes me nervous—sometimes it just takes a push in the right, or wrong, direction for someone to end up on any given path. I know I shouldn’t, but it somehow feels like my responsibility to do something!”

Unintentionally, Izuku raised his voice just a little towards the end, so he wilted back into his chair and tried to avoid eye contact. “I feel like Nejire would support it, after talking to her a bit at the meeting today. She almost encouraged I write something to that effect, after the first article about the Hero Killer became so successful… It felt wrong to lie to her, she’s done so much for me.”
“Are you…” Todoroki eventually responded, forehead knit together. “Asking if I think it’s a good idea for you to publish the story?”

“Well, not exactly… or maybe I am?” he answered honestly, playing with the straw to his drink. “It might be seen as reductive at this point, what with the popularity of the video and all… like I’m responding to the people who praise what Stain was doing. But maybe that’s okay? I don’t know. It’s just been driving me crazy because I can’t talk to anyone about it either, except you or Iida, and I still feel sort of uncomfortable bringing the subject up to him. After everything with his brother… I just… this is the one thing I’m supposed to be able to do! All Might told me… even though I don’t have powers… I do have a voice. And not using it just feels wrong.”

After taking several thoughtful seconds to sip his drink, Todoroki formulated a slow response.

“I think you should publish it, if that’s what you want to do. All Might is right: you have a very large audience, and people genuinely care about what you have to say. It may not reach as many people as it would have, had you published it last week, but there are likely some people who will listen.” The 1-A student raised his left arm between them, studying his hand, flexing his fingers deliberately. “But you shouldn’t do it because you feel obligated to anyone, either. If you were to look at the way you communicate with people like how most people think about quirks… then, it’s your power, isn’t it?”

Izuku’s breath caught in his throat, but Todoroki kept going.

“There could be consequences. I would honestly prefer there be no way for the story to get back to Iida or myself, for selfish reasons, but you should never have had to sacrifice your own will for ours. If it would help, you could even write in a bit of the cover story about my father. But besides that—if you argue against someone’s ideology, they can take it very personally. You could run a lot of risk to put out a statement like that, but at the same time, if you feel it’s more important than saying nothing at all, those should be risks you’re willing to take.”

“T-Todoroki…” Izuku didn’t know what to say.

He did, however, accept a napkin when Todoroki offered it to him for crying in public. “S-Sorry… and thank you.”

His poor heart wasn’t ready for the small smile Todoroki sent him, and it nearly beat out of his chest as a result. “I’ll think about publishing it like that… but I want to be certain there’s no way it could impact you or Iida first. I’m going to talk to Chief Tsuragamae… and, maybe—do you think I should try to talk to Endeavor?” Izuku managed to ask, sniffling a bit.

The other student let out a bereft laugh. “I can talk to my father. I know how to get him to agree to things. He may insist that you send him a copy of what you intend to say that includes him, but that won’t actually be read by him. Someone on the PR team, more than likely. If you email me a copy, I can share it with them directly.”

“R-Really?!” Izuku couldn’t help but beam. “I mean—you don’t have to do all of that! It sounds like a lot of work, and I only have until Monday until we do the special ‘last week’ edition which will definitely not be an appropriate place for it…”

“It doesn’t hurt to try,” Todoroki shrugged. “We may not be recognized for what happened, but you at least deserve to share your perspective on the events. I’d like to help.”

The simple sincerity of his words were touching, and Izuku tried not to blush too hard or read into things too much. “…Well, okay. If you’re sure you don’t mind… I’ll probably fix my draft tonight
when I get home and I can text you when I send it. I’ll also have to talk to Nejire and Iida of course… and the Police Chief, somehow. But even if it doesn’t end up working, I really appreciate it. Thank you, again.”

“You’re welcome,” said Todoroki, a glint of the earth and sky in each of his heterochromatic eyes.

They turned to simpler conversations thereafter, idly chatting about their families, Yūei, where they went to school before—Todoroki was grateful for the explanation as to why Kacchan seemed to hate him so much, and the origin of Izuku’s nickname.

As was usually the case with Izuku, the conversation turned back around to All Might at some point, and if his life was a shoujo anime, he would have surely swooned. Todoroki was the only one he had talked to since Kacchan had distanced himself who appreciated the finer details of the Number One Hero’s success.

(“Oh and there was that one fight in Hokkaido, when All Might was caught in that mêlée à trois with Spite and Madame Hollow!”)

Todoroki nodded. “He was able to create enough air pressure just by grinding his heel into the ground it knocked the other two off-balance. A more tactical use of the raw strength that is such a trademark of his quirk, when he can use it to attack in ways the opponents would never have seen coming.”

(“Marry me—Merry May! That was another good fight. When he teamed up with Gigabyte to take down Merry May. Yep. You know—haha.”)

Privately, Izuku considered writing a letter to Endeavor and Todoroki’s mother, thanking them, but also demanding monetary compensation for the damages their son has caused to his well-being. Between his blood pressure, pulse, and a host of other cardiovascular issues, Izuku felt he would have had a pretty good case.
Chapter Summary

After several hard weeks, All Might tries to brighten Izuku's spirits. Meanwhile, Shōto's recent epiphany has become a big, confusing, hydra-headed monster that he quickly can't get a grip on anymore. He turns to his family and his friends for help.

They're about as useless as you'd expect.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The weekend blinked by in what felt like a matter of seconds, one of those where it felt like there was never enough time to do anything, but Izuku tried to remain in good spirits as Monday came around. He had texted with Todoroki, polished the draft on the Hero Killer with the addition of Endeavor’s not-so-real, but bracing, rescue, and shared his desire to publish it with Iida. Once Izuku managed to get through his full explanation, the 1-A Class Representative had paused for a long time on the phone, but he eventually came back and agreed, understanding the importance of the issue over his own personal goals. And Izuku reassured him that, with the story written this way, it would only strengthen the public narrative regarding Endeavor’s involvement.

All of that aside, the first thing Izuku planned to do when he got to the Yūei was track down Uraraka, and she didn’t make it difficult. In fact, she appeared to be waiting for him at the front gate, not even on the Yūei grounds yet. “Hiiiii, Deku!” she waved her phone back and forth. “Did you and Todoroki have a nice dat—”

“Uraraka, how could you?” he cut her off, face hot. “It wasn’t that at all, you made him think we were going out as a group! Of course, it was still great, and it was nice to spend some time with him but it wasn’t a d-date just because you called it one.”

Knowingly, her smile widened. “I’m not the one calling it that. Everyone else is!”

To explain, she handed Izuku her phone, which was opened onto her Twitter feed. He already knew what it was going to say, but he accepted the proffered device anyway and furiously began to scroll through it.

There were a handful of pictures that had been circulating around social media that had gotten traction since Friday, and they were largely featuring a slightly smiling-Todoroki and lovesick-puppy-eyed-pathetic version of himself. Tons and tons of images, reblogs and likes and comments and tweets about them had sprung up again—

#tododeku really out here saying fuck hetero lives huh. honestly mood

Can we just acknowledge that in these pics they both got drinks that matched their hair? My uwu’s, dropped. My tea, spilt. My wig, snatched. #tododeku
If this whole #Tododeku thing ends without them dating, that’s fine. It’s all probably just a big overblown reaction to a guy-guy friendship...

**BUT.** If this whole thing ends **BECAUSE Todoroki turns out to be STRAIGHT?** We riot

I WAS RIGHT THERE! I couldn’t believe it when I realized it was them!!!! They sat at a table and just talked and joked and jesus christ I understand deku’s love letter now todoroki is really unfairly beautiful once you see him in person #tododeku

I would sell my soul for todoroki to read some of these thirst tweets lmao y’all are SHAMELESS. He’s taken anyway smh #tododeku

Let me say it one more time for the people in the back

**SHŌTO! TODOROKI! IS! GAY!**

I know because it’s actually illegal for straight guys to look that good. sorry i don’t make the rules #tododeku

Hey @GoBeyond_Weekly is deku single or is #tododeku confirmed?? asking for a friend

I think my favorite thing about #TodoDeku is just the fact that, platonic or not, they both really just seem to want the other to be happy. Romantic or not—that’s the best kind of love there is.

deku’s quirk is just good luck. he becomes basically famous because he “accidentally” posted an article about how he wants to jump todo’s bones? And then he LANDS THE GUY TOO?? Meanwhile im still single and #tododeku is thriving. rip

okay but was anyone gonna tell me that deku was quirkless or was i just gonna have to read the #tododeku tags myself

what’s red white and green all over? santa’s workshop and my twitter feed motherfuckers #tododeku stans rise up

@Endeavor_official Some people speculate that you don’t like #tododeku, so my first question is how dare you
“Ugh,” he groaned, fighting down a blush, shoving the phone back towards Uraraka. “I’ve seen enough, I get it! This was your fault!”

“Fault? You should be thanking me. Have you looked at any of these pictures? The way Todoroki is looking at you is——”

“Uraraka, please.” Izuku took in a big breath, held it in for three seconds, and then released. “I really appreciate this, but please don’t pull any more stunts like that again, okay? I’ll be honest, I’ve had a really good time getting closer with—him.” Doing a quick check to make sure no one was around to listen, Izuku took another step closer and lowered his voice. “But it’s getting harder to just… be friends. I know he doesn’t want that, so situations like that… they’re making it so much harder. It hurts when I look at him. And it hurts when I don’t. I’m trying to be okay with just being friends but making things more like dating just...”

Immediately, Uraraka was apologetic, a faint gasp passing over her.

“Oh, Deku… I had no idea. I’m so sorry. I shouldn’t have done that—I didn’t think——”

“No, no! Really. It’s okay.” He tried to reassure her with a smile. “Like I said, I had a good time. And he and I are talking more and we’re going to get closer one way or another as friends, but I just need to keep up with it at my own pace… or else I won’t be able to handle my emotions. Does that make sense?”

She wore a sympathetic smile and nodded. “Yeah. It does. I didn’t mean to push you, or him, I guess I just got—I think you two would be really good together. It’s frustrating, from my perspective, but this isn’t about me. I hope you can forgive me.”

“Of course,” Izuku brightened immediately, and the two hugged. “How could I stay mad at my best friend for trying to help me out? Just let me help myself on this one from now on!”

Both hands raised as fists, she nodded sternly. “Right!”

Thereafter, the morning proceeded more-or-less normally. There was a slight threat of rain in the air, so he didn’t sit outside with Shinsō waiting for class to start, and he only stuck around for homeroom. All Might had texted Izuku (!!!!!!) on Saturday, asking if they could meet on Monday morning, so naturally he was thrilled. He was feeling really good about the article he was planning to submit for tomorrow’s print, got a solid start on studying, and made a more organized and thoughtful list of things he could feasibly do for his practical project. Whatever it was All Might had in mind for that morning, Izuku was ready.

Well, he was still about five minutes late, but that was normal. The day that Izuku Midoriya is right on time for anything is the day the world ends.

He knocked shakily, a bit out of breath after running from homeroom, eagerly awaiting for All Might to open the door to the teacher’s lounge.

It took so long, however, that Izuku almost knocked again, but eventually a very out-of-sorts, skeletal, especially-gaunt version of the Symbol of Peace appeared in the doorway. He wasn’t wearing his hero costume or his familiar yellow, pin-strip suit, but a pair of baggy pants and a loose fitting t-shirt.

“Y-Young Midoriya?” He rubbed his eyes and stretched his arms out. “What are you doing here?”
The quirkless student paused before dropping his head, realizing All Might’s meaning. “Oh, o-of course, I’m so sorry I’m late. I understand if you can’t meet anymore, I’ll try to be more punctual in the future…”

“W-wait, late?” The man checked his watch and muttered a brief curse in English. “No, no you’re absolutely fine, my boy. I lost complete track of the time. Please, come in.”

Warily, Izuku did as he bid, following after him into the teacher’s lounge. Not only were the blinds were drawn and the overhead lights on, but the entire room was a mess. Papers and documents littered the couch and coffee table, the ground, some were even taped to the walls. There was one, All-Might-shaped exception, outlined on the couch.

“Did you sleep here?” Izuku wondered aloud, and the Pro-Hero laughed dryly.

“It’s about as much of a surprise to you as it was to me. So sorry about that, again. Tea?”

All Might moved over to an electric kettle and took down a cup from a nearby cupboard for himself, so Izuku politely accepted the offer.

While he waited for the tea, Izuku’s eye was drawn to much of the mess, although he was unable to discern much rhyme or reason to any of it. There were the student portfolio pictures of the Big Three along with what appeared to be their academic records, a large number of police files, blueprints to various buildings Izuku did not recognize, newspapers with stories covering both attacks by the League of Villains, half-sketched out flow-charts that stopped part way through, grading rubrics, a number of different editions of Go Beyond! Weekly, and that was just the stuff Izuku was able to recognize. Sticky notes covered some of the surfaces with acronyms—OFA, AFO—and others had post-its with days of the week scribbled on them in seemingly random places.

“Um, All Might?” Izuku moved a manilla from the place he usually sat and awkwardly nudged it next to some of the papers on the table. “Is everything okay? Things are kind of…”

“Messy? Hah!” The man looked over his shoulder as he readied their drinks, offering a quick thumbs-up and a smile. “Actually, things are excellent, young man. Teaching, amongst other things, has been keeping me very busy.”

Perking up at All Might’s attitude, Izuku felt a rush of admiration. That was what he loved about All Might most; of course things weren’t great, if he slept here last night and the room was a hurricane of preemptive paper cuts, but he didn’t seem phased in the slightest.

“So,” the hero began, passing Midoriya a teacup while sitting down carefully in his impression left behind on the sofa. “There are a few things I wanted to talk to you about, mixed between all of this mess. Go Beyond! Weekly’s last meeting for the term will be—not this Friday, but the following one. Your final exams are coming up. And I have some exciting news to share!”

With no small amount of effort, Izuku managed not to blurt out the five thousand questions that sprang to mind. He was just shy of vibrating in place, and All Might’s blue eyes danced with amusement as he beheld Izuku’s clear enthusiasm.

“First, how is the writing going? Your piece on young Mirio was quite compelling; in hindsight, I still would have liked to have seen your original column on the Hero Killer—it would have felt like a nice ‘bookend’ to that whole ordeal. At the same time, I do believe helping people return to a sense of “normal” after the attack also had an effective palliative effect.”
Glowing at the compliment, Izuku nodded. “Thank you, sir! Nejire was able to provide some helpful insight as well, since I’ve only ever observed Tamaki-san and Mirio-san from afar. He has such a versatile quirk, it was almost easy to write about. It did feel strange not being able to put the words out there about the Hero Killer…” he paused, dropping his gaze. “Which is sort of what I wanted to talk about today. I was hoping you might be able to help me with something.”

All Might raised his brows. “And what is that?”

“Well…”

Izuku explained what he had largely shared with Todoroki in the cafe on Friday, explaining that if he redacted some of the more critical points and passed it by Chief Tsuragamae, he might be able to publish it instead.

“May I see the edited version?”

Izuku pulled out the document and handed it to him as he accepted it and sat back with his tea.

While the Symbol of Peace, the Number One Hero, Izuku’s idol and role-model—

read over his work, Izuku did his best to remember to breathe. There was always something nerve wracking about anyone reading his writing in real-time, and never was that more true when the literal greatest hero on Earth was dedicating his time and attention wholly to Izuku’s hard work.

Needing something to do, Izuku sipped his tea to keep his shaking hands busy.

“You have grown so much in your observations in such a short time. This is excellent, critical, thoughtful, and empowering. You’ve done great work.”

The tears were immediate, and All Might released a well-meaning sigh before passing him a tissue.

“T-T-Than-Thank yo-you, A-All M-Mi-Might, I’m s-sor-sorry about c-crying…”

“That’s quite alright. Just try not to work yourself up too much! ...There, that’s better. I know this may surprise you, but I have quite a bit of clout when it comes to local police.”

Izuku rolled his eyes at the bad attempt at a joke, which made the Symbol of Peace grin. “If you can leave this draft with me, I can get it to Naomasa, and he could probably clear it with Hosu City’s chief. But I must ask: you’re sure this what you want? You understand there may be consequences, especially if what you told me about Endeavor’s behavior in the hospital was true?”

Chewing his lip, the teenager shifted his weight back and forth. “I thought about it… and I decided I need to do this if it’s what I feel is the right thing to do. If there were people out there who were thinking about turning to villainy, or who were confused, hurt, impacted by what the Hero Killer did… the least I can do is reach out to them. It’s not the end-all-be-all answer, but it’s an answer. Closure after so many killings… it feels important. So, while I don’t want to say consequences be damned…”

All Might laughed. “Consequences be damned?”

“Basically,” Izuku said, sheepish, and All Might cleared some space to put Izuku’s draft down.

“I will let Principal Nezu know as well. Thankfully our meeting was early enough that I should be
able to reach everyone in time, although getting firm answers by 17:00 could be cutting it close.”

All Might produced a phone from his pocket and sent some kind of text message. “In the meantime... do you have any plans to continue writing over the summer?”

The question was unexpected enough that it gaze Izuku pause. “W-Well, I will definitely still keep u-up with my journal, but without GB!W... I know I could write on my own and put it online or something, but that doesn’t really feel right to me. Nejire gave me the platform to do this, so I feel like I need to... be loyal? If that makes sense.”

Humming, All Might replied, “Perfectly understandable. If you’d like to take the break from the column during the length of the class breaks, you could consider some kind of writing workshop. Training for your craft, you could say. The 1-A and 1-B students will be doing something similar at a training camp.”

“O-Oh! I didn’t even realize that was an option. If that’s possible, then, yes! I would be very interested!”

“Let me think on it a little longer,” the hero said with a smile. “I’ll let you know more in the next week or so what sort of options you might have. We have a bit of time before that becomes a pressing concern.”

“Right,” nodded Izuku. “You wanted to talk about final exams? Ectoplasm-sensei has also assigned us a ‘practical’ portion of the exam, which is sort of like a special interest project... which I would actually really appreciate some extra feedback on my proposal, if you don’t mind? Our ideas have to be submitted by Wednesday...”

“Not at all. In fact, I’m quite interested: knowing you, I can only imagine it’s something thought-provoking.”

Resisting the urge to tear up, Izuku settled on turning pink and mumbling his thanks.

“I, um, wanted to do something that sort of tied all of our lessons together so far. At first I went through a lot of possibilities for writing about you—there’s like, a million things I could cover, like the deconstructing your supermoves and exploring the benefits and restrictions of each, or maybe a critical breakdown of the symbolization of your current costume, or how you’ve been able to brand yourself so successfully, and basically I had so many ideas that I couldn’t decide at all. Then I talked to Todoroki,” Izuku coughed when All Might raised his brows, and pushed past his momentary embarrassment. “And he suggested maybe writing about your battle with the Blue Agent, and how the terrain made that fight especially challenging, which then got me thinking about fighting schematics in general. I experimented with a bunch of possibilities this weekend, and I decided I wanted to really synthesize a lot of the tactics you and some of the other Pro’s have employed over the years with different tiers of villains. In order to do that at as a project I developed, well... this?”

Anxiously, Izuku handed All Might his journal, already flipped open to the page that he’d sketched out a rough drawing of a building, notes from ground floor to the roof detailed into the margins.

“But I thought it might be too, um, out-there for what Ectoplasm-sensei wanted and I just thought maybe you could give me some advice on I might be better able to implement what I wanted to accomplish?”

Brow furrowed, the Pro-Hero’s eyes scanned the page briefly. “Tell me a bit more about what I’m looking at here. I’d like to hear your thought process behind this.”
“Right, well,” Izuku downed the remainder of his tea, hoping it would help to settle his nerves. “I thought to myself, what better way to tie together all of our lessons than taking all of the advantages of heroes into account and trying to build the ‘perfect rescue?’ But that required me pitting different theoretical quirks against different types of plans—heists, hostage situations, that kind of thing. After awhile I decided to think about it the other way: if all of the big jobs or iconic battles had flaws that heroes have exploited, why don’t I build the perfect villain plan? By putting myself in the shoes of someone trying to think of how I would foil a hero, it became a really easy way to demonstrate everything I had learned so far this semester… but it also feels really weird and backwards and I was worried Ectoplasm-sensei might get the wrong idea if I submit it like this! I figured if anyone had any idea of how to make it into something presentable, it would be you, since you have so much experience…”

Slowly, All Might nodded, tapping his chin and keeping his eyes on the diagram in Izuku’s journal. His lack of response was less than reassuring, and Izuku quickly began to fidget.

“This is almost concerningly well-thought out,” he said, eventually, a smile slowly spreading on his face. “It’s not actually perfect, but for someone your age to come up with this sort of detailed plot—and you’re right, this would require a hero to act flawlessly, or at least with incredible reflexes and reaction time, to resolve. Different quirks could have different advantages, of course… hmm. Well, let me start by saying, consider me impressed, young man.”

Taken aback, Izuku turned an unnatural shade of scarlet, lowering his head to demonstrate his gratitude. “R-Really? I-it wasn’t that big of a deal, Ectoplasm-sensei has us do a lot of things that include building layouts like this, but we usually just critique heroic procedures from actual raids in the past… I guess I just wanted to take it a step further. So you don’t think I need to change the way I present it…?”

“No, although, it does give me an idea. You could certainly submit this diagram and an accompanying, small explanation of your methodology and I have little doubt you would score well on your practical. But I wonder… how would you feel about someone actually trying to complete this, let’s call it, ‘practical course’? Because that is very similar to what you’ve done here, in a sense. It looks a bit like my lesson plans for the Hero Courses when I have a specific scenario in mind I want them to run through… although admittedly this is much more comprehensive. I bet some of your 1-A and 1-B classmates would appreciate the extra practice, too!”

“W-Wait, what?” Izuku balked, looking down at the diagram and back at All Might. “Really?”

“I don’t see why not! In fact… I’m sure there could be some slight adjustments that could be made to facilitate group trainings. With your permission, I’d love to take this idea to Principal Nezu and see what he thinks.”

Wobbly smile in place, Izuku was torn.

On the one hand, All Might’s praise made him want to melt into the floor, certain that he could die happy. But was this really an appropriate thing, something to pose a counterpoint against his classmates? He tried to consider what he knew about the friends he had in 1-A, and their incredible quirks and skills, and he reached two conclusions.

1. **Izuku** felt desperately out-classed.
2. The plan itself was solid, devised in such a way that it should be challenging for even a Pro-Hero (at least, that was the hope).

“I guess…” Izuku clenched his hands into fists and avoided All Might’s eye. “I—don’t know… I
don’t really think I’m qualified to help with something like that, this was just sort of me listing things off… All I really know is just from case study examples we’ve looked at in class or I’ve reviewed myself, sort of just, reverse-engineering the plots from those… there’s no actual experience behind any of my ideas though. I appreciate the offer, I really do, but I don’t know if it’s a good idea…”

“Well…” All Might’s gaze softened. “That is reasonable. I wouldn’t want you to feel pressured to accept; I sometimes forget that you are so unlike your peers, with your level of self-awareness. But it would be doing you a disservice as an educator not to tell you, I would not have made the suggestion if I wasn’t confident this was up to par. You have got an excellent skill set for this sort of strategic thinking, Young Midoriya. What you lack in experience, you make up for in your careful analysis. If it would make you feel any better, I could also pass the idea by Nezu and if he were to OK it, you could still have the opportunity to choose to just submit this version of it.”

“I…” Izuku bit his lip, still unsure. What did he have to lose? All Might said he could still back out if he didn’t make up his mind after the idea was pitched to the principal. “You know what…? Okay! I-If you think it’s a good idea, then I support that.”

All Might clapped his hands together and smiled. “That’s the spirit! It could even be fun. I will talk to Nezu today, and assuming he says that’s alright, we can figure out something more tangible with when we might meet next. Of course, I can talk to Ectoplasm as well, this might change your due dates a bit for the final project but—this is just excellent. A perfect segway into my final subject for today’s conversation.”

“Oh, right!” Izuku had almost forgotten. “What was the good news?”

Shuffling around some papers in a stack, All Might handed Izuku what looked like an email that had been formatted to print onto paper.

“An invitation to… I-Island?!” his jaw dropped. “Wow, that’s exciting, All Might! You’ll be sure to see lots of cool things at the expo event!”

Laughing, the teacher covered his eyes with a hand. “No, no, my boy. At the bottom of the page. I’m allowed to bring a guest. I’d like you to come with me.”

From the far, far end of a tunnel, Izuku heard a ringing in his ears. It was like the final note on an orchestral recording, just stubbornly holding out before switching over to the next track. He must have misheard, or one of his neurons misfired, or this whole conversation was a fever dream because—

“What?”

“Well, the circumstances are a little different now. I had to be so discreet before because, officially, he was never supposed to be in Japan, or to leave I-Island, really. The second part of your placement was supposed to be with David Shield—Dave, to me, anyway. He was in town for once, and it lined up with the second week of your shadowing, but what with the events of Hosu City…Anyway. The point is, I got this note to come to the expo this year. I feel at least partially responsible for your inability to shadow him here in Japan, so I thought what better way to make it up then for you to shadow him on I-Island? If, of course, you want to.”

Something reached up Izuku’s stomach, into his chest and squeezed his heart. There were about fifteen things about all of that which made all of zero sense.

Me? Spend time shadowing David Shield?! THE David Shield? All Might really tried to coordinate
that? There are so many other people that could get so much out of the I-Island expo event, but he wants to bring me? Just to make it up to me—it wasn’t even his fault! It was mine, I didn’t have to get involved in the Hosu City incident, but I did, and now—

“Kid, kid, relax” Smiling good-humoredly, All Might leaned forward. Izuku flushed when he realized he’d been saying all of that out loud, just barely under his breath.

“I want you to come, I picked you to shadow with Dave for a reason—you both have some things in common, and I think he would be a great resource for you in the future—but it didn’t work out. This is a great opportunity, and I know you would get more out of it than anyone else I could bring. Of course you’ll have to talk to your family and acquire the proper permissions, a passport if you don’t already have one, and a few other things before it could become official, but I would be happy to take you along. I’ll cover the expenses, if you decide you do want to go.”

“Yes!” Izuku actually jumped out of his chair. “Yes, yes! Definitely! I’d be honored, All Might! Meeting David Shield and seeing his research—absolutely yes!! I can ask my Mom and get permission but I would be beyond grateful!”

With a tired but sure smile, All Might said, “I’m glad you’re excited. Remember, young Midoriya. You’ve got promise, and a gift. Together that can be an incredible power all on its own. Take advantage of these opportunities while you can.”

Izuku may have cried again. Maybe.

Shōto was having an objectively good start to his week.

Monday and the morning lessons on Tuesday flew by, not that it wasn’t expected now that they were reviewing for exams rather than learning new material. Like clockwork, on Tuesday morning, the entire class had their noses buried in their own copies of the paper, sans Bakugō, who still refused to read anything Midoriya wrote. Shōto bought a paper and read the article out of habit, and in wanting to demonstrate his support for the GB!W staff, and just as ever he enjoyed the way Midoriya managed to convey such a complex thing as admiration for a serial killer and disapproval with understanding easily, naturally to him as if it were just breathing.

Of course, the entire school and their neighbor, best friend, and local news anchor had heard or read the story by noon. A lot of people were moved, some even teary-eyed in the hallway—probably people who have lost someone who mattered to them in a villain incident. Speaking about any tragedy was bound to revive old wounds; those that had long since scabbed were picked off by the Hero Killer article, skin exposed and freshly bleeding again… but, the damages were being treated with more than just time.

A balm for the world, the message exhaled with it relief, some kind of definitive ending. The epilogue to a nightmare that belonged in fiction, not in the real world. Accepting the words was the most surprising act of bravery, easily taken and worn visibly all around Yūei.

Even better, Midoriya was no longer spending his lunch period in the Support Department, though his sleep-deprived, snarky classmate was largely absent. He was, Midoriya claimed, staying behind to work on his support item for the General Studies Department’s final projects. For lunch, with the nice weather, they elected to sit outside and were joined by Uraraka and Iida at first. Koda was
outside feeding a few rabbits that, evidently, lived in the bushes on the grounds, and Midoriya waved him over to join them. With a shy smile, the boy complied, bringing bunnies, and then a few squirrels, over to sit and run circles or playfully sneak between their legs.

About halfway through the period, Sero, Kaminari, Kirishima and Ojiro were walking the grounds together and spotted them as well, and soon their group of four, that had become five, then became nine, but Shōto didn’t even mind. The company of his classmates was becoming increasingly tolerable, even enjoyable at times; Sero giving away half of Iida’s sandwich to a partially hefty squirrel was actually pretty funny. The little rabbits also really seemed to enjoy the mane of Ojiro’s tail, and one of them cuddled up on it and fell asleep.

Midoriya seemed to be in a particularly vibrant mood. If his usual attitude was sunny and bright, then today he was downright blinding: laughing often, talking openly and freely with everyone, quizzing the 1-A students he didn’t interact with normally on their quirks. In exchange, they all told Midoriya how much they enjoyed hearing his perspective on what happened with the Hero Killer, even if the topic made him and Iida clearly a little uncomfortable. Even Koda, who was usually wordless, opened up a tiny bit and talked to Midoriya about something regarding the newspaper—Shōto often forgot that Iida and Uraraka were not the only 1-A students who were in the club along with Midoriya.

While the two talked, one of the smallest bunnies hopped into Midoriya’s lap and settled between his crossed legs, sleepily lying down while he continued to take vigorous notes on something quiet Koda was saying. Shōto almost wished he could take a picture.

At one point while they enjoyed each other’s company, Kaminari slid up beside him and gave him a pointed nudge in the ribs. Shōto had half a mind to activate his quirk to remind Kaminari of personal space, but the blond cut him off, and instead began wiggling his eyebrows. He asked in a low, conspiratorial voice how their date went on Friday, referencing some recent activity on social media.

“I didn’t go on a date.”

He sputtered a laugh. “I know that, I’m just messing with you! Although… that reminds me. Hey, Deku?”

The green-haired boy turned and smiled in Kaminari’s direction. “Hmm? What’s up?”

“Your uh, buddy, the one you’re usually with. Shinsō?” Coughing, the blond paused. “Couldn’t help but notice he’s not with you today?”

“Oh. Yeah, Shinsō is in the Support Department right now. He probably will be on and off a lot this week; he’s working on something for our finals.”

Posture deflating a little, Kaminari nodded. “Ahh. Got it. Thanks.”

Conversation around them picked up again normally, but Shōto frowned into his soba, thoughtful. He did recall his sister asking him something similar over the weekend, suggesting that he and Izuku were in a relationship. And then there was when Natsuo and Fuyumi both cornered him after the Sports Festival.

What qualifies as a date, exactly?

Was it a date? No, he reasoned, that probably involved some sort of formal invitation, at least a verbal request. They just went out and spent some time together since their other friends were
The subject of dating and dates sat heavy in his head for the remainder of the lunch, tossing back and forth. As far as Shōtō really knew from the little of it that came up in the manga he usually read, a date constituted romantic interest by both or all parties involved in the date. Shōtō didn’t have any romantic feelings towards Midoriya, so that was out.

...Then again, Shōtō also didn’t think about kissing people, and he had thought about kissing Midoriya an awful lot since the idea crossed his mind on Friday. He imagined it would taste sweet, like matcha poundcake, probably on account of his hair—that was also new. Shōtō definitely had never wondered what someone else’s lips would taste like.

When Shōtō got home that evening, he decided that perhaps he could better get a sense of what he was feeling if he asked someone with some experience. His brother Natsuo had a girlfriend for a little over a year now, so he seemed as good a candidate as any.

“My baby brother, asking me about dating? You’re not allowed to grow up anymore! Not another word or else I might cry!” he said, dramatically falling back onto the couch.

Shōtō rolled his eyes. “Cry, then. Will you tell me or not?”

“Fine,” Natuso’s arm half hid his face. “What do you want to know? If it’s about sex—”

“Nevermind.”

“I was kidding! Shō, come back!”

Against his better judgement, Shōtō turned back around and shoved his brother’s legs off the end of the couch, taking the seat next to him.

“I just want to know what it feels like to be romantically interested in someone.”

“You’re asking what it feels like to be in love?” Natsuo asked, raising his brows. Uncertain, Shōtō nodded. Was that what he was asking? It at least seemed like a good place to start.

After a moment, Natsuo smiled and let his head fall back a bit into the sofa cushions. “Got it. Well. I guess I think about it, like, in simple terms. Blunt terms. The difference between loving your family or your friends and being in love with someone is as simple as the way that they make you feel. Like, you and Fuyumi, I love you guys, and you guys make me feel welcome, and proud to be your brother, and happy…but in a relationship…you feel happy because the other person is happy. Like, when you talk to them, you think about how much better it could be if you could talk to them and be close to them at the same time. I’m talking to you right now, aren’t I? I have literally no desire to hold your hand, though. Sorry little bro.”

The older of the two grinned, and Shōtō deadpanned.

“Anyway, when I’m with my girlfriend, I want to hold her hand so I can be closer with her, while still talking to her and paying attention to the things that make her happy. Her being happy is what makes me happy, and what makes her happy is making me happy.”

Genuinely curious, Shōtō furrowed his brow and let that settle in. “But then isn’t that just a cycle? How do you make her happy, if what makes her happy is you being happy?”
“Good question. Like, let me put it in really simple terms. You and me, we both have the same favorite food—cold soba. Her? She loves french fries. Best thing in the world to her. I would rather eat french fries when we go out to dates, because I know how much she likes them, and I’d be just as happy doing that as eating my own favorite food.”

That… made some amount of sense, Shōto supposed. Still, it felt very unintuitive. Why not just get cold soba for yourself, and she eat french fries separately? Or is it the act of compromising on their behalf supposed to demonstrate love?

And then there was the bit about holding hands… unconsciously, Shōto looked at his own hands, turned them over and back again; he knew it was something most couples did. Did he want to hold hands with Midoriya? Did he want he and Midoriya to be a couple?

...It did sound nice, when he thought more about it. He liked the idea of a simple line of connection, that intertwining his fingers was illustrative of being with someone else. The idea that just by touching someone, being near to someone, could be reassuring and elicit feelings of love… it made sense.

In fact, he had felt it before.

Once Shōto, Native, Iida and Midoriya all emerged from that lonesome alley in the backstreets of Hosu City, the Hero Killer in custody, the most he was able to recall were vague impressions. The remnants of his adrenaline had faded, along with a larger part of his ability to focus. There were voices, sidekicks arriving, someone calling an ambulance, Midoriya being set down by Native while they waited for the police, his Father’s voice came from around a corner, a beast with wings blocking out the moon and—

Time stopped.

Just for a heartbeat.

Just long enough for a winged Nomu to rear around the corner, to wail into the night, to swoop in and dig its claws into Midoriya like he was grain to be reaped for harvest.

There was a shuffle of sound, so simple it could have been mistaken for folding sheets, and that was it. A brush of wind, a shift of color, a drop in register.

Shōto blinked, and Midoriya was gone.

His eyes took in the skies as his heart plummeted into the earth, conscious frozen in the armistice zone between shock and reflex. There were no stars. Just lamplights, set against the pit of black.

All of his muscles screamed at him to move, but what could Shōto possibly do? He would kill Midoriya if he tried to stop the Nomu, if he wasn’t already—no, no.

No no no—

He can’t be dead—he can’t be, right?

Except, there was invariable evidence of the contrary falling like raindrops all over the
sidewalk.

Blood.

It was unclear who was losing the blood, however. Was the Nomu already injured? Or had it ripped through Midoriya’s stomach?

People all around Shōto shouted. Some of them scrambled to make a move.

Shōto didn’t do anything. He couldn’t do anything, not a single thing, besides watch in mute horror while Midoriya was stolen right out from under them.

Then, the two of them were falling, tilting against the axis of the world’s gravity and crashing into the pavement with enough destructive force to leave behind a crater. From the Nomu’s back, Stain rose.

He spewed words with loathing, claims of homicidal intent that was the stuff of nightmares. The killer’s bloodlust was so thick in the air, Shōto thought it would suffocate him, knocked him back off his already unsteady feet.

For the first time in so long, Shōto felt very small. Unfathomably helpless. Spectacularly useless. He was five years old, dry heaving over the mats in the training hall of their home. Mom was trying to keep him from harm.

Just like then, he did nothing, but stood and watched and waited for the godforsaken terror to end.

And that’s how the story ended for him, the first time. He watched and waited and his Mother was sent to a mental hospital.

This time, he watched, and he waited, and when he realized—when he realized Midoriya was alive—Shōto had never moved so fast in his entire life. He wasn’t a child anymore, and the real victory turned out to be a complete accident caused by Stain’s punctured lung, but Shōto didn’t fucking care. For god’s sake, for once, he just didn’t care. All that mattered was that the first person who had tried to be his friend in so long, the first person who treated him with respect for reasons besides his last name, the first person who had ever made Shōto realize that he could reach for goals on his own, that he was much more than his father’s prize to polish—the first person to matter to Shōto, like no one else had ever mattered before, was okay.

He wasn’t dead. Midoriya was alive. Half-covered in blood, sure, but his green eyes flickered with the same amount of determination as they did when he was staring Shōto down outside of the Sport’s Festival Stadium. Midoriya looked at him like that, and Shōto felt his legs give out beneath him, acting without thinking, smearing the blood from his freckled cheeks. How backwards—how entirely backwards that all Shōto wanted to do was laugh and smile in that brief moment, overcome by relief.

The most important thing in the world at that moment was feeling the warmth of his face, even beneath the blood, the reminder that he was alive. He was too important, too good to die like this. The sight of his smile, the way he leaned into the touch—it made Shōto’s heart flutter.

“Hey, Shōto?” Natsuo had placed a hand on his shoulder and gave him a little shake, forcing him
back into the present. “You alright? Did you wanna tell me what this was all about?”

It took him a moment to regain his bearings. “Oh. Yes, I was just thinking. I may have developed these feelings for someone, but I’m still trying to figure that out.”

“Oh ho ho, someone?” His older brother’s brows bounced, but Shōto ignored him and got up from the couch.

“Thanks, Natus-nii. I appreciate your help.”

With a smile, his brother called out to him. “No problem, but hey, one more thing?”

“Hm?”

“It’s okay to take some time to think things over… but, if it’s who I think it is, then don’t forget that they’ve felt this way about you for awhile. They might not wait forever. If you’re unsure, then find a way to become sure, one way or another.”

Shōto nodded once, sternly, and headed to his room. He could appreciate Natso’s point. If Midoriya did still have feelings for him… was it always this confusing for him when they were together? Had it been like this for him from the beginning?

He dug his cellphone out of his school bag and thumbed through his contacts and wrote out a quick text.

Shōto Todoroki (17:32)

What is your favorite food?

He sat in bed and waited less than sixty seconds before he got a response.

Izuku Midoriya (17:33)

That’s so random, hah! Hm, it depends on what mood I’m in, but most of the time it’s pork katsu. Any particular reason why??

Shōto Todoroki (17:33)

My brother and I were just talking about our favorite foods and it was on my mind, that’s all. Thanks.

Izuku Midoriya (17:34)

No problem (~‿~)/ I’m studying so I’m a little busy now, so I’ll ttyl!
Pork katsu was a fine meal, as far as Shōto was concerned. He was having trouble interpreting his brother’s analogy, though. Does eating pork katsu instead of cold soba mean something? Compromise? A willingness to be less happy for the sake of the other person’s happiness? It just felt like an odd metric on which he could judge his feelings.

That said, he didn’t mind the idea of learning more about Midoriya’s interests outside of school. It felt like a strangely personal space, one that Shōto didn’t really mind sharing with him.

Shōto Todoroki (17:36)

Good luck with your studies. And I don’t know if I remembered to tell you in-person, but the article turned out very nice. I’m glad you decided to publish.

Izuku Midoriya (17:36)

Thank you! That’s really nice of you… I was still really nervous about it, still kind of am tbh, but I think it’s a good thing. I want the world to know that it’s not okay to make other people suffer for your own personal sense of justice. It’s a societal, cultural consciousness kind of thing.

Izuku Midoriya (17:36)

Not that I need to tell you that haha sorry, got carried away.

Izuku Midoriya (17:37)

Gonna go back to studying. Thanks again for talking to your Dad about it

Shōto Todoroki (17:37)

No problem. Have a good night.

After hitting send, Shōto laid back, running a hand through his hair. The more he considered Natsuo’s words, about wanting to be closer... to be happy that they were happy, and to just be near to them... It made sense. He could envision those things, and they made hands tingle to remember how it felt to hold a living, breathing, blood-covered Midoriya in his hands. Inversely, if he tried to imagine his life now without Midoriya... even the loss of his friendship would have been devastating. Shōto already had to confront that very real possibility once at the Hosu City Hospital, and it was painful to even think about.

Midoriya’s heart could have stopped beating. His heart could have stopped beating. It was haunting thought, one that wore spectral robes of unease as they fluttered over the edge of Shōto’s mind.

Unfortunately, the one person who could probably put what it was like to love someone in
understandable terms was the only person he probably should not ask about it, he thought, thumb ghosting over the screen of his phone.

Maybe he was overthinking things. Perhaps he just needed to ask someone else besides his older brother—not that Natsuo had been unhelpful, but someone who knew the situation better. Someone like…

“Yaoyorozu.” Shōto greeted as he sat down next to her Wednesday morning. “I have a question.”

The Vice Class Representative blinked over to him and smiled before tucking away her phone. “Sure, what’s on your mind?”

“How did you and Jirō start dating?”

It took all of one second for her face to turn bright red, eyes wide. Conveniently, everyone else in the room stopped talking immediately.

“T-Todoroki! Why would you say something like that?” she stammered.

Brow knit together, he was confused. “Was it supposed to be a secret?”

Yaoyorozu sent a frantic look at Jirō, who was turned around in her seat looking directly at them. She looked almost as red as Yaoyorozu, and her earphone jacks were curled in on themselves.

“We’re not dating!” Yaoyorozu whisper-yelled to him.

“You’re not?”

Jirō burst out of her seat, arms crossed tightly over her chest. “That is—we—she’s not—why would you even ask something like that?!”

“Erm… I was thinking of asking Midoriya out on a date. But I don’t really know how.”

If everyone hadn’t already been listening, they certainly were now. The room had gone completely silent. Shōto looked around, and judging by what he saw, this was evidently a big deal to everyone.

Uraraka eventually broke the silence, looking like she was going to explode. “YOU WHAT?!”

“What?” He adjusted his posture, trying not to sound defensive. “Isn’t that what you do when you develop romantic feelings for someone?”

Ashido actually jumped from her chair and moved over to his desk, and a few others took that as an invitation to follow suit. “Hooooooooold on! Romantic feelings? You have romantic feelings for Izuku Midoriya?”

“Is there something wrong with that?”

“Well—no—but—” Uraraka struggled to explain, so Tsuyu helpfully weighed in.

“It’s just unexpected, kero. All of the people who were supporting the ‘Tododeku’ concept were actually right—it’s sort of like a conspiracy theory that was proven right.”
Sighing dreamily, Aoyama tucked his hands beneath his chin and winked. “C’est magnifique! Even if he is the farthest thing from a sparkle, if he brings a twinkle to your heart mon chéri, then you should tell him how you feel.”

Hagakure hugged Ojiro. “Oh my god, we’re not going to be the only couple anymore!! This is so exciting!”

“You’re dating?” Shōto asked. Several people groaned.

“How are you that out of touch with reality?”

“I don’t know how I am supposed to answer that,” he said truthfully. Now that everyone was listening, he turned the question over the class. “I’m just unclear on what’s the norm here. What do people usually do when they’re in situations like this?”

Bakugō muttered something macabre, which the room largely ignored, and Ashido squealed happily.

“Oh my god it’s like watching your baby grow up and leave the nest.”

It’s not like that at all, Shōto was tempted to say, but instead he looked to Hagakure. “How did you tell Ojiro?”

“Oh, don’t ask me,” she held up her gloved hands, deferring to her boyfriend. “I was planning on staring at him and fantasizing without ever making a movie until I died.”

“I told her it didn’t matter that I couldn’t see her,” the blond interrupted proudly. “I could tell she was beautiful by the way she talks and acts, and that’s more important than anything to me.”

To that, several people let out a chorus of “aww’s” or other general sounds of approval.

“I don’t think that will work.” Shōto pursed his lips. “Midoriya isn’t invisible.”

No one said anything, although Uraraka looked like she might need to be taken to Recovery Girl’s office.

“It’s not that difficult, you should just be honest and talk to him,” Tokoyami suggested eventually. “Tell him how you feel, and together you can decide what you want to do from there.”

Frowning, Sato shook his head. “That doesn’t feel special at all though. I would make them something—like a cake, or cupcakes—and then tell them. By doing something, it shows that you like them enough to take initiative, rather than just struggling through an awkward conversation.”

“That’s a bad idea,” Tsuyu said. “Starting out by making things transactional is the wrong way to go. He might feel obligated to say he feels the same if you give him a gift or something.”

“You might be right,” hummed Kirishima, who was standing between Bakugō’s and Jirō’s desks. “Wouldn’t wanna start the relationship with any sort of drama.”

Turning around in his seat, Sero looked directly at Shōto and grinned. “You know, you could write a big story about how you feel and just publish it in the school paper. That definitely wouldn’t cause any drama!”

Most of the class laughed at that, and Shōto let out a good-humored chuckle, too. He wasn’t the most socially adept of people, but sarcasm wasn’t completely lost on him.
Kaminari weighed in once the room quieted down again. “The beginning of a relationship is when things are supposed to be new and awkward and fun, right? Why don’t you try flirting with him first and see how he responds? It’s been a little while since he wrote that… article about you. Wouldn’t hurt to test the waters and make sure he’s still interested.”

“Flirting?”

“You know, like,” Mineta winked at Yaoyorozu, who looked about ready to break his nose. “Hey, did you sit in sugar? Because you’ve got a pretty sweet ass.”

“Do NOT say that! To our classmates, Mineta—or to Midoriya, Todoroki!” Iida advised, mortified. “I know him rather well and I assure you if you say that, he will very likely not respond with any coherent sense. Not only is it highly inappropriate, it might very well kill him.”

Shōto was starting to worry now. “I could kill him?”

A few people began to speak at once, all offering Shōto their advice, none of which seemed to really complement anyone else’s suggestions. It was no wonder so many people didn’t date. He wasn’t even sure that was what he wanted, and it was already beginning to stress him out.

“Christ, would you all shut the fuck up?!” Bakugō spat, clearly annoyed by the conversation, and he stood up. “I don’t give a fuck about you or that shitty nerd, Icy Hot, but if you want to ask him out just don’t be a fucking pussy. Make a move or don’t, but make your choice and then just fucking do it.”

Ashido put her hands on her hips, exasperated. “Geez, relax! We’re just trying to help, and it’s not like you’re one to talk!”

Per usual, Kirishima looked ready to intervene, one hand towards Bakugō and another pointed out towards the rest of the class, like he was about to preemptively break up a fight. Bakugō was visibly furious, the room thickening with tension like a cloud pulled to the surface, and no one moved for several long seconds waiting for the crack of thunder that followed a flash of lightning.

It was Bakugō who acted first, though no one expected him to reach his hand out and grab Kirishima’s tie. practically yanking him over the desk. Shōto knew Bakugō was impulsive and gutsy, but even he was impressed when the blond shamelessly kissed the redhead in front of the entire room, both of their eyes closed for a whole three seconds before separating.

“Date me,” Bakugō demanded the moment they broke apart.

Stunned silent, the room watched as Kirishima, his cheeks a color that put his hair to hero name to shame, cleared his throat.

“Y-Yeah, sounds good.”

Bakugō let him go and sat back down smoothly, like he hadn’t just made a huge scene in the middle of the room. He punctuated the whole display with a cocky smirk, shooting a glare in Ashido’s general direction.

“Fuck off, Pinky. Act or get over it, otherwise you get left behind. That’s the only way.”

Meanwhile, Kirishima stumbled back to his own desk, falling into the seat with wide, unfocused eyes. Sero stage-whispered in his direction. “Dude, you’re right. That was probably the manliest thing I’ve ever seen in my entire life.”
Aizawa-sensei walked in a moment later, looking fully like he’d rather be anywhere else in the world, and those still standing rushed to take their seats.

Jirō, who had stood up and was halfway between Shōto’s desk and her own, looked back anxiously and then met eyes with Yaoyorozu. They both turned telling shades of pink.

“...Can we talk after class? Please?” the dark hair girl whispered quickly, and Yaoyorozu bit her bottom lip before nodding.

Shōto felt a little guilty, not having meant to put the two in an uncomfortable position, but he was glad it sounded like they were going to talk about the awkwardness and get past it. For the sake of their friendship, he sincerely hoped their conversation later would go well.

(In hindsight, it must have gone extremely well: when Shōto left the grounds that evening, he saw Jirō and Yaoyorozu, holding hands, smiling and laughing as they passed through the school gates together. The sight made him strangely hopeful.)

The week leading into finals was what Izuku would have normally called hell, at least so far as his school schedule went. If he wasn’t studying for exams, then he was meeting with All Might to work on different aspects of perfecting his final project.

(Yes, Principal Nezu agreed to it. And yes, it was still very unreal to Izuku that the administrator had been so enthused over his project that there were several extra teachers recruited to help facilitate the practical course.)

In all, the whole thing was very, very anxiety-inducing. But it was, at least, the good kind of stress—the kind that made him feel confident that maybe he was actually making progress. Time management was key, which was rather ironic given Izuku Midoriya’s track record, but this week he was more intentional with his time, thereby allowing him to keep up with other obligations that were important to him: writing for next week’s column, helping his Mom around the house, and testing some of Hatsume’s “babies” as part of keeping up his end of the deal for working with Shinsō.

Ectoplasm-sensei approved Shinsō’s project after he managed to mock-up some pretty detailed sketches and writing an accompanying explanation of the tool’s utility. If he could complete a functioning prototype by the end of next week, then Izuku was confident he would be able to get a good grade.

That being the case, Shinsō (and consequently, Izuku) spent several lunch periods or after school study hours in the Support Department with Hatsume. She held Shinsō to his word of holding him accountable to doing all the actual work, which he did without complaint, and only stopped to ask her questions or if he couldn’t find a specific tool in her very “personally organized workspace” (though Izuku would have sooner called it a mess).

Exams were set to begin on that coming Tuesday, and the written portion would span through to Thursday. On Friday, depending upon each department's discretion, were practical exams. Obviously that didn't directly apply to Class 1-C—that was just the last day to submit their final projects, if they were granted that length of time to work on them—but that was when 1-A and 1-B would take their practical exams. Izuku had no idea if and to what extent the Support Department's
"practical" exams were administered, seeing as almost everything Hatsume ever did seemed to be practical in the same sense of the word, but he was frankly a little too busy with his own work to concern himself with that. The really important adjustment as far as he was concerned came with the publication of GB!/W: so as not to distract students from the exams, the school made the executive decision that the newspaper staff had to withhold printing and posting any of their articles online until at least Friday. As far as Izuku knew, Nejire was aiming to do a noon release to get them out before the weekend, but she hadn't reached a final decision last he'd heard.

There would plenty of time for a decision to be reached, of course; it was, at present, only Monday. Exams began tomorrow and they were much more at the front of Izuku's attention, so he was doing his best to soak in the remainder of their last normal day, eating lunch outside with his friends. Sunshine drifted down between the clouds, and there was the hum of laughter and conversations that floated around the grounds. A breeze bobbed along, carrying with it refreshing breaths of braving a new week.

Basking in the seasonal warmth and the glow of good company, Izuku found that his oncoming exams didn’t seem quite so daunting that early afternoon. He sat down with Shinsō, Uraraka and Todoroki, but they were joined shortly thereafter by no fewer than six additional faces: Iida and Kaminari from 1-A, the latter of whom seemed to find teasing Shinsō endlessly entertaining; Kendo and Tetsutetsu from 1-B, the former a valued member of the GB!/W team as well; Hastume, strangely enough, had come out of her hermit habitat; and Jirō and Yaoyorozu, whom Izuku heard had just started dating after some kind of misunderstanding last Wednesday. Izuku wasn’t very close to either of them, but he felt like he knew them because he knew a lot about them. Largely because of the Sports Festival… but, honestly, a certain amount of it was just because Izuku was just like that.

“I haven’t seen you guys together since I heard the news! Congratulations!” he practically bounced in place in his enthusiasm, and both girls laughed shyly. “You guys go together much better than Kacchan and Kirishima. And wow, two 1-A couples in one day?! No one ever really told me how it happened, just that it did...”

Several of the surrounding expressions shifted, some exasperated and others surprised, and most of them looked from Todoroki to Uraraka, the latter of whom just shrugged. Izuku was going to ask what gives, but before he had the chance, Tetsutetsu spoke up.

“I’m happy for you dudes, too! But I gotta give mad props to Kirishima, he deserves someone as manly as him.”

There looked to be a tear in his eye, at which several of them laughed.

“It was quite unprecedented—and inappropriate—to kiss in front of the entire class like that,” said Iida, adjusting his glasses with a disapproving frown. “Please don’t follow their bad behavior!”

“We won’t, Iida, calm down!” Jirō waved him off, showing off her hand linked with Yaoyorozu’s. “I promise this is the most PDA we’ll get.”

“Aw man, if only I had someone to hold my hand,” Kaminari sighed, nudging Shinsō in the ribs. “Know what I mean?”

“Sure I do,” snorted the 1-C student, holding out his hand but keeping it a measured distance away. “What do you say?”

Kaminari made a whiney sound and said, “Please?”
The moment he did, however, Shinsō jerked his thumb over his shoulder. “Great. Now go hold hands with Iida.”

Kaminari’s face glazed over, eyes going blank, and he wore a dopey smile as he moved after Iida. The Class Representative stood up and performed a hilarious combination of dodging while at the same time scolding Shinsō for the improper use of his quirk, who, all of the sudden, seemed not to be able to hear him.

Things were good, and they had a nice time together, and Izuku was laughing, and it was—good.

Or at least, good-adjacent. Something close enough to good that he didn’t want to jeopardize it, that was for sure.

He glanced to the side, noticing Todoroki saying something quietly to Yaoyorozu. From the angle, Izuku couldn’t see his scar or red hair at all, and it made him look almost, and definitely unfairly, angelic. Halo of sunshine, snow-colored hair, perfect features, soft eyes—unfair, unfair, unfair.

Unfair. Good-adjacent. Synonyms. Antonyms. He didn’t even know anymore.

Friendship.

It’s not like that word was absolutely eating him up inside. Not at all.

It’s not like he had to tell himself five times a day that he was over his crush. Because he was definitely over it. Because Izuku knew better than to reach out when Todoroki walked away after they spent lunch together or if they walked to class together. Because Izuku he was smarter than that, knew to leave well enough alone. Things certainly hadn’t gotten to the point where Izuku had to tell himself to give up, to spare himself future heartache with preemptive wounds.

That’s not how things were, because if that’s the way things were, then Izuku would be doomed no matter what.

Maybe it was because he was still dealing with the social fall-out of the Boba Tea Incident: it felt like any of his more private conversations with Todoroki since had become a hundred times more awkward. Did Todoroki even notice? Or was it all in Izuku’s head? Did he see any of the nastier Tweets on the subject—the ones where people suspected Izuku was more of a stalker than a friend? Todoroki didn’t think he was a stalker, right?

And then there was the really unpleasant conversation he’d had with Uraraka on Friday. Even after promising to leave him to sort out his own feelings, she tried to convince him that Todoroki did indeed have feelings for him, and that she heard him admit as much in class.

Izuku was impressionable, not stupid. That was about as likely as Izuku being All Might’s illegitimate child.

He was thrust back into reality when a hand came to rest on his, frosty fingertips barely brushing against his skin. Todoroki must have tried to set his hand own down and Izuku was taking up the space.

Acting on his knee-jerk reaction, Izuku flinched away. “Sorry, e-excuse me!”

There was a short pause.

“Midoriya, can I ask you something?” Todoroki asked, and it was during one of those very inconvenient times when everyone stops talking. For some reason, it made it impossible to meet
Izuku cleared his throat. “Uh—s-sure…?”

“Do you still think of me in a romantic way?”


And all of the sudden, everyone was *staring* at him.

And all of the sudden, Izuku wasn’t having a very good day anymore.

And all of the sudden, he was standing and quickly apologizing before taking off into the school.

Was Izuku really that obvious? Was his attempt to veil his feelings with friendship too weak? Todoroki had noticed how he’d been acting and decided enough was enough?

He set a quick pace, talking to himself rapidly, and his pre-programmed strides brought him all the way to 1-C. The lunch period wasn’t even half over, but Izuku was too mortified to go back there now—not only did he not deny it, his flight instincts told him to *run*? That was it—Izuku was officially screwed. He wouldn’t be able to talk to Todoroki ever again.

But Izuku knew that was a big fat lie, and the moment his phone buzzed with a text message he was clawing for it in his pocket.

*Shōto Todoroki (12:58)*

*I’m sorry if my question made you uncomfortable. I did want to talk to you about it though. Not by text. Are you available after school today?*

Biting his lip, Izuku stared at the offending letters on the screen, like they were somehow personally responsible for his constant state of human-disaster.

*Izuku Midoriya (1:01)*

*Oh no I’m fine!*

Izuku was not fine.

*Izuku Midoriya (1:02)*

*I just remembered I needed to do something with All Might for my project... Sorry about running off like that. Yeah, of course we can talk!*
Izuku very much did not want to talk.

After General Studies classes ended for the day—the Hero Course students had an additional 7th period—Izuku sought out Nejire in the pressroom, where she was diligently putting together the template for the next morning. He popped in his flash drive to a computer next to the one she was working at and the pair exchanged a bright smile.

“I can’t believe this is our last edition until after summer,” she hummed. “You’ve done so much good for our team, Midoriya. I hope you know how thankful I am.”

Surprised, Izuku flustered a bit at the compliment. “Oh, well, it’s been—it’s really all thanks to you! I never would have had the confidence to write all of this if you hadn’t taken a chance on me… I really appreciate it, Nejire.”

Loudly, she sniffled, and when Izuku noticed she seemed close to crying, he teared up himself. For some reason—probably all of the stress of the upcoming exams—they were both even more emotional than normal.

“What does the full spread look like this week?” Izuku asked after successfully sniffling away his tears and adding his piece to the staff’s hard drive.

“Oh, it’s great. You should see Fukidashi’s comic—it’s hilarious. I’m glad Koda spoke up about his suggestion for the last edition. It feels like a good way to end the term, somehow… fitting of Yūei, you know? We’re all already weird, so why not pick out the weirddest-of-the-weirds? And Kodai, oh my god, she wrote this really cool piece of some of the urban legends regarding the school. I didn’t know half of them, but apparently she got into a big thing with Cementoss about it.” Trailing off for a moment, Nejire’s gaze shifted to something far-off. Izuku had a feeling she was seeing something beyond the beige wall behind the computer.

“I’m just… so proud of how much our club has grown. I know it’s hard for you to imagine, but I was the only second year on the staff last year, and anyone who was any good graduated, and all of the first years—second years now—didn’t like the direction the paper was going and didn’t come back… I mean, I didn’t either, but I wanted to do something about it. It’s thanks to you all that we’ve got such an amazing following, and have made all of this profit for the school.”

Izuku brightened like a freshly watered bloom. “You’re an amazing leader, Nejire! We wouldn’t have been able to do any of this without you. Definitely not me, I would never have even thought… people would want to read what I have to say.”

In response, she reached a hand over and ruffled his hair; Izuku laughed along and pretended that he didn’t like it.

The two wrapped up their conversation once Iida arrived to lend his own editorial eye for Nejire’s benefit, and Izuku waved before exiting the press room.

He barely stepped into the hallway before there was someone directly beside him.

“Midoriya,” Todoroki greeted in his usual manner. “Iida told me you would be here.”

“O-Oh, did he? Aha. That’s… that’s right. Here I am.” Izuku tried to smile, but it felt weird and his
posture suddenly heavy.

“Can we talk? Privately?”

The whole moment felt hauntingly familiar. Wordless, he nodded and followed after Todoroki as he was led down a series of hallways.

They stopped at the one leading down towards the teacher’s lounge. At this hour, there were very few people around who could eavesdrop, but Izuku supposed it was better to be safe than sorry.

“Are you angry with me?” Todoroki began, and it was so unexpected Izuku felt like he received whiplash.

“W-What? Why would I be angry?”

The other boy’s gaze flickered to one side, and he scowled at the tiling. “I’ve been trying to talk to you about this since last Wednesday. I am sorry about earlier—I didn’t mean to put you on the spot. It sort of just came out since I haven’t been able to talk to you.”

“W-Wait, you’ve been trying to talk to me? I didn’t… I didn’t even know, I’m so sorry, Todoroki. The exams and newspaper and this final project have kept me so busy I didn’t even realize… I’m really sorry.”

Todoroki seemed… relieved. “No, don’t be sorry. I just—I was overthinking. I’m not very good at this.”

“What, being friends? Don’t say that.” Izuku smiled, earnest. “You’ve done a great job so far. Just keep following your instincts, and the rest will come naturally.”

“My instincts… In that case, my instincts are telling me that…” he let out a small laugh. “For once, I think Bakugō was right about this.”

“Kacchan? He was right about what now?” Izuku tilted his head to the side, confused.

After taking a moment to card a few fingers through his hair, Todoroki held up his left hand, tightly coiled into a fist. “I wanted to show you this. And then explain it.”

Izuku watched, unsure what he was getting at, waiting. The 1-A student turned his hand over and splayed out his fingers, a small column of fire rising from his palm. For more reason than human survival instincts, the sight made Izuku’s heart pound against his sternum.

“It’s a byproduct of my quirk. If I am feeling a particular emotional response, either my left or right side will let out a bit of discharge. For a very long time, though, it was only ever ice. My right side would sometimes turn frosty when something bothered me. Usually, my old man.”

“Wow…” eyes glistening in the orange light, Izuku idly wondered if there was some kind of fire hazard law about suspending a flame in the middle of the hallway, but the tone of the conversation didn’t really feel right to point that out.

“This has been happening for days now. It’s been annoying, to be honest.” Todoroki closed his eyes, took a deep breath, and curled his hand back into a fist. The fire went out with it. “I can control it if I’m paying attention. It’s more of an unconscious response, I think.”

“Are you trying to figure out what caused it? It sort of sounds like it could be serious if it happens that often, maybe Recovery Girl—”
“I know what’s causing it.”

Izuku scratched his chin, confused as to why Todoroki was bringing this up to him then. “What is it?”

And Izuku’s heart skipped a little when Todoroki just let out a little laugh, a surprising and sincere smile taking the place of his usual measured indifference.

In lieu of a response, Todoroki moved forward, and Izuku’s whole world—

Stopped. Because Todoroki was kissing him.

His lips were warm, but his breath was cold, and for just half a second Izuku had the inane, very teenaged train of thought that leapt up his throat of oh my god is this real? But he knew it was, because fiction could never be this good—half of the poetry he’d read always talked about the star-mapped skies and the silver rush of constellations, but they never even remotely captured how completely bodily an experience it was to be kissed. It was something so deeply human, the stars would wish upon them instead.

Shoulders tense, but not from fear, from surprise and thrill and the indescribable need to not-ruin-it. There were five chilly finger-tips on his face, matched by five warm ones on his neck, and slight chap to his lips that somehow made it more real, because—this was his first kiss and he didn’t expect it to be perfect, because how could it be without having the experience to know otherwise? But Izuku also hadn’t considered that the moment would completely reinvent what he thought of as perfect, either.

Adrenaline helped him to capture it all, the silence of the hallway, the urgent thud of his pulse, the slight way Todoroki’s lips quirked up at the corners when they pulled apart, the dizzied head rush that followed.

It was probably about the most confusing, star-struck fourteen seconds of his young life.

Once it was over, Izuku balked, stating the first words he had ever uttered to Todoroki with just as much grace: “Nhg?”

“Okay. I know now.”

“Y-you… uh… me?” Izuku didn’t know what he was trying to say. “We… did? A… lips? Of kiss?”

“Sorry if I surprised you. I just wanted to be sure. I am now.” Todoroki said, a little huff of laughter passing over him. The frosty fingertips that ghosted gentle slopes over the curves of Izuku’s cheek did not move. “Allow me to explain.”

Izuku was barely able to keep himself standing. An explanation—yes. That would be.

Uh. Helpful.

“I’m not very good with… expressing… things, especially through words, so I’m sorry it took me some time to catch up with you. I don’t know if you still feel the way you did when you wrote that story about me, but if you do, I would like to take you on a date. Or, several dates? Whatever is the prerequisite amount of dates in order to be your boyfriend, really. I haven’t been able to get a straight answer out of anyone.”

Internally, Izuku was somehow skeptical, not wholly convinced that he wasn’t sinking into
something of a fantasy, warm water rising only to yank him into beneath a summer tide, and his legs and lungs were *trying* to give out. It was hard to fight against the *want* to believe, no matter how impossible the words felt as they absorbed into his heart and head, because it was something Izuku had so badly pined after for so long.

Almost abruptly, like it was just as much a surprise to him, Todoroki stated: “It took me awhile to understand it, but it’s so painfully obvious now that you’re actually standing in front of me. Of course I fell in love with you, you make it almost impossible not to.”

As was his natural response, Izuku had the fight back the urge to cry. He didn’t want to ruin this moment with his big, fat tears. Dream or not he was intent on seeing hearing Todoroki out.

“I wanted to be certain when I told you, but all of this is so new to me so it some time to put the word to the feeling, but I get why it was so hard now. It’s *you* that makes it so easy. I don’t really know if that’s the name for the way I feel, but I think it is love. And if it’s not, I think it can be, I *want* it to be. When I tried to analyze how I felt about you in the abstract, it was much harder to wrap my head around. I’ve even tried to compare other people’s experiences, asking other people for advice… even Bakugō.”

That made a watery chuckle bubble up Izuku’s throat, choked though it sounded with his urge to cry. “You asked Kacchan?”

“It was more of a case where he overheard and then loudly forced his input, but yes.”

“That…” Izuku laughed again. “That sounds like him.”

There was a smile in Todoroki’s voice, one that Izuku would have normally desperately tried to look away from, but he couldn’t really do much when his face was still being tilted up towards him. The only was to go was forward, and, unthinkingly driven by his flight response, he leaned into Todoroki’s chest.

When he realized Todoroki had tensed at the contact, Izuku began to back up. “Sorry, that probably was—”

“No—I—um.” A warm hand smoothed back his hair, eliciting goosebumps, and the other rested hesitantly on his shoulder. “I’m just not used to it. But… I like it. That’s what I’m trying to say, I think. I don’t know how any of this works, but I know that I like it. Spending time with you. Texting. Talking to you. You have this way of… looking past cynicism. Not just mine, but everyone’s. I saw it in Hosu City, and at the Sports Festival, and I see it everyday, really. You’re kind. I think love is the right word, but all I really know is that, being with you makes me happy, and that you have restored so much… hope, into my life. If that isn’t what love is supposed to feel like, I’m still okay with trying to figure it out, but I’d like to do it with you.”

Izuku wanted to memorize everything about that moment. It was like everything he had always wanted was finally falling into place, instead of, for once, falling to pieces around him. Before he had even known Todoroki, Izuku envisioned what it would be like, to love him, had accidentally published it for the world to read—startling, refreshing, uplifting.

Izuku had been right, but he’d been wrong, too.

Because it was all of those things, but it was much simpler than he anticipated, too. Softer. There were no fireworks, but the brush of an emotion, of a special sort of comfort, that moves with the tides. Hushed. Trust that comes in waves, and not the kind that you wave goodbye to as they curl back into the sea, but the kind that rushes up, cold against your bare feet, and it’s just right.
“Midoriya?” Todoroki asked after a moment. “Are you… alright? Do you need some space? You haven’t said anything.”

“Heh,” he replied, letting out a tiny sigh. “For once, I don’t have anything to say. There aren’t words for everything. I’m just… happy. That’s it.”

There was something of amusement in Todoroki’s voice. “Is it that simple? Just being with someone who makes you happy?”

“No,” Izuku shook his head, tilting his chin up to meet his gaze. “It’s about recognizing that you could be unhappy about some things, but you can’t help but be happy because of who you’re with.”

There was a pause for several seconds, and then both of Todoroki’s hands were on his shoulders, manuvering Izuku to be at arm’s length. It took all of Izuku’s nerve to meet Todoroki’s eye, to pry out the next words that hovered on the tip of his tongue.

“Let me just ask… you’re… you’re sure you want to do this? That’s… that’s all I want to know. I mean… you’re you, and I’m me. There are a lot of people who don’t probably wouldn’t… like that I was with you, or want us to be involved…” Like your Dad, no doubt.

“I don’t have a quirk, I don’t have anything to really offer—no status, a nothing family name. I guess I always just imagined you could do so much better than me.”

“There is no one better than you,” he said, simply. “None of those things you listed matter to me. I didn’t develop these feelings because of any of that. I just want… you to be happy. And if you’re happy, that’s what would make me happy… Oh, I get it now. Like eating french fries instead of cold soba.”

Izuku blinked. “W-What was that last part?”

“Nevermind, I just—realized something.” Todoroki shook his head. “It would make me very happy if you were to accept, but if you don’t want to, please don’t feel pressured.”

“I want to!” He nearly leapt in place. “Are you insane? Of course I want to! I just wanted to make completely sure that… that this was what you wanted. Also… you can call me Izuku, if that’s um, something you’re comfortable with.”

He smiled, something small and reserved. “Izuku, then. I don’t know if you want to go on any dates first, but if you’re okay with it, I’d like to call you my boyfriend.”

Blushing madly, Izuku felt like he was going to burst into flames. “T-Todoroki! Y-You j-just… can’t say things like that! And—and that was my first kiss, you know! Give a guy some warning. You’re going to give me heart attack at this rate?”

“Should I not have done that?” the other asked, frowning. “If the kiss was—”

“N-No, I just meant…” He scratched his cheek, averting his gaze. “It was… could you maybe… do it again?”

There was a brief silence, and Izuku felt a little triumphant rush when realized why: Todoroki’s left hand, was curled into a fist, but still a little plume of flames were sprouting from his knuckles.

“Heh. So it was me?” Izuku pointed, laughing just a little, and Todoroki shrugged. “That made this start happening?”
“I’m pretty sure it was always you.”

Chapter End Notes

OH MY GOD I CAN’T BELIEVE I GOT THIS FAR FSDALKJSDLKJLFJKLDFJ

im SO sorry about the delay everyone! i’ve been recruited for a new job so life has been super crazy with the transition, I’ve been BONKERS busy, but I'm SO RELIEVED TO FINALLY PUT THIS CHAPTER UP!

also, dumb aside, but I definitely drew fan art for my own fic: https://real-fakedoors.tumblr.com/post/187759849799/ok-so-dont-be-mad-buuut-ive-literally-been-going

ANYWAY! NEXT TIME!

1-A has their finals, 1-C has their projects, AND Izuku and Todoroki are trying to figure out what their new normal is supposed to be!

See you then!!!!

PLUUUUUUUUUUUUUUSSSSSSS ULTRAAAAAAAAAA!! (▽’ )ﾉ♪
Icarus

Chapter Summary

Izuku talks himself up into taking one of the biggest risks of his life, no matter how afraid he might be of getting burned. Shōto tries his hand at the whole boyfriend thing, and faces Endeavor.

There's lots of funny stuff going on, too.

Tuesday morning, Izuku woke to the familiar hum of freshly brewing coffee and the muted sounds of his Mom moving around their small flat. It took a moment of blinking around, bleary-eyed, for him to discover his alarm wasn’t set to go off for another twenty minutes.

A sliver of light peeked from the drawn blinds and beneath his door, painting the room in just the faintest of orange hues, all to a backdrop of the earthy aroma of ground coffee mixed with the slight hint of lavender that had long since soaked into his memory; it was the scent of his Mom’s favorite detergent. Like the edge of his awareness was ensconced by the same cozy warmth of his blanket, Izuku felt like everything was a little distant; comfortable, but far outside of himself.

Subtly, driven by the immutable state of dawn, the urge to wake ebbed over him like a summer tide, pulled one direction that was almost relaxing enough to invite him back to sleep, but pushed towards another, bracing him for the day to come.

Rather than trying to go back to sleep for a few more precious winks, Izuku decided to stretch out in bed with a sleepy, satisfied exhale. He had woken up just like this many times before; so many mornings, spent in the quiet company of their high rise apartment set to the sounds of the city beyond, mixed with the quiet murmur of the news, the clink of pots and pans as his Mom made breakfast, or the gentle scratching of the neighbor’s cat trying to sneak onto their balcony.

It was just like any other day.

Except, it wasn’t. Obviously.

Because today was certainly the first day Izuku had ever woken up with the memory of frosty breath sitting on his lips. Mind still sorting through the fog of waking, he raised his fingers to his mouth, tracing his lips with the lightest of pressure, reliving the events of yesterday, verifying to himself once again that it was all really… real. Really, really real. Really, actually real.

His first kiss, ever, was with Shōto Todoroki.

Who was now his boyfr… b-boyfrie—boy f r i e...nd...

…

“Hhhhhnnnnngggggg—” Izuku, too embarrassed to face the many likenesses of All Might that occupied his walls and shelves, attempted to hide behind his own hands. Nope! No, nope, no way! He couldn’t do it, couldn’t even put the words together in his head without feeling flustered.

Maybe it was just a dream? Had he finally cracked under pressure? Maybe, between the Hero Killer and the Nomu, Izuku had actually lost enough blood to slip into a coma, and this was all
some crazy dream?

No, no, it had to have been real. Izuku had gone down that hypothetical road to reasoning already. On some level, he knew to expect the possibility of some kind of skin-based temperature difference with Todoroki’s quirk, but it didn’t make it any less jarring—didn’t make it any less thrilling—to be kissed by warm lips with a lingering exhale that was colder than midwinter’s wind. There was no way Izuku’s imagination could have come up with that all on his own.

And, if Izuku was being honest, the whole thing sort of aligned perfectly with his incredible propensity for bad luck—that even his most amazing boons of fortune were ill-timed. Because when else would something as unbelievable as this happen, if not the literal day before final exams? There was no fate more fitting. Whatever sadistic force of the universe kept up the ledger for Izuku’s pent up luck, instead of holding off for just a few more days, decided to unload it all right before Izuku would take some of the most important tests in his life to date.

Because of course it did. This was Izuku Midoriya we were talking about.

It made complete sense—how he had been so giddy after asking if Todoroki they could kiss again, that he ended up ruining it. Physically incapable of stopping himself from smiling, Izuku broke into a fit of laughing and bumped into Todoroki’s nose instead of really kissing. Todoroki didn’t seem to mind, but he didn’t attempt another kiss and instead pulled Izuku into a bit of an awkward, but nice, hug, chuckling and burying his face into Izuku’s green curls.

Thank you, Izuku, he had said.

Groaning, the so-named teenager threw his arms out above his head, sprawled on his bed. Many All Mights smiled back at him, and Izuku narrowed his gaze. Did his mint-condition Millenia 2000 Special: Legacy Collection PVC All Might action figure always look so smug?

No, he thought with a sigh. All Might is way too nice to ever tease about this. Izuku was definitely projecting. Speaking of, what would All Might say at a time like this? Probably something like: You are dating Young Todoroki now? What a nice surprise, your article turned out to rather prophetic, didn’t it, my boy! You two make a good match. Just remember to relax, and move forward with confidence that this is all happening because it is something you worked towards—just like your enrollment here and your success as a writer!

Resigned, Izuku took a deep breath. His inner-All-Might was right, and he knew it.

With that thought pushing him forward, Izuku forced himself to behave like a functional human being, dragging himself from his bed and out to the hall. A quick peek towards the kitchen informed him that his Mom was fixing breakfast over the stove, so Izuku quickly stopped in the bathroom.

Checking his reflection, Izuku inhaled, and exhaled, two long, uneven breaths of air.

What is so scary about all of this, anyway? It’s just Todoroki-kun!

So what if he had one of the most versatile, powerful quirks ever conceived? Or that he was probably the most attractive person Izuku had ever seen in his entire life? Or that he was the son of the Number Two Hero in the world, so that made him... essentially famous? Or that he was... clever... and thoughtful... and charming... and um... what was he just doing?

Izuku splashed his face with cold water, trying to wake up and simultaneously get a grip, replaying what Todoroki had said to him yesterday.
I think love is the right word, but all I really know is that, being with you makes me happy.

The more times he remembered, the more it was like stumbling upon a new song, and being so captivated by the lyrics or the rhythm that all you wanted to do was play it on repeat for days, weeks, months, unable to unwilling to get sick of it.

Izuku reached for a towel and dried his face. The idea that Todoroki felt that way towards him?

In some ways it felt surreal, like he could hardly believe it.

But then, Izuku had wanted this so badly. So badly. He had wanted it so badly, for so long, and now that it was really happening—of course he could believe it. He wanted to believe it. It took only the smallest amount convincing, of telling himself that it didn’t really matter that he was scared out of his mind:

What if he ends up messing things up? What if Shōto changes his mind? What if Endeavor retaliates?

What if he’s not good enough, his quirklessness catches up to him, the fad of his readership dies down—what then?

Except, the day Izuku accepted his admission to Yūei, he accepted the call to put his doubts to rest. His what if’s became so what’s. He would make things work. He was happy—proud—of his choices, even if things weren’t always simple, because they certainly weren’t always easy.

All Might always smiled, no matter how impossible the situation. It was part of what made him such a force of nature, that nothing scared him enough to make him stand down, to even so much as make him drop his signature smile, and Izuku was hellbent on following in his footsteps. He would rather fly on wax wings than to never know the joys of flight, and so what if he flies too close to the sun?

Let him get burned. There were risks worth taking, and this… this was one of them. A tiny leap of faith.

Letting himself love Shōto—it was the simplest act of letting go.

Of course I fell in love with you, you make it almost impossible not to.

Izuku raised his head from the towel, face dry, and looked back to the mirror: his cheeks were burned red again, now paired with a beaming smile that was reflected back at him… because he could be afraid of hitting the ground, of falling too fast or too hard or at the wrong time or in the wrong way.

Or, he could just close his eyes, and hope.

Hope beyond hopes that things were finally working out for him, that he had worked hard enough and long enough and was good enough to have earned to feel this way, that he could really give someone as amazing as Todoroki—that he could give Shōto—the love he deserved, too.

Wedged between a middle-aged man who smelled like cat food and another male student, taller
than Izuku—not Yūei, but they were wearing a similarly styled uniforms—his hands were shaking.

Only a little.

Izuku stared daggers at the screen of his smartphone, the last text he’d gotten yesterday still open in his messenger app.

His plan to get through the next three days wasn’t an especially sophisticated one, but it was better than nothing: if he could keep his attention occupied with studying and manage not to overthink things, the Todoroki situation (not that it was a situation) would work itself out… probably. Hopefully? They were both going to be busy with exams anyway, so it’s not like there would be a lot of free time to be spent together.

Shōto Todoroki (06/29 20:44):

We can talk more about it on Friday, after school. And good night to you too, Izuku.

Somehow, it felt like the little white letters were mocking him.

He hadn’t texted with anyone for very long last night: a few messages to Uraraka, Iida, and Shinsō to let them know what had happened; his Mom, since she was working late; Shōto, briefly, before bed. But with exams coming up, he forced himself to not text any later than 21:00.

Per their conversation, he and Shōto had agreed to have their first real date (since the so-called “accidental” boba tea incident definitely did not count) some indeterminate time after finals end. Shōto suggested that weekend, but Izuku asked if they could maybe not set a day or time just yet, because, as well as Izuku knew his strengths, he knew his own weaknesses, too—if he let himself start dreaming up specifics about it, he knew it would end up consuming his thoughts for the entirety of the week. By cutting off that nebulous source of anxiety at the source, he hoped to at least rein in some of his focus.

Izuku had to put all of his attention into their finals right now.

Particularly, the written finals.

The General Studies practical was designed with the application of the skills they’d acquired this semester in mind, while still being broad and flexible enough that the criteria didn’t restrict anyone from working towards a special goal—like Shinsō, who wanted to ultimately transfer to the Hero Course. Should any of the students not be pursuant of a future in heroics, however, they could use the opportunity to build a rapport with the Support or Business Departments, outside agencies, or another specific focus-area of their choosing.

Izuku’s own project was, for all intents and purposes, complete. All Might was still encouraging him to run it like an actual course to test its viability—(“It would be a great exercise in self-confidence, young Midoriya! Plus your fellow students could stand to learn quite a lot from you!”) but anything beyond the scope of what he turned into Ectoplasm-sensei would be optional, not graded. As of right now, he tentatively agreed to run the training course the following Monday—most of the student body was given the day off if they didn’t have any make-up exams, with the exception of the Hero Course students, who had a mandatory training to acclimate them for something they were doing over the summer break.
In truth, it didn’t really matter to Izuku how well he did on his practical—he could get a perfect score, could rank as the most technically skilled student in the whole department, even. The still bitter reality he faced everyday was that, no matter how many or well-honed skills he could acquire, none of them could make up for his lack of a quirk.

He remembered a question Shōto had asked him, when they accidentally crossed paths on the first day of his internship and Izuku’s shadowing at the HNN.

_Is it difficult for you to watch other people with quirks around you, or people like myself or Uraraka work towards becoming heroes? When it’s…_

Shōto hadn’t finished that question, but he didn’t really have to.

Izuku was already full-aware that he was always running to keep up with everyone else—his peers, who were sometimes just walking, sometimes not even moving, were always leagues ahead of him.

And, god, if Izuku’s legs weren’t tired.

But he wouldn’t stop. Didn’t matter if his muscles tore or his lungs collapsed or his feet blistered or his knees scraped, so long as he could move, even if he had to crawl, Izuku would not give up. The only reasonable strategy was to play to his strengths, and his test scores were what had gotten him into Yūei in the first place. If he didn’t keep up with that level of performance, then he was sure to get left behind.

So, Izuku would throw himself into these next three days with everything he had—he owed it to everyone who had supported him and helped to get him this far.

Feeling weirdly emotional, the green-haired teen shook his head, trying to rid himself of the surge of admiration and gratitude that seized around his heart. He forced himself to focus on the present —on the train, on the way to school, the guy who smells like cat food—all of which returned him to his current, miniscule predicament: figuring out what he was going to say.

Compared to everything else Izuku was facing, certainly he could just write good morning to his b—bo—...boyfri—

“Boyfriend!” he said, confidently, loudly, filled with resolve that he’d been missing when he first woke up that morning.

Except, he didn’t just wake up. He was neither alone, nor in his apartment, nor in his bed.

Everyone around him turned, expressions ranging anywhere from amused to disturbed. The cat-food-guy beside him looked particularly incredulous, and Izuku, sufficiently mortified, began to apologize to everyone.

“A-Ah, I’m sorry—! I didn’t mean—! W-Well, I did mean it, but not to you, I just—my phone—”

Visibly uncomfortable, the smelly stranger gripped his briefcase tightly and started to get up. Izuku almost stopped him, prepared to insist that he wasn’t some creepy kid on the train, but trying to make that argument might have just made the situation worse. He sort of was a creepy kid on the train right now.

Dropping his head and taking up as little room as possible, Izuku went back to glowering at his phone, now sweating and hyperaware of everything. In an attempt to rid himself of his stupid, errant, awkward thoughts, Izuku forced himself to just start typing something.
Good morning, Shōto! Best of luck on your exams today!

No, no. That seemed too… blah. Izuku backspaced and started from the top.

Good morning, Shō!

Was Shō too informal? It didn’t sound right. Maybe he should just do away with the name altogether?

Good morning ( •ᴗ• ) I’m a little nervous about exams today… but I’m happy I’ll get to see you.

Groaning—quietly, this time—Izuku squeezed his eyes shut. That was way too embarrassing to say.

Izuku Midoriya (07:41)

Good morning ( •ᴗ• ) I’m a little nervous about exams today… I’m running early, but if you wanted to walk to class together, I’ll be in my usual place with Hitoshi. Not that you have to—if you wanted to get to your homeroom early that makes sense, too!

That seemed… good enough. Yeah. Izuku quickly tucked his phone away so he wouldn’t sit and stare, waiting for Shōto to start typing back. That is, if Shōto chose to type back at all, he had mentioned before that he really only texted on occasion so—

Izuku’s phone began to go off before he could even finish the thought.

Shōto Todoroki (07:41)

Good morning Izuku. You shouldn’t be nervous—Shinsō said you always do excellent on the tests and homework, so I’m sure you’ll do well.

To be clear, Izuku did not squeak. It was more of a—a choke—which, considering the alternative, was actually more dignified.

Shōto Todoroki (07:41)
Also, homeroom is mostly just Kaminari yelling... or Bakugō yelling at him for yelling. Sometimes Iida, too. There is a lot of yelling.

Shōto Todoroki (07:42)

My point is—I won’t be missing anything. I’d rather spend the time with you. See you soon.

He texted back so quick oh my god that’s—so, so c-cute—I wasn’t ready—and he wants to see me?
I mean I know we’re dating so I guess he’ll have to see me sometimes but he doesn’t have to give up his time with 1-A to spend time with me but he wants to? I guess Kacchan doesn’t exactly make for the greatest company in the mornings but he sits right beside Yaoyorozu and they are friends so the fact that he wants to—

“Excuse me?” A young woman said to him, not unkindly, almost sympathetically. She leaned forward in her seat and removed one of her headphones. “Were you speaking to me, sorry, I couldn’t hear you...?”

“O-Oh, nevermind! No, I was just, uh, talking to myself. Sorry!”

With a friendly smile, she returned to listening to her music or podcast or whatever normal thing she’d been doing before Izuku had forced his awkwardness upon her. Cheeks burning, Izuku returned his phone to his pocket without trying to panic through some kind of answer—his stop was coming up and with his nerves so tightly-wrought right now, it would be a miracle if he didn’t drop his phone trying to type.

Once he stepped off the platform, Izuku felt particularly thankful for the bright, bracing morning air. It had that sort of indelible sharpness to it that only a metropolitan city could, something metal and unnatural to it, but it stung his throat with a strange impression of crisp resilience and a functioning world. The day hadn’t grown hot just yet, so the city breathed with its waking working class, energy frantic and distinctively alive.

With a deep breath in, Izuku tried very hard to ready himself. Exams were the most important thing right now. Everything else would come later.

With that thought motivating him, Izuku walked on, head held high.

...Well, not literally, because the next thing he did was pull out his notebook for his natural sciences class and start reviewing a few more key concepts, rapid-firing off quiet words to himself. It was more of a metaphorical kind of ‘head held high’ type of thing. The point was, he felt good, confident, and let that spirit lead him all the way to campus, settling down in his normal ledge to the left of the main entrance, absorbing as much last minute information as his brain would allow.

Minutes passed. Izuku wasn’t paying attention to how many, just that they were steadily whisking by, the only real indication was the growing volume and movement of more people in his periphery. His attention was consumed by the protein synthesis process—DNA, mRNA, tRNA, they really had an abbreviation for everything, didn’t they?—and aside from a few scribbled notes he thought to ask Hatsume based on the cycle, Izuku managed to get a solid twenty additional minutes of studying in before—

“Hello, Izuku.”
“AH!” The surprise was enough that Izuku not only leapt, but he fell straight into the grass in a confused flail of limbs and turf. He knew that soft, low voice anywhere—firm and steady, but gentle, too.

Shōto.

Oh god oh god oh no I’m blanking I can’t think of anything to say—um—

“All Might!” he blurted, his default answer to most things, simultaneously scrambling for something that they actually had in common—“Breathing!”

“Pfft,” an abrupt laugh knocked him upside the head. Wait, that didn’t sound like Shōto—

Taking a moment to adjust to his sudden vertigo, Izuku’s brain began to process the silhouette above him as it blocked out the sun—the hair was much more wild and pointed than Shōto’s. In fact, it was just about as messy as his own…

More reactively than consciously, Izuku said, “Shinsō?”

His friend didn’t answer at first, but stepped out of the line of sun and Izuku was able to confirm; he could recognize that mop of purple hair anywhere. Did either of them ever end up buying that brush? Izuku should make a note so he wouldn’t forget again.

While well-intended, the thought flittered out of his head almost as soon as it occurred. Izuku was much more interested in what Shinsō was doing: he watched, wide-eyed, as his classmate unhooked a series of clasps that surrounded part of his neck the lower half of his face, feeding into a dark, angular and metal mask that was comprised of a number of plated and fine-mesh materials.

“Shinsō!” Izuku repeated, this time with much more excitement in his voice. He couldn’t even stay mad about getting pranked for how excited he was to see the finished prototype. Leaping up, Izuku inched closer so he could better inspect the support item while his classmate carefully removed it.

“You finished already?! Ectoplasm-sensei said you had until Thursday!”

“It’s functioning,” Shinsō corrected, in his own voice this time, fixing his face with a grimace in a rather poor attempt to hide a smile. He held out the so-called ‘artificial vocal cords’ he’d been working to make (with Hatsume’s supervision round-the-clock for the past two weeks). In its current state, it was a little bigger than would be ideal, and it definitely erred on the heavy side for everyday use.

Even so, it was really cool.

“I still have a few adjustments to make before I turn it in, though. So, it was pretty convincing?”

“Too convincing,” Izuku held his chest over his heart, still pounding noisily from shock. “I thought you… and I wasn’t ready—”

“Well, sorry to disappoint. I’m not going to kiss you or set anything on fire,” his friend finished, holding up a hand. “But, on that note, you really need to work on your game, Midoriya. Even Kaminari is better at flirting than you, and he sucks. Please tell me you don’t only talk to Todoroki about All Might and breathing.”

With a huff, Izuku’s ears burned red and he gathered his notebook and sat back down in his usual spot. “N-No, we talk about more t-than that! Sometimes we talk about… um… quirks… and we talked about food once. Oh, twice if you count the boba tea!”
Shinsō settled down in the grass, laying flat on his back and closing his eyes, artificial vocal cords securely held in his left hand. “I actually can’t believe you managed to get your shit together with him. I genuinely did not think you had it in you.”

Narrowing his gaze suspiciously, the green-haired boy asked, “Is that a compliment or an insult?”

“Anything can be an insult if you hate hard enough.”

“Well...” Izuku quipped a smile that went unseen by his friend. “By that logic, then anything could be a compliment if you love hard enough, right?”

“This is why we don’t get along,” Shinsō insisted.

Laughing, Izuku shook his head and looked back at his science notes. “You say that like we’re not friends, ‘Toshi.”

The indigo-haired teen fought a visible chill. “You sicken me.”

“Sure, sure. Don’t come asking me for help studying for the math exam tomorrow then!”

A shrug. “I don’t want your help. God knew I’d be too powerful if I was gay and good at math; I accepted my fate a long time ago. I’ll pass, I don’t care about getting an A.”

“Shin!” Izuku laughed. “That’s not a very heroic attitude of you!”

His friend, splayed out in the grass, winked one-eye open to look at him. “Izuku, I don’t know how to tell you this, but I couldn’t give one fuck even if you begged me to. I will be a hero, shitty attitude and all, because being a hero isn’t just about smiling all the time like All Might or beating villains.”

“I know,” Izuku said with a trace of fondness in his voice. Glancing down at his notes, the quirkless student dubbed any further studying at that point a lost cause; he closed his journal and tucked it back into his bookbag.

“That’s exactly why I love writing about it. It’s so impossible to explain... but it’s something we all understand? How does that even make sense?! I’ve always thought about it like... like a person’s spirit, you know? We don’t all have a perfect sense of what that really is, but at the same time, it’s something we can feel within and between us...”

A bit absent-mindedly, Izuku reached his hand forward, angling his fingers up to just obscure the treeline. There was some scarring on his hand and forearm—a combination of burns from when Shōto’s fire had gotten out of control during the Sports Festival and some of the evidence of Stain’s blades from Hosu City. It felt a little unbelievable, that he’d been at Yūei for such a short time... everything had changed so much.

He couldn’t find it in himself to regret any of it, though.

“And I... I think it’s just amazing, that we all know what it means to be a hero, but that it’s so difficult to... explain. That we can intuit what’s good and right without even having to describe it. That’s what I makes me want to keep writing. I want people to understand that being a hero is...”

In a world like this, it’s not uncommon for extraordinary people to save other people, but it’s much harder to save someone’s heart.

Before Izuku could complete his sentence, he flinched in surprise when his outstretched hand was
no longer empty. He’d been so lost in thought, he hadn’t even realized that he and Shinsō were no longer alone; a shock of warmth suffused the tips of his fingers and down through his palm.

His hand lowered automatically, unblocking his line of sight, but his fingers didn’t untwine.

“What are you doing?”

Blinking deliberately, Izuku’s brain jumpstarted after a moment or two, and his cheeks pinked when he finally put the pieces together. Shōto was standing in front of him, his arm angled forward just a little bit to continue to hold Izuku’s semi-extended hand. Shinsō was still on the ground, one-eye watching them, and Izuku looked dazedly between the two.

He was surprised by how calm he felt, all things considered. It was like waking up from a comfortable dream, and then, the whole world felt like it was filling in around him, just a little bit more.

Past Shōto, Uraraka was jogging to meet them, arm waving above her head. A few other 1-A students caught sight of them, like Koda, who smiled shyly as a songbird fluttered onto his shoulder, and Kaminari, who swaggered over with some of his usual suspects, Sero, Ashido and Kirishima. On the stairs, to his left, Izuku could just barely discern the Big Three in his periphery; Nejire’s stand-out voice certainly helped to verify.

“Izuku?” The boy before him asked, a confused smile in his voice.

Shōto’s fingers felt so warm… and the sun, it felt so full.

And Izuku’s heart—it felt so right.

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For as long as he could remember, even on his best days, Shōto kept his sights forward: what he would be doing next, where he would be going next, one tally mark after another on the never-ending to-do list. On days when he was extraordinarily lucky, which, he couldn’t help but feel were becoming more and more frequent, that list ran short of things scrawled in his father’s demanding penmanship and the rest of the lines crowded with things Shōto didn’t even fully understand; all that he really knew was that he liked them. These things—they weren’t just another box waiting to be filled. Most of the time, they weren’t boxes at all. Sometimes it was smudgy, soft charcoal directions written in the margins, like, go out with friends on Friday, and others, in italicized, bold, and underlined font that read things like: I really want to kiss him.

That was the funny thing about putting something like that on the sort of list Shōto was used to keeping. It wasn’t like he could just cross it off or check some box, even after he did it. He kissed Izuku. (Twice, sort of, but the second one was half-interrupted when Izuku started to laugh, and even then it was better than anything on any list ever.) All it really taught him was that he could probably complete that task a hundred times, a thousand times, and it would still be there, front and center, maybe even more glaringly obvious than before.

A consequence of all of this was, of course, now Shōto had to re-learn how to operate. He couldn’t just focus on getting through the day and letting everything else fall into place around it, because the things he had to do hardly seemed like an important part of his list anymore.
Maybe it would be best to do away with the list altogether. There wasn’t any point in keeping track of what was important when the most obvious answer was right in front of him.

“What are you doing?” Shōto had asked the very subject of his train of thought, confused by the way Izuku’s hand was stretched forward, like he was reaching for something, or maybe trying to block the sun from his eyes. His decision to thread their fingers together wasn’t even a conscious one.

“Izuku?”

“I’m…” Slowly, a smile split Izuku’s face, and like a fog clearing, his eyes brightened to a glimmer that would rival the stars. “I’m really… really good! Great! Sorry, I was just thinking… zoning out, I guess. Good morning!”

Amused, Shōto tilted his head. “Can I sit?”

“If you want to, sure,” the other boy mumbled, and Shōto sat on the ledge beside him. It wasn’t particularly comfortable, but he didn’t mind. His own heart felt light and heavy at the same time, and his throat hurt, but it was like a tightly coiled spring rather than a sprained joint. An… eager kind of pain? Did that even make sense?

“What were you thinking about?” he asked, setting his bag down in the grass.

Before Izuku could answer, Shinsō let out a low chuckle. “I’d bet money it was either All Might or breathing.”

Izuku’s scoffed at his friend, indignant, but he didn’t argue. Not that he didn’t seem ready to, but there wasn’t a chance before Uraraka was upon them. Close behind her, Shōto realized, were more of his classmates, their voices familiar and underpinned by smiles as they breezed by.

“Good morning you two,” Uraraka said, sporting a very knowing grin.

Drily, a voice came from the dirt between them. “I’m still here, you know.”

Waving off Shinsō, Uraraka gestured towards Shōto and Izuku. “You know you’re going to break Twitter if you walk into school like that.”

With an audible whine, Izuku performed a cross between a seated-bow and the fetal position, hiding himself from Uraraka. Shōto was simply amused, surprised that Izuku was so flustered by the idea; it was easy for him to forget that everyone wasn’t so used to the inconvenience of fame.

“I can’t stand all the Twitter stuff… it’s already so out of hand…” Izuku sighed, glancing up at Uraraka, then to Shōto. “I mean, I know this was basically my fault from the beginning, but still.”

Carefully neutral, Shōto weighed his words before responding. “That’s… well, that is true. But I don’t mind.”

“You don’t mind?” Izuku asked, incredulous.

Before Shōto could adequately answer, several other 1-A students were surrounding them. Uraraka turned around to greet them, and Shinsō rolled over so he was facedown in the dirt.

“Hey, yoooo!” Sero cheered. “Todoroki, you did it! Got yo’ manz!”

Shōto’s brow furrowed a bit. “I did… what?”
Exasperated, Kaminari cocked his hip to the side and pointed a hand very clearly at Izuku. “He means you managed to ask Izuku out? Given that you’re, you know, holding hands and that Shinsō looks like he’s been murdered.”

“Oh. Yes.” With a mild-manner, Shōto smiled. “Although Izuku and I now being in a relationship has nothing to do with Shinsō. He always looks like that.”

Izuku laughed, voice a little pitchy but smiling just the same. “It’s true.”

Snapping his fingers, Kaminari knelt down beside the 1-C student. “Maybe he just needs mouth-to-mouth resuscitation!”

“Touch me and you die,” Shinsō said, tone corrosive like acid.

Several people laughed at the blond’s expense, but Shōto had a feeling he wasn’t joking.

Once the sound died down, Kirishima flashed them a toothy smile. “But seriously, happy for you guys! Midoriya is an honorary bro for sure. Feels surreal though that we’re not getting a Go Beyond! Weekly today, though!”

“Aww, he’s right,” Sero said, arms crossed. “Now we have exams to worry about and no stories… bummer.”

Ever eager for the opportunity to gossip, Ashido leaned forward and wiggled her eyebrows at Izuku. “Soooo? Got any insider knowledge for us? Any hint on who you’re writing about this week?”

“Uhh, haha, n-no, sorry.” Izuku cleared his throat, glowing at their compliments. “Thank you all, though. Writing for the newspaper has really changed my life… it’s really nice to hear that you all get something out of it.”

“Are you kidding?” Kaminari laughed. “It’s like, a highlight every week in 1-A! We all sit there in silence and read… although if it’s really hard to get our hands on a copy, sometimes Ojiro will read to the class. I don’t know why he was dubbed the official speaker, just sort of happened.”

Ashido, meanwhile, had been using the opportunity to snap a few pictures with her phone. “I’m gonna be Twitter famous bay-beee! Wait ‘til the Tododeku stans get their hands on this. Oh, man, this week is going to be crazy.”

Coughing, Izuku glanced to Uraraka, and the pair shared a significant look for several seconds before the brunette turned around.

“Wellllllll, Mina, As nice as it would be to get that blue checkmark, why don’t we not use Todoroki and Deku to get famous?”

“Boo, fineeeee—can I at least keep the pictures for me? They’re sooooo cute.” She looked to him and Izuku, and Shōto had no idea what to say. He really did not care.

Like a true villain, Uraraka slapped her hands together and rubbed them menacingly. “Only if you send them to me first!”

“URARAKA!” Izuku let out a loud protest, but the two girls already had their phones out and were, he could only imagine, exchanging text messages.

With a quick glance towards a particularly adorable smattering of freckles, Shōto dropped his
voice a little and said, "I told you, everyone is annoying in the morning."

“It’s—ahhh—fine… I know they mean well.” Izuku scowled at a nondescript spot on the ground, cheeks pink. “It’s just—I’m trying to—g-get used to it. Maybe Uraraka was right though… it might not be a good idea if we, um, do this in the hallways, at least not yet, you know? I really don’t like getting approached by people I don’t know very well… a lot of people already ask me questions about you and it just feels… I don’t know. I don’t want people prying… more than they already do?"

“Are you sure? I’m happy to make it clear to anyone who bothers you that they should mind their own business.”

Izuku snickered a little, covering his mouth with the back of his free hand. “As much as I appreciate you offering to threaten people for me, I’ll be okay. I just don’t do super well with lots of added attention.”

“Of course, that’s okay,” Shōto promised, a small smile sneaking into his voice as he studied their joined hands. “I’m not in any rush. You waited… a long time for me to catch up to you. You didn’t have to. I don’t even really think I deserved that, especially after how I treated you in the very beginning.”

Humming, his gaze wandered over their peers. Yaoyorozu and Jiro had found their way over at some point, too, the former reminding them all gently that they should head inside if they wanted to make it in time for their short homeroom before exams would begin.

They started to get up, and Shōto turned to Izuku. “Just tell me what your boundaries are and I’ll do my best to adhere to them, okay?”

And… there.

He was starting to get the hang of this—for once, knowing the right things to say.

For a long time, socializing had been so difficult for him. No matter the school, no matter the person—even with Yaoyorozu, Shōto usually couldn’t get a good read on her. But… this was different. He was starting to understand when the things he said would make Izuku smile. And the different kinds of smiles, too. He credited that to Izuku teaching him how to play poker while they recovered in Hosu City—at least when it came to reading his facial expressions. Shōto could tell them apart, the hollow smiles, knowing grins, crooked smirks; whether they were excited, lopsided, near-tears, or wobbly, each one was always, always bright-eyed.

This one? Soft, unguarded. Paired with a shy nod, and cheeks a color that made his freckles stand out. It was probably a good time for them to stop holding hands after all, because Shōto could feel his quirk shimmering hotly under his skin, fire teasing the surface of his fingertips.

Unfortunately, now that Shōto realized why he enjoyed Izuku’s company so much, he did not like that he couldn’t just kiss him all of the time. The whole act had yielded a strange effect on the unconscious byproduct of his quirk, in which it subsided naturally, like a sort of instinct that kept him from hurting Izuku by mistake. Whether or not it was a fluke because he’d been sort of hyperaware of everything when they kissed, Shōto wasn’t totally sure. Only time would tell.

Together with the other first years that had gathered in front of the school, they made their way towards their respective homerooms. Shōto and Izuku hung towards the back of the group, side by side.
He caught Sero asking something about their exams, and Shōto knew that Izuku had stayed up for a while studying yesterday.

“Do you feel ready for your exams?” he asked, and Izuku looked up at the ceiling thoughtfully for a moment.

“I feel pretty confident, but who knows? If anything, I’m not going to have a problem with the material but with time. I’m always writing to the last minute.”

Given all that Shōto knew about Izuku, that was about the answer he would have expected. His tendency to talk without breaking to breathe was a habit that had even carried over to their text messages on occasion, and his avid note-taking basically cemented the mental image he had of Izuku scribbling through an essay until the very last moment. The visual made him smile, just a little.

“What did you place for your class on the midterm? That should be a pretty good metric of how you’ll fare on the written exam.”

Izuku coughed and looked away. “Oh, uh. Hah. I placed, uh, first. In 1-C, I mean… So—I hope that is a good indicator!”

Had Shōto not been so practiced in the art of keeping his expression blank, he might have appeared more shocked. Not shocked, really—he knew Izuku was intelligent—but the first rank for academics in each class was at least mildly coveted. Yaoyorozu was closely followed by Iida for the spot in their own class, and somehow, the distinction made Izuku seem that much more impressive.

Evidently, he wasn’t the only one who thought so, and Kaminari turned dramatically and hung his head in Izuku’s direction. “I didn’t know you were that super-smart, Midoriya! You should have said something, a few of us went over to Yaomomo’s to get some extra tutoring but I’m not ready, oh god, I’m not ready at all, oh shit, oh fuck—ow! I’m—ow! Hey!”

Shinsō had cut him off with a swift smack behind the head. Izuku winced, and Shōto had to wonder if it was a common tactic.

“Don’t start with that shit. You know what you know. And no profanity in front of Midoriya, he’s the last good person on this Earth.”

“H-Hey!” Midoriya pouted, even while Kaminari nodded in understanding. “You just said the f-word to me outside before everyone else got there! You cuss all the time!”

Glancing over his shoulder, Shinsō started to turn towards the General Studies hallway. “I’m not pretending to set a good example. But these 1-A heroes are supposed to be role models or something. Just do your best, Denki. You might surprise yourself.”

Ashido and Sero looked a bit stunned by that, and Izuku glanced back and forth between them with a brow raised. Shōto wasn’t sure what about Shinsō’s words warranted that sort of reaction—it was good advice—besides the fact that they were a bit uncharacteristic.

Whatever had stalled them, Shōto decided to ignore it in favor of remaining conscious of the time. He glimpsed towards the stairwell that would take them the rest of the way to the Hero Department, while Izuku’s eyes followed after Shinsō as he turned into their General Studies classroom.

“Well, um… I just wanted to say...” Letting out a small, sharp exhale, Izuku looked up at Shōto and
managed a nervous smile. “Shinsō was right, but, uh, not just about Kaminari-kun! Everyone in 1-A is really amazing, and you’re all already on your way to becoming Pro’s… so, um, I hope it’s not weird to say, but I know that some exam won’t stop any of you from becoming great h-heroes! So… I would wish you good luck, but I’m sure you won’t need it!”

Before anyone had the chance to react to that, Izuku turned and made a beeline for 1-C, but he stopped at the last second and turned around.

“Oh, and, um, bye, Shōto!”

And just like that, he was gone again. Something tangibly shifted the moment the moment the door shut behind him, and Shōto balked a little because every one of his peers turned and immediately stared him down.

“...What?”

Uraraka’s gaze narrowed, just a little. “Nothing. You just better appreciate what you’ve got. Deku is a literal angel and I will not hesitate to kill for him.”

“It would be super unmanly to ever hurt Mido-bro’s feelings. He’s like, the nicest guy.”

“That’s a good way of putting it,” Jirō remarked with a nod, gesturing that they all keep walking. “I feel like that meme, ‘I’ve only had Deku for a day and a half, but if anything happened to him I would kill everyone in this room and then myself’, you know?”

Yaoyorozu lightly scolded her girlfriend with a warning tone. “Kyoka, let’s not turn violent on Todoroki just yet. It’s been a day.”

“It’s fine, Yaoyorozu. The threats are not necessary, but noted.” Keeping his tone neutral, Shōto smiled just a little and started to move up the stairs. “I assure you, I am very aware of how lucky I am.”

The ink on the tomes of time that marked the beginning of their relationship had not yet dried as exams swept through Yūei. For some, the shifting winds came with a vengeance, but for others, it was a breeze. Shōto felt fine with his performance. For the entrance exam, he had received tutoring to a much higher caliber than the material they were covering in their core courses, so his studying was largely comprised of reviewing things he already knew. Some sections were more challenging than others, but he wasn’t concerned.

Izuku was a bit of another story. Not only was he concerned, he seemed outright wired the few times that Shōto would cross paths with him during. Shōto would find him spending a majority of that time pouring over his notes and speaking quietly to himself—depending on what subject was coming up next, Shōto sometimes liked to just sit and listen; it was oddly calming, now that he’d grown used to it, but he also knew Izuku got distracted easily and didn’t want to risk impacting his performance. Most of the time, therefore, Shōto spent his breaks with his classmates from 1-A or eating by himself. It sounded lonely, but Shōto enjoyed having time to himself that didn’t really
require him to be anywhere or to be doing anything in particular.

The second day of exams proceeded much like the first: quietly, with a text from Izuku to keep him company on the sleepy train ride in, and then made loud and crowded by their peers by the time he arrived; long stretches of silence, disturbed only by the chaff or pencils or the occasional cough, and intermittent breaks.

Halfway through the exams and on their largest break of the day, Shōto found himself in the company of Sato, Tokoyami, Iida and Aoyama. Kirishima and Bakugō were seated at the same table, but a ways down the length of it. The different departments schedules all varied a bit to accommodate the different class sizes and lecture lengths, so Heroics and Business were the only ones occupying the lunch hall during that particular break. It felt strangely empty without the regular, mind-numbing rancor of the rest of the student body.

Not that Shōto didn’t have his own headaches to deal with; his most pressing one came in the form of a text message, midway through a bite of soba.

*Enji Todoroki (13:38)*

_I will be home around 16:00 tonight. We need to talk, so make sure you are home and available when I get done with patrol._

“Well, fuck.”

Iida, seated immediately to Shōto’s right, looked positively scandalized.

“Todoroki! You must refrain from using that sort of language during school hours!”

It took him a moment to realize that Iida had even spoken to him.

“Sorry,” he mumbled, tucking his phone back into his pocket. “Knee-jerk reaction.”

Aoyama, across from him, put down his sparkling water. “What ever is the matter, _mon cherie_? Is the constant testing wearing on your shine?”

Unsure of what to say, Shōto returned to eating his lunch. “No, it’s—nothing.”

“It’s clearly not _nothing_,” Tokoyami pointed out. “But if you’re uncomfortable, you don’t have to talk about it.”

Frowning, Iida turned to him, sounding uncertain. “If the social media harassment is becoming too much, I can talk to Aizawa-sensei. There is probably something the school could do to moderate the problem...”

“It’s nothing, Iida.”

The Class Representative hesitated for just a moment before deciding to drop the subject with a single, stern nod, returning to his own food with his typical jerky, yet somehow purposeful, movements.

“Well!” Ever energetic, Aoyama pulled out his glittering smartphone. “On the subject of social media, I must say, you and your beloved beau are twinkling extra brightly these days. The rest of
the world has taken notice once again!”

Shōto had to resist the urge to roll his eyes. This had practically become a part of his weekly ritual, someone shoving their phones in his face. He’d learned it was easier to just accept it than to fight. Unsurprisingly, Aoyama had Twitter pulled up for him already, a search query returning anything with ‘#tododeku’ said in the message.

#tododeku shippers how are we feelin??????????????

RT: @NejireChan Yūei gets a little gayer everyday… I feel like a proud big sister. :)

>> thank you for this delicious fucking #tododeku food. We will literally accept crumbs just please. you are an actual angel @NejireChan

>> NEJIRE HADO REALLY SAID GAY RIGHTS

@GoBeyond_Weekly WE BE WAITING PATIENTLY FOR FRIDAY LIKE ….SO MANY PEOPLE SAY IT’S HAPPENING AND IM JUST AHHHHHHHHH

IF THEY DONT FINALLY CONFIRM #TODODEKU ILL EAT MY ENTIRE ASS.

That made Shōto pause. What does that… even mean?

@endeavor_official #tododeku it’s #gaymer hours

(1/2) i like #tododeku but some of y’all really need to calm down. Every other tweet is “ok but deku is quirkless and the toodoroki family has money invested in UA obviously something shady/nsfw happened. b/c UA doesnt accept people without quirks.”

(2/2) have you actually read deku’s writing? Does he really NEED a quirk to be a student? what are you a conspiracy theorist?? Please, shut the fuck up. Just let them be.

#tododeku since Deku’s quirkless and Todoroki basically has two quirks, does that mean together they’re like, one whole functional human being?

here’s a 99% chance that @endeavor_official is homophobic & if so that bitch can go die #tododeku

Okay, Shōto had to admit—that one was actually pretty funny.
THE IDEA THAT DEKU PLANNED FOR #TODODEKU TO BE END GAME FROM THE BEGINNING IS THE ONLY CONTENT I APPROVE OF IM WHE EZING--

>>In reply to: “what if i published my absolute love for the prettiest boy at UA accidentally and then get him to fall in love with me?? haha just kidding...

unless…?”

#UAShips ok i will acknowledge that #tododeku is a cute ass ship but why is no one talking about #KIRIBAKU? #MOMOJIRÔ?? holy fuck talk about legendary… all-might who is openly bi starts teaching there and then every student is like “oh its’ OK for heroes to be LGBTQ?” coincidence?? nah.THAT’Ş why he’s the no. 1 hero.

do you have any opinions on #tododeku @NotActuallyHawks

>> @NotActuallyHawks: bold of you to assume i have opinions.

>> wait what does this mean

He looked up, one brow arched high. Shōto noted that there was glitter rubbing off on his hand from Aoyama’s phone. “Is that Hawk’s actual account? Doesn’t a name like that confuse people?”

“That man is… chaotic. It actually suits him rather well,” Tokoyami said, tone halfway between sharp and exasperated.

#tododeku is,, good,, they,,um,,hhhh ‘it’s your quirk’,,,dkdslsfn they should,,

>> go on

>> what im trying to say is,,,,, .................................  ........,,kis s

@GoBeyond_Weekly ok but TELL ME this isn’t how #tododeku happened

Deku: im gay

Todoroki: how gay

Deku (sweating): yes

I know deku doesn’t have a twitter but if he ever somehow sees this… pls give todoroki headpats. Even if #tododeku isnt romantic and its just platonic. He always looks so tired in pictures :(
Sighing, Shōto gave Aoyama back his phone. He didn’t understand a lot of what was being said anyway.

Somber, Tokoyami remarked, “I myself was quite surprised by your admission to pursue a romantic relationship with Midoriya, but I am happy that it has worked out for you both. I would say congratulations, but that somehow feels like the inappropriate choice of words given the floodgates this opens up all over again for you both.”

“I appreciate the sentiment,” Shōto said. “It only bothers me to the extent that it seems to make Izuku stressed. I don’t particularly care.”

Sato popped a granola bar in his mouth, chewing thoughtfully. “Well, summer will be starting soon, so maybe that will help some of the mania to die down. I am so freakin’ ready for break.”

There was a murmur of agreement, and the topic started to shift to plans for the summer. Shōto did his best to pay attention to his classmates, but he kept going back and forth about all of the things his Dad might actually want to talk about. If Twitter was any indication, he may have figured out that Shōto and Izuku were now dating. If not that, then what? The not-knowing made his stomach clench uncomfortably. An old fear that his mother had died at the hospital or something had happened to Fuyumi or Natsuo, or they found Tōya but he was dead—all of it resurfaced and kept his focus far from the lunch hall for the remainder of their break.

His answer came shortly after his father arrived home, in the training hall. His old man stood at the head of the room, and Shōto stopped about 10 paces short of him, waiting.

“You and Izuku Midoriya are in a relationship.”

It wasn’t a question, and Shōto wasn’t intending to denying it. At least no one was dying.

“And?”

Across the length of the training hall, his father’s piercing blue eyes narrowed. Dangerously.

“Were you planning on telling me?”

“Eventually, sure.” Shōto kept his tone neutral. “Now you know. Was that all?”

“Cut the crap, Shōto. Being friends with that boy was one thing, but this is too far. If this is all some way to get back at me for enrolling you at Yūei, then—”

Unconsciously, Shōto’s left eye twitched. “Are you serious? Not everything is about you, holy shit.”
“Shōto.” Endeavor’s voice was dark, a familiar warning, and Shōto hated that his own response was so disgustingly pavlovian. Ingrained, automatic, and entirely involuntary, he became silent and still. His will towards self-preservation were perhaps the only set of instincts he had that were more well-developed than his fighting ones.

“I’d rather this not become an argument,” Endeavor said after a solid minute. “So I’ll get right to the point. You’re not going to date that boy, Shōto. Ideally I would like for you to wait until you’ve graduated to date at all—you need to focus on your training right now—but if you’re going to insist then you can at least pick someone better.”

Biting his tongue, Shōto could have drawn blood with the effort to hold back the many terrible things he wanted to say. He tried instead to remind himself of Izuku’s reassuring words, before they parted ways at the end of the school day.

I don’t know Endeavor very well… but he is your Dad. I think he wants the best for you… even if his idea of ‘best’ is a little warped. Just hear him out, and if it goes badly, you can call me okay? I can take a break from studying to talk for awhile.

It was hard to take Izuku’s advice to heart when he was the subject of his Dad’s present criticism, but he was going to try.

“You don’t have to like it, but I am not changing my mind or my decision. If you really don’t want this to become an argument, then we can leave it at that.”

Endeavor watched him for a long moment, the training hall quiet but for the distant hum of the TV in the living room and the slight shuffling of pots and pans as Fuyumi made dinner.

“You’ve changed, since attending Yūei.”

Biting the inside of his cheek, Shōto eventually agreed. “I’m trying to be less like you.”

Almost abruptly, like the thought just occurred to him, his father said, “I don’t mind that he’s a boy, you know. Whether you like men or women is not my concern. I only find it hard to believe that you haven’t considered how unfair this will be for both of you.”

The fact that he even considered Izuku in his ‘reasoning’ was enough to make Shōto drop his guard, if only for a moment. “What do you mean by that?”

His old man sighed, squeezing the bridge of his nose with his thumb and forefinger. “Power differentials are a dangerous business. You need a partner who can keep up with you, because if you continue to grow and they get left behind, it will only make things harder on both of you until something gives.”

“So it’s because he’s quirkless, then. Got it.” Shōto’s patience was running thinner by the second. “You didn’t have to pretend to take some kind of position on fairness. You think he’s going to get in my way.”

As was usually the case, when one of their tempers spiked, the other always reciprocated in kind.

“He already has,” Endeavor snapped. “The fact that we have to have this conversation proves as much.”

Words icy, Shōto shot right back. “You’re right, he has already made an impact on my life. Why are you so convinced that it’s a negative one? Or are you so detached from reality that you can’t even tell the difference?”
“Do not speak to me in such a way,” his father warned, eyes flashing. “What it comes down to is simple: Izuku Midoriya is never going to be a hero. He will never be on the same level as you, and that sort of dynamic will only drive you apart. He will hold you back, and you will drag him along. It’s not going to be beneficial to either of you.”

Shōto ran a hand through his hair, using the tips of his fingers to cool his scalp in an attempt to keep from getting too angry.

“You’re the last person who should be trying to give advice on relationships. Mom’s quirk might have made it seem like she was a good match for you in terms of power, but what the fuck does that have to do with caring about someone? You can’t measure people’s worth by their quirk alone. I’m in a different course than him, not a different world. He is more than capable of handling himself.”

Shaking his head in a way that just exuded condescension, Endeavor’s response was crafted as if Shōto was throwing a tantrum. “His enrollment at Yūei is practically a public endorsement of vigilantism. You have to see that, Shōto. It’s irresponsible. No test score could supplement a complete failure on the practical portion of the entrance exam—but that’s another conversation. The point is, this isn’t a debate. I am telling you you aren’t to pursue any sort of relationship with him from this point forward. Do I make myself clear?”

“No, actually,” Shōto couldn’t help the humorless laugh that slipped out of him. “It’s almost funny—you spent fifteen years beating my quirk into me, to—what? Make me more powerful? And I’m actually grateful, because you made it so easy to tell the difference between when someone actually wants me to become a better person, because they knew it would make me stronger, instead of what you’ve always done, pushing me to become stronger so I could be better than everyone else.”

Reactively, Shōto held out his left hand, a small pume of flames rising from his fingertips. He wasn’t demonstrating it as a threat, but rather, to make his point.

“I hated this part of myself, and it was Izuku who gave it back to me. Not you. So if you’re expecting me to walk out of this room and cut ties with him because you think he’s holding me back, then you’ve got it all wrong. He’s the one who made me realize that it’s okay to do what I want to do, to set my own goals, for myself, and I refuse to let you be the one to hold me back anymore.”

The room was growing hotter, and Shōto couldn’t tell if it was because of him or his father, but his heart was beating faster and harder to compensate.

Flames were spreading on the mats, and Endeavor growled, “You are out of line! You’re willing to risk your future for some quirkless nobo—”

“Don’t you dare finish that thought,” Shōto ground his right heel into the floor, extinguishing the flames, ice spreading fast and with such violence the walls shimmered with frostbite. “You asked me to cut the crap, so here it is: I am in a relationship with Izuku Midoriya. You don’t have to worry about anyone getting in my way—I will surpass you, and All Might, and everyone else, because that’s what I want to do. My goals are my own. I want to become worthy of the title hero, and not just the kind that arrests villains. I want to help people, and if you’re so blind that you can’t see that Izuku is the strongest person for that, then that’s your problem.”

With the last word spoken, silence knit itself into the still air of the training hall once again. His father’s facial hair wicked slightly as it drew in oxygen, and Shōto let the flame go out of his fingertips, but it was otherwise empty space. A middle-distance of understanding.
“Are we done?”

“The issues I have with him is greater than his lack of a quirk, but I can see you’re going to be too stubborn to listen to reason. I can’t say I didn’t expect as much.” With a noise of irritation, Endeavor turned around and began to exit the training hall towards the north wing of the house, stopping at the door to look over his shoulder. “Go on and make your mistakes. At least you might end up learning something.”

Without moving, Shōto watched him leave, door closing off the image of his broad shoulders and stubborn glare. He felt strangely energized, adrenaline-induced from the suddenly absent tension, and instead of leaving or going back to his room, Shōto decided to use the hall for its titular purpose.

Hanging a punching bag was a graceless and cumbersome task to do by oneself, but it wasn’t Shōto’s first time. It was almost a cliché, the way people talked about throwing your weight into each punch as a way to get out your anger, imagining the face of whoever wronged you at the end of your fists, but he didn’t find that to be what was so therapeutic about it.

It was the kick-back.

That’s why he preferred that brand of training over any of the others he went through on a weekly basis. It felt more definitive, more real than using his quirk. For every reaction, there must be an opposite and equal reaction, and nowhere did that law apply so stubbornly than in the ache of his wrists and tenderness of his knuckles after letting out his frustrations on the taut leather of a worn down punching bag. And while Shōto certainly was no masochist, in those instances, it felt like he earned that pain, somehow. Going on runs, using his quirk continuously or in alteration—it left him feeling drained.

This made him feel alive.

Shōto failed to realize how long he’d been letting out his pent-up—frustration? energy?—until Natsuo came to let him know that dinner was almost ready.

“You’re sweaty and you smell bad,” his brother informed, and Shōto gave him a deadpan stare as he accepted his help taking down the punching bag.

“Sooooo... you and Dad had a, uh, talk?”

Shōto hummed. Natsuo let out a sigh and followed him out of the training hall.

“Take a quick shower and come down. If you want to talk about—”

“I’ll be down in ten minutes.”

Shōto walked to his bathroom and stretched out his arms, about to start up the shower when he was reminded of Izuku’s advice earlier.

If it goes badly, you can call me, okay?

Did it go badly? Does a conversation with his father ever not go badly? Shōto wasn’t even really sure what counted anymore.

He decided to take Izuku up on his offer anyway; there was still a buzz beneath his skin that the added work-out didn’t quite extinguish. The ache in his knuckles had helped to take the edge off, but he just felt... Ugh. He didn’t even know.
Shōto wasn’t the one who was good with words.

\[ \text{Shōto Todoroki (18:05)} \]

\[ \text{Can I call you?} \]

It took only fifteen seconds before he received a call instead of a text back. He didn’t realize until Izuku’s name was on his screen that they had never spoken on the phone before; it was, for some reason, slightly nerve-inducing.

“Hi, Todoroki-kun! Er, Shōto-kun, sorry, I’m still—you’re still Todoroki in my phone so seeing your name pop up made me—nevermind... I just finished eating and hadn’t started studying yet so you have great timing! I just—hold on—I’m going to my room, Mom! Yes, I’ll tell him. Uhh—okay, hi.” Izuku spoke so fast Shōto almost missed it all, and it took him a second to put together an adequate response.

“Hi. I was helping my Mom clean up after dinner. She insisted that I tell you that she is really excited to meet you.”

“Oh.” He thought about that for a second. “Why?”

An abrupt laugh came from the other end of the line. “Because she has… kept up with the news? And all of… erm, you know, things about, uh, us? Soo… she’ll probably just try to entice you into coming over with free food.”

“Ah. Bribery for affection. Now this is a concept I’m familiar with.”

Shōto wore a tiny, private smile crack when the other line went completely silent.

“That was a joke,” he informed when Izuku failed to laugh.

“Oh! Oh my god, Shō, you sound so s-serious sometimes! You kinda freaked me out for a second!”

“I know, that’s what was funny about it.”

Izuku burst out laughing. “Okay, wait, wait—you were dead serious about thinking you were cursed to ruin people’s hands, but jokes about bribing people for love is free-game?”

“I wouldn’t joke about my friends hurting themselves.”

A light sigh was his answer. With surprising fondness in his voice, Izuku said, “I know. That’s the real reason my Mom wants to meet you.”

Maybe it was just the tone with which it was said, but Shōto felt his phone start to grow hot in his hand, so he switched sides.

“Anyway… how are you? What’s going on? Are you studying?”

“I’m going to eat dinner soon.”

Immediately, Izuku began to back-pedal. “Oh, was this a bad time then? I just sort of called
because—I thought your text meant now, but now that I think about it you didn’t specify a time? I can call back if that’s—"

“No, I’ve got a few more minutes. I just—you said I could call you after I talked to my Dad. And I just thought I would take you up on that.”

There was a pause, and Shōto could practically hear Izuku’s heart sink. “Oh… did it… um… I guess it didn’t go very well, huh?”

“I… don’t know. It was just frustrating, I think. It feels like we didn’t get to finish talking before he just turned around and left.”

“That might be a good thing?” Izuku said, voice cracking towards the end. “M-Maybe?”

Shōto didn’t really know what to say to that, and now that the opportunity was available, he wasn’t sure if it was appropriate to tell Izuku exactly what they talked about. He didn’t want to make him feel bad or guilty for the argument, because while Izuku was the subject, his father was the one to blame.

Preoccupied with his thoughts, Shōto failed to notice the silence had grown to the point where it would have been awkward until a cough came from the other line.

“Listen… Shō... You don’t have to say anything, but I sort of had a feeling… I don’t think Endeavor likes me very much. If that’s what this was all about, that’s… well, it sort of sucks, but I’m not upset about it or anything. I might be totally off-base if that’s not what you talked about, but I just figured I’d…”

Shōto was a little relieved that he could at least say something about it. “It was about that. I don’t know why I feel so… off. I don’t care what he thinks, but I also don’t like leaving things… unresolved. I don’t like it.”

Sympathetic, Izuku asked, “Can I do anything to help?”

“You are,” he answered, a little confused. “That’s why I called. Talking to you is nice.”

A weird sound, like a mouse being stepped on, rang in Shōto’s ear suddenly and he flinched away from the phone.

“S-Sorry!” Izuku sounded far away. “I didn’t mean to—I just—dropped my phone!”

There was some crackling sounds, presumably, Izuku getting his phone back to his ear and off the ground. “I’m sorry, I was just surprised… I, um. Sorry.”

“It’s okay,” he huffed a small laugh. “You apologize a lot.”

Sheepish, Izuku responded, “Yeah… I’ve been told that… Um. So… I—I should probably let you get to dinner?”

“Yes, I probably should. I need to take a shower first, too.”

“O-Oh. Well then, uh. Hm. Shower. Sure. You go and—shower it up! Without clothes. What am I saying? Please don’t listen to me. I’m nervous and I sort of—blah when I’m nervous? Hah? And now I can’t stop—I’m going to stop now—”

Surprised, Shōto let out a proper laugh. “Pfft—”
He was able to perfectly imagine how Izuku must look right now: eyes wide and moving his body too much while he explained, words coming out rapid-fire. If he didn’t have to hold his phone, he’d probably be trying to cover his face with his arms or hands.

“You always turn red when you’re embarrassed. Are you blushing right now?”

“I—I’m not going to answer that!” Izuku said, too loudly. Shōto took that as a yes, and laughed again.

“I’ll let you focus on studying for the remainder of the night, so I’ll just say goodbye until tomorrow. Thank you, Izu.” He cleared his throat. Saying a nickname out loud and typing it felt very different, and the informality was so foreign it made his heart pound a little harder. “I’m really… I hope you have a good night.”

“A-Ah y-you too! Thank you. I—good shower, nice night—ugh, I mean, have a nice shower, and a good night. Um. Okay. Bye!”

Smiling, he wished Izuku a good night and hung up. It didn’t matter that his shitty father couldn’t see past his own shitty worldview. Izuku was important to him, and begrudging or not, Endeavor would have to accept it.
Chapter Summary

*Yugen; a word which does not translate into English. Meaning: A profound, mysterious sense of the beauty of the universe.

Or, how Shōto feels when he thinks about Izuku.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Izuku did end up spending a large part of the morning matches with his pen in hand, his focus near-unblinking as he tracked the teachers and students movements around the different testing grounds. Sometimes, he got swept up a bit in the role of spectator and forgot to write certain things down, gasping and pointing in time with certain particularly cool applications of people’s quirks.

More of Shōto’s classmates came into the viewing area the longer the day went on, and almost all of them asked him for some manner of advice in one way or another. He continuously failed to see what Shinsō’s problem was with 1-A—they were all so kind to Izuku (with the exception of Kacchan) and seemed to really value his opinions on how they would fare in their matches.

By the end of Uraraka and Yayorozu’s match—a narrow victory, one that Izuku vocally cheered upon completion—Izuku was so engrossed in detailing every aspect of Yaoyorozu’s brilliant plan to capture Aizawa-sensei, it took several calls of his name for him to realize Shōto was trying to speak to him.

“Izuku,” Shōto said firmly, resting a hand on his shoulder while those of 1-A who had joined them in the viewing area chattered and complained amongst themselves.

Distracted, Izuku’s eyes flickered in his direction. He blinked, returning to the present in the familiarity of that heart-stopping, heterochromatic gaze.

“I’ve got to go get ready for my own exam now. I’ll see you later.”

“O-Oh, right. Um... later, then?”

With a quick nod, Shōto began to walk away and Izuku waved, watching the space between his shoulder blades until he was almost all the way in the hallway. Izuku didn’t say anything else, mind moving too many different directions to really figure out what was appropriate, but now that Shōto was almost gone a little knife twisted nervously in his stomach. That wasn’t a very good-boyfriend thing to do, was it? He should do something... say something nice? Inspiring?
Izuku fast-walked after him, catching him at the door. “Shō?”

He was met with a look of mild surprise, and Shōto paused. “Yes? Is everything okay?”

“I wanted to kiss—*wish you good luck!*” Izuku nearly choked on his own breath. “S-Sorry, that was—”

Shōto seemed unphased. “I would prefer the first option, if you’re offering.”

“I—I mean—*what?! I*—I didn’t mean—I mean, *I did* mean it, I’ve been thinking about it, but—I just—nevermind. Um.” Izuku was holding his journal in his hands, twisting the binding slightly. Glancing behind him, it didn’t seem like anyone was watching them. “I…”

Shōto had just basically *asked* him—and Izuku wanted to—but that was—they hadn’t since Monday and—what if he messes it up somehow?

“Izuku,” Shōto said, reaching out for his hand and brushing cold fingertips against his own. “It’s okay. Don’t push yourself, I’m not going anywhere.”

Izuku couldn’t stand how nice and patient Shōto was all of the time, and it just felt *unfair* because he wanted to kiss him—but everytime Izuku thought about it and he just got so *tense*, so for once he just—

“I will if you win!”

Izuku stood his ground, red-faced, his attempt to be serious ruined by the way his expression was all wobbly. “G-Go pass your exam and I’ll give you a, uh, winning kiss, b-because you don’t need one for luck! So… you know, go do your best!”

Clearly surprised, Shōto’s eyes were wider than normal and his brows had disappeared behind his bangs. Then, with a little bit of a smirk that Izuku swore should be *illegal*, he said, “Fine. I’ll see you once the exam is over.”

The two parted ways after that, Izuku managing not to make any more of a fool of himself—at least, no more than he already had—and he turned back to join the rest of Shōto’s classmates. 1-A had been so accepting and kind of him, and the more he got to know them the more he appreciated their almost family-like dynamic. Dysfunctional, maybe, but a family nonetheless. The General Department’s three classes, C, D, and E all felt very… disconnected. It wasn’t a bad thing, and he wouldn’t trade his weird-friendship with Shinsō for the world, but it certainly didn’t feel the same. Everyone’s coursework was structured to be as personalized as possible to apply to their different career paths, whereas the Hero Course students seem to have a certain… syncopation, that Izuku’s classmates lacked.

His distracted thoughts carried him back to the front of the viewing area. On the screens nearby, Principal Nezu was waiting in the center of what appeared to be some kind of junkyard, or an obstacle course largely built from scrap metals. Shōto and Kacchan hadn’t entered the arena just yet.

If he had to guess, judging by the choice of space and the destructive force of the two student’s quirks, Principal Nezu was planning to use their power against them. The more structures they destroyed the harder it would be to find an exit, hide, and work together. But metal was easily something that both of them could weaponize, *especially* if they worked together…

“Midoriya! How are you enjoying spectating so far?” Iida had appeared by his side, and Izuku nearly leapt out of his skin. The newspaper’s junior editor had a tendency towards being louder
than necessary, speaking clearly and deliberately. While Izuku appreciated it sometimes, this was not one such time. “Our class owes a big thank you for helping to contribute to the implementation of our exams! I had no idea you took part in planning it.”

“Ah, hah, it wasn’t really anything like that…” Izuku tried to wave him off. “I told Recovery Girl earlier, it was more like, I was working with All Might on my own project, and he mentioned the idea to Principal Nezu in passing? Apparently the idea was well received by the faculty and that’s all I really had to do with it.”

With an astute adjustment of his glasses, Iida replied, “I see. Well, either way, I was pleasantly surprised you were available to join us! Hado-san said you would—”

“Nejire,” Izuku corrected on her behalf. It felt like Iida was almost determined to use the wrong honorific when it came to their editor-in-chief.

“Oh, right. Well, she said you and Shinsō would be selling Go Beyond! Weekly this morning. Did something happen?”

With a simple shrug, Izuku said, “There wasn’t much to it. Shinsō didn’t seem to want company today—although he never really does, does he? And then All Might offered to bring me here. Since there aren’t a lot of students on the main campus right now, Shinsō seemed more than capable to sell on his own.”

Iida seemed satisfied with that, and the two fell silent while they Principal Nezu went over the same shortened version of the rules that each student was told before the exam began. Kacchan looked… well, like Kacchan, angry and hunched over and ready to destroy everything and anything in his path; Shōto looked comparably, almost comically, deadpan beside him. He almost didn’t appear to be listening, and the thought made Izuku laugh a little; what could he be thinking about?

The match began, and the 1-A students and Izuku watched with bated breath. Kacchan utterly ignored Shōto and went directly for the Principal himself, using the explosions from his hands to propel himself forward with startling speed. The principal simply ducked, and Kacchan flew right over him. Before there was a chance to turn or regroup, the man helped himself into a crane that had been conveniently right beside him when the match began, and he let out a maniacal laugh before swinging the attached wrecking ball right towards where Shōto was standing.

“Yikes,” Kaminari said, and Izuku couldn’t help but agree.

All Might had been quite right—the usually soft-spoken man was rather terrifying when he wanted to be. The match proceeded with much of the same lack of cooperation, and it was getting a bit frustrating to watch. Kacchan wouldn’t hear any of Shōto’s attempts to work together, and Shōto was clearly getting angry, too. He threw up wall after wall of ice to put some distance between the Principal’s destructive path while trying to force Kacchan to listen.

Yikes, indeed.

At this rate, their inability to reconcile was going to cost them the match. Izuku hoped that one of them would have enough sense to see that their current approach was clearly not working, the principal hell-bent on turning Shōto and Kacchan into rubble if they didn’t kill each other first.

Their eventual victory was admittedly narrow, but a victory nonetheless.

It took Bakugō threatening to punch Shōto in the face, and then Shōto freezing him from the neck
down for them to come up with a plan.

“Oh no,” Izuku buried his face in his open journal. “Oh, this is bad.”

“Deku, what’s wrong?”

Coming back up, now with pen marks on one of his cheeks, he said, “Nitroglycerin freezes at 13 °C and becomes really unstable once it reheats afterwards! It’s, like, something like 1,200 times more explosive then the original point of detonation once the nitrogen molecules start to decompose. If he leaves Kacchan like that he’ll essentially turn him into a bomb.”

Incidentally, Izuku was not the only one aware of this. Thrashing around in Shōto’s ice he swore with even more venom than usual, shouting loud enough for the overhead cameras to pick up his outburst.

“That stupid fucking shitbag you call your boyfriend used to force me to wear extra scarfs and hats and shit in elementary school or he’d tell my Mom like the fucking snitch he is. If I get cold, my sweat becomes unstable, and it can blow up an entire fucking playground in two seconds if I’m not careful as shit, so let me go before I fucking murder us both!”

Shōto corrected him—actually, that would be a murder-suicide—which made several people stifle laughs but Kacchan failed to see any humor in the situation, becoming so incensed he nearly blew them both apart when the nitroglycerin reacted with the ice.

And, just like that, completely by accident, they found their winning strategy.

It came down to the last five minutes, needing to put up plenty of distance between them and Nezu, to give Kacchan adequate time to generate enough sweat in his Grenadier Bracers to be effective. He detached the bracers from his costume and Shōto froze them to the inside of the building they’d taken to hiding in. After that, all they had to do was get out, and get Nezu to knock down the building with his wrecking ball.

Then, with just a little bit of added heat, Shōto lit the world on fire.

Well, that’s what it looked and sounded like, anyway. It was an explosion that shook the entirety of Grounds Gamma; Izuku wouldn’t learn until later that their strategy almost killed the Principal and the both of them.

As the dust settled, it was needless to say that if Principal Nezu hadn’t effectively leveled all of the buildings already, the two of them certainly did.

The moments that followed were fascinating, thrilling, and a little terrifying, if Izuku were being honest. It was so weird to feel—feel this kind of pride for someone else. He’d always loved and supported his friends, so seeing Iida and Uraraka pass their exams had been uplifting; when Shinsō turned in his completed artificial vocal cords to be graded, Izuku gave him a hug even if he had insisted that he didn’t want one.

But watching this victory? It made him want to write. His pen twitched and he started to jot down every question and idea that popped into his mind—if there was something opposite to writer’s block, this was definitely it. His pulse felt electric, abuzz with creative, unspent energy; all of the sudden Izuku had a hundred new ideas to write about, and he wanted to share all of them with Shōto.

That thought gave him pause. Izuku loved documenting his ideas, but he’d never really had the automatic reflex to… seek out someone to share them with. It made his face hot, and he shook his
head and continued writing furiously to distract himself well into the beginning of the next match.

Several 1-A students came and went over the course of the day, and at present, Izuku found himself in the company of: Kirishima, Ashido, Iida, Uraraka, Yaoyorozu, Ojiro and Tokoyami. Shoji and Hagakure just left to discuss strategy in a more quiet area for their upcoming match, and Tsuyu hopped in for a while earlier but her match had tired her out and she decided to rest in Recovery Girl’s make-shift clinic in a specified room off the viewing area.

By the time Shōto returned, the unfortunate image of Kaminari and Aoyama was displayed on the many monitors lining the wall, the pair already trapped by the near-inescapable force of Thirteen’s quirk. Kirishima noticed his return first and called out in greeting, and the rest of them turned around to do the same.

Izuku would have sworn he looked more excited than normal, even though his face betrayed nothing more than his usual passivity. Maybe Izuku was just projecting, but there was something in the way he held himself upon returning—it made Izuku’s stomach do a weird swoop, which didn’t even really make sense but it was the only way to describe the way his body reacted.

Well, that, and with one of his typical, horrible, goofy, too-much-teeth smiles. The one that Izuku was really bad at hiding.

All of the 1-A students gave various cheers and praises, a few of them congratulating Shōto on not dying. In spite of the air of celebration, Shōto brushed past his classmates and barely gave Izuku the chance to catch his breath before purposefully taking his face in his hands and bringing their lips together. Unlike their first (and a half) kiss, this action felt very deliberate, each of Shōto’s hands holding his cheeks, and Izuku was frozen for just a beat—a very self-aware part of him knew there were almost a dozen people who could see them, but the sweet and sincere display from Shōto, who was usually so reserved, made Izuku feel uncharacteristically bold, too—and after just a second he let himself melt into the embrace. He rested a hand against the taller boy’s chest, taking in the overwhelming presence that was Shōto; he smelled of smoke with just a hint of burnt sugar, and he tasted slightly of sweat, but it was the farthest thing from unappealing; cold breath and warm skin, soft hands and steady pressure—all of it was amazing and dizzying and oh god I need to breathe—

After a solitary six or seven seconds, to cheers and Iida’s scolding, they separated.

Izuku couldn’t help but think Shōto looked incredibly smug when he smiled a little and said, “I won.”

“TODOROKI RELEASE MIDORIYA NOW, THIS IS HIGHLY INAPPROPRIATE!”

At almost the same time, Recovery Girl spun around in her chair and teetered in place. “There you are, absolutely reckless child! Get over here right now!”

“Uh,” Shōto looked unsure, but did as he was instructed and walked over to her console, and she forced him to sit in the stool beside her. “What’s going on?”

“Your little fireworks show with your friend is what’s going on! Look at your burns!” She gestured his arms with a frantic wave of her hand.

“I… see them.”

Izuku barely managed not to laugh, but he stopped himself because he knew Shōto was not being facetious. There was bandages on his knuckles—he mentioned some sort of training—and both
sets had been scorched during the exam, as well as some some minor burns that traveled up his left arm; the material of his hero costume and the fierce cold of his right side protected him from the extreme heat otherwise.

“You should be more careful. I’d give you a smack on the head if you were my kid,” she scolded, pulling a balm out of her medical bag and insisting he sit still. With Shōto preoccupied, Uraraka came to stand beside Izuku and poked him in the ribs.

“That was the cutest thing ever, I hope you know,” she said with a happy sounding sigh, and Izuku sputtered before turning away. On the screens, time had just been called: Aoyama and Kaminari were unable to escape Thirteen’s blackhole quirk, nor were they able to restrain her, so they joined Sato and Kirishima amongst those who failed the exams.

Iida, arms chopping up and down, began to launch into a lecture about PDA while those around laughed (much to Izuku’s chagrin), but a loud groan came from the hallway and cut them off. Turning, Izuku was surprised to see the usually-cheery image of Sero dragging himself through the doorway, looking more despondent then he could ever remember having seen him.

“Hey, man, what’s up?” Ojiro asked. “You doing okay?”

“Ehh, I just wanted to see if Recovery Girl was able to put me in a medically induced coma to spare me.”

“I could probably cryogenically freeze you,” offered Shōto from his seat beside Recovery Girl. “It might stop all brain activity and end up killing you, though.”

Sero clapped his hands together. “Sounds like a plan to me—hit me, Todoroki!”

“I want to laugh but I can’t tell if you’re joking or not,” remarked Ashido. “No one is freezing anyone, tell Mama Mina what’s got you all worked up.”

“Nothing, honestly—just—ugh.”

Izu had a sense the cause of the 1-A student’s current mood had to do with his upcoming match; he had been thinking about that particular pairing himself. It wasn’t necessarily surprising that Sero felt the way he did, but it was still sad to see him in such bad spirits about it.

Wondering aloud, Izuku asked, “Are you worried that your specific skill set will be a poor match against Midnight-sensei if she is able to reach you with her quirk, or has doubt in your partner’s ability instilled doubt in you as well?”

Everyone fell silent and turned to him, incredulous.

“Oh, uh, sorry!” Face burning, he dropped his head and scratched the back of his neck. “W-Was that too much? I’ve thought about Mineta-kun’s quirk a lot lately, so it was sort of on my mind.”

“Mido-bro, you should consider a future as a therapist,” Kirishima said, solemn, to which Izuku laughed uncomfortably.

“Ahh, it wasn’t anything like that, I just—how do I put this? I had to imagine there was a... reason they put the only female teacher besides Thirteen up against Mineta. You both pair well with capturing or restraining type of quirks, but the possibility of exploiting Mineta’s... weakness, seemed like an obvious ploy.”

“Well—well, yeah!” Sero carded a hand through his hair, visibly frustrated. “Exactly! It’s super...
frustrating that I get stuck with him when he’s bound to be useless against a hot teacher. Erm—objectively speaking, that is, being the 18+ hero and all…”

Izuku frowned. It was true that Mineta’s reputation preceded him, but Izuku hadn’t realized it was so bad that Sero expected to fail because of him. “You think he’ll be useless? What about the grade…”?

Holding a hand to her chin, Yaoyorozu answered with a touch of sympathy in her tone. “He performs above average in class, around the middle mark but leaning on the favorable side of that half. I wouldn’t say he is the type to throw away his grade, but I don’t know if he has enough of a motivation to pass that would outweigh his... behavioral tendencies.”

“Yeah, I highly doubt it,” Ashido added scathingly. “I would sooner try to talk to All Might about some alternative arrangement before working with him, but then again, maybe he’s tolerable if he’s not about to grope you the moment you turn around.”

Lips thin, Izuku’s fingers drummed over the face of his journal. His gaze wandered to his bookbag, still leaning against Recovery Girl’s console from where he’d left it when they first got there.

What if I just…

“Has anyone seen Mineta-kun?” Izuku inquired, turning around and making sure he didn’t miss him somewhere in the room.

“He was in the arena antechamber when we left,” Yaoyorozu said, gesturing herself and Uraraka who nodded. “We all have to go there before our match to prepare; that’s where All Might is as well.”

Shōto verified that he had still been down there after his exam finished, and Izuku hummed in thoughtful silence thereafter.

“Oh, the next exam is starting,” Uraraka pointed to the screens, to which Izuku had been facing away, and they all clamored to quiet down and focused on their classmates who were about to begin their match.

Making up his mind, Izuku leaned over to Iida and said in a low voice, “I’ll be right back. Tell me what I miss, okay?”

Iida nodded stiffly, a glint of understanding reflecting off his glasses, and Izuku smiled before turning away. He caught eyes with Shōto, who raised a brow, but Izuku just sent him a wave and tiny smile before exiting the viewing area and proceeding down the hallway that lead back to the main lobby.

It was well-lit but rather plain, considering this was Yūei, with ash-colored tiling and some sort of yellow-ish light guiding the way back to the main lobby of the facility. Izuku set a quick pace in hopes he wouldn’t miss the whole match, and the low murmurs of the 1-A students grew increasingly quiet as he got further and further away. Eventually, new voices replaced those, and Izuku stepped out into the bright and well-decorated lobby, the overhead glass ceilings casting the whole room in warm sunlight. Aizawa-sensei and Present Mic-sensei were standing together, talking quietly, while Midnight-sensei was on her phone a little ways away. Cementoss was reviewing some kind of report-looking thing on a clipboard, seated in a comfortable chair across the room. Considering they all looked busy, Izuku quietly walked around them in an attempt to not interrupt and made his way down another hallway, marked with a poorly-written sign that read: EXAM ENTRANCE THIS WAY.
This hallway was much more winding, following lots of turns and passageways that lead to different corridors—to Izuku, it felt much, much longer than the straight-shot he’d taken to get him to and from the viewing area, but there was posted signage along the way in that same scribbled handwriting as the first sign. It was sort of stuffy, lacking in natural lighting or a good sense of direction once in the labyrinth, but Izuku managed to get through it in about five minutes.

The sort of ‘antechamber’ was surprisingly cozy once he finally managed to find it. Did he go down stairs at some point? He must have and not noticed, because the place had a sort of ‘bunker’ quality to it, like the large hallways that led out onto the pitch for the Sports Festival. Opposite where he entered, there was a set of wide open doors, and in the center of the room was a round couch and circular table, almost reminiscent of a lounge. To either his left or right there were small locker rooms, probably for last minute costume adjustments or bathroom breaks before heading out.

All Might’s back was to him, looking out into the world with his fists and his hips, the vision of a true hero; his silhouette was inky, poured into being by the filtered sunshine that streamed through the opening at the far end of the room. On the little couch, Aoyama was prone with his arms crossed over his stomach—his nausea must be acting up, which made sense considering his match had only just ended. The only other person present was Mineta, who was standing conspicuously close to the girl’s locker room area.

Izuku pointedly cleared his throat, a little embarrassed when and all three turned to him at the same time.

As ever, All Might’s voice boomed. “Ah! Young Midoriya! What brings you down here? Did you need something?”

Waving his hands back and forth, Izuku chuckled a little nervously. “Oh, no, it wasn’t anything like that. I was, uh, actually looking for Mineta-kun!”

For a half-second, All Might looked surprised, but then he pointed his chin up with a knowing edge to his trademark smile.

“Ahh, I see,” he said, punctuated with a thunderous laugh. Saying nothing else, he turned back to face the outdoors, adopting the same inspiring pose as before, the image of bold fearlessness.

Izuku murmured an admiring, “So cool…” before remembering why he’d come down here in the first place.

He turned to Mineta, who was no longer trying to leer into the girl’s changing area, standing halfway between the couch and the locker room with his arms crossed and a skeptical brow raised.

“Hey? It’s Deku—er, Midoriya, right?” he said, offering a half-wave, and Izuku nodded.

“Yes! Right, hi. Sorry, I know we’ve never been formally introduced. But yes, my name is Izuku Midoriya. You can call me Deku if you want, I go by either. It’s nice to meet you, Mineta-kun. I’m a really huge fan of your quirk.”

The short student blinked deliberately. “My—you’re what now?”

Brightening, Izuku swung his backpack around and began to dig through the contents of it. “Your quirk—it’s incredibly versatile! I’m really excited to see you and Sero match-up against Midnight-sensei, considering you both have restraint-type quirks, it’ll be interesting to see how—”

“Wait, wait.” Mineta held up two hands, and Izuku stopped talking. “Are you, like, messing with
me? Did someone put you up to this? Mina? Jirō?”

Izuku’s smile fell, and he knelt so he could properly sort through the mess in his bookbag. “W-What? No! I wouldn’t do that. You’ve got a really cool power, and I—”

His fingers finally brushed the paper he’d been looking for and he pulled it out, holding it out for Mineta. “Here we go! I know it’s probably sort of awkward since you don’t really know me, but I wanted to give this to you. It was a challenging piece to write, and I mean it when I say I hope nothing I say offends you personally at any point, the whole piece just got me thinking about some higher level issues and I sort of just went with what felt right.”

“What—is this…?”

Izuku beamed, standing up and putting his backpack back on. “Yeah! I’m sorry it came out so late, Principal Nezu wouldn’t let Nejire send anything to print until this morning, he didn’t want Go Beyond! Weekly to distract the students, I guess… which is really a compliment if I think about it, but it was hard not to say anything! I had a lot of questions, too, and there were a few times where I saw you and thought about asking but then—oh, um.”

He realized Mineta was not listening, eyes intent on the newspaper, so Izuku let out a small laugh and turned away. “I’ll leave you to it, actually. You can keep that copy, it’s become sort of customary that we don’t charge the subject of each week’s column. So… bye!”

As he quickly headed back out of the hallway, Izuku’s chest soared a little when he heard Aoyama whisper to—himself, All Might, Mineta? Who knows? But what he said touched Izuku’s heart.

“Truly magnifique. I’ve never seen anyone who sparkles so much when they make others shine.”

Once Recovery girl was finished with him, Shōto stood up and maneuvered around his peers until he reached Iida.

“Where is—”

“Midoriya said he will return shortly! I believe he may have gone down to the preparatory area.” Iida answered promptly.

“Oh.” Shōto paused. If he felt the slightest bit begrudging to have to share Izuku’s time with everyone else, he tried very hard not to make it known. “Thanks.”

It was silly, of course. Izuku was openly kind and liked just about everything about everybody, and earlier in the day it had made him feel something close to pride when people asked for Izuku’s recommendations or insight into their upcoming matches. It wasn’t really appropriate, because Izuku was much too nice to say no to anyone who asked for help, but even so it made Shōto feel… what was the word? Fortunate? Conceited, even?

It was a totally selfish, simple-minded line of reasoning, but he liked that Izuku was the one who garnered such positive attention. Shōto felt lucky, and enjoyed the fact that Izuku was, well his.
Anyone else had to ask him questions on borrowed time.

*You don’t have to ask.*

He sighed, barely keeping a smile from spreading across his face. He’d been looking forward to his own exam being over just so he could come back and finish watching the remaining matches with Izuku—but he knew that was silly. There was still plenty to get out of viewing on their own, he just… liked watching them with together.

It was one of those things that was a self-contained experience. Izuku’s whole process was almost as interesting as the exams themselves. His reactions mirrored the battles, gasping at all the right moments or anticipating a counter-attack seconds before it would happen. It had been impressive, when Izuku would lean over and say, “*oh, watch this! They’re going to—!*” calling out the next move from teacher or student alike, pointing out weaknesses or openings the teachers left for the students to take, like they were the most obvious thing in the world.

It came as no surprise that Izuku had talent, but seeing him analyze things *as they were happening* was sort of… unreal. His understanding of his each person’s quirk—classmate or teacher—was borderline prolific.

But the room was mostly quiet, now. No muttering, no jittery-jumpy energy nearby, no bright green eyes.

Determined not to let it get to him, Shōto resolved to staying in the viewing room and investing his attention in the remaining pairings. At present, it was the seventh match: Koda and Jirō against Present Mic. Koda didn’t demonstrate his quirk terribly often, so Shōto was interested to see what would come of the match—so far, it didn’t seem to be going terribly well for his peers. They had been dropped in the middle of a forested zone, and Present Mic’s *voice* quirk was effective even at such a distance from the escape gate.

To Shōto’s immediate left, he noticed that Yaoyorozu seemed nervous, but eager, to watch Jirō in action. It was nice to see his longtime friend so… *visibly* happy. Not that she was ever unhappy, really. They both had just been constrained to such isolating lifestyles for so long, they both tended to err on the side of serious. Seeing her with bright eyes and rapt attention and white knuckles for the sake of someone she cared about—it was refreshing.

Jirō’s fierce conviction ended up being the critical point for their own victory, inadvertently pushing Koda to do his best in return. They managed to pull one over on Present Mic with the use of insects, commanded by Koda, and two more students were marked as passed.

Izuku hadn’t come back by the time it was over.

The eighth match with Hagakure and Shoji against Snipe was over faster than anyone else’s exam. Hagakure’s invisibility really made for an incredible asset when it came to these sorts of tests. They avoided Snipe, Homing and all, and were marked as having passed once she slipped by the escape gate.

And Izuku still hadn’t come back.

There was only one more exam to go: Midnight-sensei against Mineta and Sero.

*Where is he?*

“Todoroki?” Gently, Yaoyorozu touched his shoulder. “Are you okay?”
Belated by a few seconds, he turned to her. “What?”

“You’re staring at the back of Mina’s head like you’re about to commit homicide... Is something wrong?”

“Oh.” Shōto tried to school his face into something more neutral. “It’s nothing. I was just—”

Lowering her voice, she asked. “It’s Midoriya, right? I know that look. He is bound to be around here somewhere, don’t worry so much. Maybe he got caught up with All Might. Did you try to text him or call him?”

“Is that appropriate?” Shōto asked. “I didn’t want to bother him.”

Yaoyorozu nodded. “Well, that’s considerate of you, but I doubt he would mind since you’re obviously just worried. If it would make you feel better, we can go try to find him.”

“No, I’ll just... I’ll text him. You’re right, he’s got to be here.”

Shōto sent him a simple enough message—time-stamped at 12:59—asking where he was. The final exam was about to begin, so he just sighed and tucked his phone away.

Izuku was fine. He was just overreacting.

But god, if it wasn’t a shame that he missed this fight. It was beyond surprising. Like someone had totally replaced Mineta’s usual vulgarity with a keen focus comparable to that of Iida or Tokoyami, he and Sero worked together with impressive synergy to ensnare Midnight in a rather sophisticated trap. It took one of them acting as bait—Sero—to draw out her domineering side, but Sero put his trust in Mineta and launched his tape at a purple ball before the somnubulalism kicked in. Seeing that Mineta was the only one who could remove the balls, he was able to reel Sero in by lifting up the ball as an anchoring point, all while Midnight was knocked over and stuck to the rock face with a combination of sticky balls and sticky tape.

If ever there was a sticky victory, this was it.

Shōto considered what Iida said earlier, about where Izuku had gone. Now, he had a sneaking suspicion that this startling upset and Izuku missing from the viewing area were not totally unrelated; he must have talked to Mineta and convinced him to give the final exam his all.

Shoji and Hagakure rejoined the class just as Recovery Girl began to coral them towards the lobby, instructing that they meet with their teachers and await further instructions. She didn’t follow after them, evidently having something she still needed to do. There was light chatter amongst all of his peers, and even some attempts to cheer up those who hadn’t passed—Kirishima and Sato had all morning to accept it and were taking things in stride; Aoyama didn’t seem to even notice or mind that he didn’t pass, and Kaminari seemed disappointed… but not surprised.

Shōto caught up with Shoji. “Did you happen to see Izuku while you were down there?”

“Midoriya?” Brow furrowed, Shoji shook his head. “I didn’t see him, no.”

That... didn’t settle well in Shōto’s clenching stomach. Maybe—maybe he was with All Might. Izuku loved All Might, so, surely that made sense.

As the majority of the class rejoined the others in the brightly lit lobby, like Tsuyu, now rested, and Bakugō who refused to watch their peers out of principle. Shōto squinted at the far away sight of Sero entering with Mineta on his shoulders, looking more like they’d just stepped off an
amusement park ride rather than finished an exam, but Shōto supposed revelry was better than the alternative.

“İ! Can’t! Believe! We! DID IT!!” They were both cheering and making a sort of whooping sound. A few of the teachers laughed well-meaningly at the duo before Bakugō snapped at them to shut up.

Still celebrating, though more quietly, Sero and Mineta rejoined 1-A as they formed another uneven line and stood opposite their teachers, now with a general sense of relief that the exams were over and a light buzz of energy sweeping over the students. Most of the teachers seemed to share in their good mood, expressions somewhere between exasperated grins to weary but pleased smiles.

“Alright, enough,” Aizawa-sensei called out, allowing the class a moment to settle.

Shōto did a cursory glance around the heads of the faculty, and a little pang of unease went off in his chest when he still didn’t see Izuku anywhere. All Might was up there, but they weren’t together this time. Maybe he went back to the school?

“You all worked hard, and once we return to the grounds you’ll be dismissed. Don’t forget to change back from your costumes, and any of those who will need repairs—” their teacher paused, glancing pointedly at Bakugō who scoffed and looked away. “Please drop off a request slip in the Support Department specifying what you need done. As a reminder, the closing ceremony is Tuesday, so you are all required to come to class Monday. We’ll be going over what you’ll need to know about the summer training camp over break, as well as some smaller team exercise trainings, so don’t get lazy over the weekend. Got it?”

The class chirped a brief, “Yes, sir!” followed by Iida’s hand shooting up into the air.

“All right, excuse me! Where did Midoriya go?”

All at once, the teachers demeanors shifted. Midnight crossed her arms and Cementoss folded his hands together; Present Mic actually went blank-faced, which was a genuine first; Power Loader deferred with an uneasy look towards Aizawa.

Only All Might and Aizawa seemed unaffected, the latter’s scowl stone-chiseled, not budging in the slightest.

“Midoriya was escorted back to the main campus to address an—incident that arose this morning. You’ll notice Ectoplasm is not here, either. As Midoriya’s homeroom teacher, he offered to return with him. It’s something that does not involve you and took precedence over his invitation to watch your exams, so I won’t say anymore on the subject.”

“Wait! Why did he need to be escorted back? Is something happening?” Uraraka insisted, giving voice to Shōto’s exact thought.

Aizawa considered her for a long moment before answering. “I’ll only repeat myself once: I will not say anymore on the subject. He is fine.” The last word was exceptionally sharp, even for him. Razor-tipped. “So don’t get worked up. We’re getting on the buses now—if you are permitted to see him when we get back, so be it. That isn’t my call.”

With that, their teacher turned around and instructed they leave, the rest of the faculty helping to file them along. Shōto couldn’t help but notice Principal Nezu was absent amongst their teachers as well.
An unlikely coincidence, certainly.

His earlier concerns hadn’t been totally out of unjustified, then. It wasn’t a relief so much as it contributed to the Shōto’s unease; a threatening storm rolling over a wide-open sea, kicking up waves in his mind as he boarded with the others to be shuttled back to the main part of campus.

An incident happened that morning? That was… vague.

Izuku hadn’t answered Shōto’s text, either, so he rather didn’t have his phone or couldn’t respond… or, he supposed, it was possible that Izuku just didn’t want to respond, but ignoring someone just didn’t seem like something Izuku would do.

At least Shōto wasn’t the only one who was displeased by their teacher’s lack of details. Uraraka turned into the aisle and Shōto leaned over slightly to see what she was doing.

“Deku was asking where he could find you Mineta—did you end up seeing him anywhere? Do you know what happened?”

The purple-haired student shifted in his seat, a little uncomfortably. “I mean, it wasn’t just me. Aoyama and All Might were both there, too. He said he wanted to talk to me, so we talked for a little while and then he left.”

“And nothing about it seemed off?” she pressed.

Aoyama leaned over and a little twinkle came from his eye. “Non, mon ami. He was there not five minutes. Everything seemed normal.”

Iida looked conflicted when his head appeared over the back of his seat, but he didn’t ask them to drop the subject. “Was it to discuss this week’s publication?”

“Y-Yeah,” Mineta cleared his throat, and several nearby students whipped around to look at him, disbelieving. “What?! You’re all the ones who have the wrong idea about me! Midoriya is—cool, okay? He knows what’s up! I’m sure he’s fine.”

“Gimme!” Kaminari reached over and snatched the paper from the short-statured student and presented it to Ojiro, half-bowing formally. “If you would be so kind.”

With a good-humored role of his eyes, Ojiro opened the paper and eyed the predictable location of Izuku’s article. Bottom of the second page.

“Whoa, this is a long one.”

Bakugō all but snarled. “I know you all won’t shut up about that nerd until you hear his shit writing, so just fucking read it already so I can be put out of my goddamn misery, Tail!”

Leaning away from the ill-tempered blond, Ojiro cleared his throat and semi-stood from his seat, turning so everyone could hear him.

*Hero Analysis! Weekly: The Unlikely Hero*

“On more than one occasion, a good friend of mine has written me off as an optimist, but the longer that word sits for me, the more dissatisfied I find it. I’m not entirely
convinced. Sure, I do make an effort to look on the bright side of things, and I’m usually willing to find that silver-lining even if I have to find it buried in the bottom of a haystack, but things really aren’t so simple as optimism and pessimism, good and evil, black and white.

“The same can be said of the subject of today’s article: Minoru Mineta.

“However, it feels disingenuous to write this without first acknowledging his decidedly inappropriate treatment of many of my female peers at Yūei. He has a reputation for repeatedly making them uncomfortable and invading their privacy, behavior that I find inexcusable.”

“Even Midoriya knows how gross you are,” Jirō said, stifling a laugh.

Mineta surprised them all by snapping back. “Hey, give it a rest! I’m sorry, okay?!”

A choked sound came from Ashido. “You’re—you’re sorry?”

“Keep going!” Hagakure encouraged before they derailed completely, and Ojiro nodded.

“Inexcusable, but not unforgivable. Certainly not irredeemable.

“There are some darker crimes that should never be forgiven or dismissed—I will never be an apologist for people who do irreparable harm to others intentionally—but true irredeemability is an extremely high threshold, something that is reached perhaps only by the most primordial of evils.

“There are a lot of things I think of when I see Mineta training with his classmates, not all of them kind, but then I remind myself that he is here for a reason. We don’t get to pick who becomes a hero and who doesn’t. There are numerous procedures in place that inhibit people from becoming licensed heroes if they’re deemed unsuitable or unfit to protect the public, and so far, Mineta has yet to exhibit this level of indefensible action. He applied to be a student at the top hero school in Japan, and from wherever his motivations stem, he must have some kind of desire to be a hero; I remind myself of that, and suddenly, I don’t see a student who habitually engages in misconduct.

“I see someone with all the potential in the world.

“His quirk, pop off, grants him a large supply of purple, sticky balls, which are appropriately fitting given his recently debuted hero name, Grape Juice. The applicability of his quirk, while not particularly offensive, is extremely versatile. The production and distribution of a source material in this case is what I would categorize as a “trapping” quirk, which has the primary purpose of ensnaring or inhibiting the movements or abilities of others, but it would be a fool’s mistake to take the non-threatening appearance of the quirk or their wielder as a sign that they won’t land you into trouble.

“Mineta has demonstrated his mastery with his own ability, using the adhesive properties of his ‘sticky balls’ to his advantage in the Cavalry Battle of the Sports Festival, but that is far from the scope of their strategic capabilities. They could be
used for enhanced maneuverability if he needed to scale a tall structure, to create a
chain or barricade to capture someone or something, and could be used to shield a
direct force of impact with at least some added shock-absorption—to what extent that
possibility exists, I’m not sure.

“Like many emitting quirks, the known limitation is triggered by overuse; the more
balls he produces, the greater strain it puts on his body and can eventually cause him
to start bleeding from his pores where they detach from his skin. How his body
compensates for the consistent loss and production of more balls is unknown, though
his stature suggests that it may be a consumptive side-effect (that is, his body stores
some of the direct energy that would be distributed through his system when eating to
replenish his quota of balls he can produce).

“Now, generally speaking, I try my best to separate myself from these columns. I am
not the one who deserves the recognition; it’s the greatness, or potential therein, of our
rising heroes that warrants them a place in these pages. This will be an exception, to
the extent that I struggled with the decision on how to cover Minoru Mineta—can you
showcase the quirk without commenting on the person? And if you can, should you?
Aren’t all heroes, in one way or another, a reflection or an embodiment of their quirks?
Would it be a disservice to talk about all the good a hero could do, without all the bad
that comes with it?

“And the more I thought about it, the more I came up with the same answer: I
shouldn’t be a judge of who is and is not worthy. If anything, my goal is to educate,
and I am again reminded of my friend’s claim about my so-called optimism.

“Here’s why I think he’s wrong: I look at someone like Minoru Mineta, and I don’t see
hope in a hopeless situation.

“I see the glass half-empty, but so long as there is something there, I would sooner
offer that water to those who are in need of understanding then let that resource go
untapped. Because, even if someone’s motivation differs from our own, the results are
what should really matter—lives saved. What kind of monster would I have to be to
look down at a person who has volunteered to fight and die for me? For my right to
live safely and freely? Even if the motivation that pushes that hero forward is morally
reprehensible, it’s still something, a match that stokes the fire that can save someone’s
life.

“We do not live in the Hero Killer’s perfect world, filled only by righteous and so-
called worthy heroes. Our world is one in which things can and do go wrong, and there
will be heroes out there who you encounter that will cause you to stop and wonder:
how or why?

“But maybe that’s okay.

“Maybe it’s better to accept help from someone that comes from an imperfect place
than it is to stumble along, upright but alone. Maybe we shouldn’t turn our backs on
people whose impacts are greater than the sum of their intentions—it is an everyday
act of bravery to forgive someone when there is a chance they can do better. All it
requires is the choice to see them differently, because while they may be the ones who
make you cringe or question the legitimacy of a hero-based society, those same
individuals may be the ones that are in the most desperate need of an added push—that
they’re not trapped by their own self-fulfilling prophecy.
“If you’ve painted yourself into a picture as the token pervert, as someone with an inherently *evil* quirk, as the broken villain with the tragic backstory, you’ll only ever live up to your own expectations.

“But that’s just the thing. You’re the one writing your own story. *You* get to choose what happens next. You can completely recreate yourself, if you have the will. You’re not stuck. You have choices.

“And Minoru Mineta—he has the *ability* to be something. To be *someone*. Whether or not he chooses to rise up to that potential is something only he can *want* to do, but I know that if he makes that change, there would be little stopping him from becoming a hero who can make a difference, who could save lives, who could reassure, and rescue, and change the world.

“Maybe this idea won’t reach him. Maybe I’m wasting my time. Maybe I was just an optimist all along.

“But, maybe he’ll read it. Maybe it reaches him. And that *maybe*, that’s what matters.

“Because this isn’t really about Minoru Mineta at all—it’s for every person who reads this that has ever been labeled a lost cause instead of offered a map, or been typecasted as the person who is *just like that*, trapped in a self-destructive role, or who has maybe wondered, ‘Am I too far gone?’

“You’re not. You can rise up from anything.

“Show them that you aren’t who they think you are. Show them that you’re *better* than they could have ever imagined.”

But for the gentle vibrations of the engine that moved them along, the bus was silent. Ojiro lowered the paper, eyes wide with a peculiar, lopsided smile fixed on his expression.

Shōto curled his fists in his laps, torn on how to even feel. Winded, like he’d run for miles, and calmer than if he’d been basking in the sunshine on a warm day.

Always, Izuku’s words were… they made everything that usually seemed so simple, feel…

幽玄*, if Shōto had to think of a single word.

It came close to capture the entirety of what he felt, but he wasn’t even sure that was enough. Because, on the one hand, that was what Izuku’s writing always seemed to capture. But on the other, it didn’t have anything to do with love, and that was the thing Izuku elicited most of all. It was at moments like that, the content and bittersweet silence that crept in after he finished reading (or listening to) one of Izuku’s article, that Shōto felt spectacularly stupid—to have not realized what had been in front of him all along. He’d been missing something he didn’t even know existed; drawn to a lighthouse without realizing he’d been surrounded by darkness in the first place.

How was it that words alone, not even written to or for him, made Shōto want so badly to kiss him again?

*(And again, and again, and again.)*

He sincerely hoped that whatever was happening was nothing serious—maybe it was just
something with his practical final. Izuku had been so secretive about the whole thing, Shōto couldn’t really imagine what it could be concerning.

Izuku didn’t like this.

Confused, and a little scared, he was having a difficult time keeping up with his homeroom teacher. The pace the Pro-Hero set was just fast enough that it couldn’t really be attributed to his tall stride; the silence was one suffused with anxiety.

“Ectoplasm-sensei, what’s going on?”

“...I’m not entirely sure,” he admitted, voice betraying no emotion. “There was an incident this morning, but the information we’ve received hasn’t been totally clear.”

Izuku swallowed thickly on the lump in his throat and walked a little faster. *An incident? Like a villain incident?*

They were upon Principal Nezu’s office in a matter of minutes, and while Izuku had tried to prepare for whatever might be waiting for them there, he was still sufficiently alarmed by the sight behind the doors.

Principal Nezu sat at his desk, not looking at all like he’d almost gotten blown up an hour earlier; across from him, Nejire stood with all the fury of the universe painted on her face. She was in her costume, which Izuku had never seen up close before—if he wasn’t so tense, he might have even been excited about it—but she was so distressed that her quirk was visibly distorting the air around her. Ectoplasm had stopped in the doorway, and in the back of the room was… All Might’s police friend?

“Detective Naomasa?” Izuku blurted, confused. “Nejire? What’s going on?”

Peering around his teacher, the young writer’s heart was beating rapturously in his chest. Every set of eyes in the room flicked to him, accompanying expressions ranging from anywhere from alarmed to surprised.

(Privately, Izuku had half a mind to ask how the Principal could have gotten here faster than Ectoplasm and himself, but decided it wasn’t really appropriate right now.)

“Hey there, kid. Nice to see you again,” Naomasa greeted with warmth in his tone.

Comparably, Principal Nezu sounded tired. “Hello, Midoriya. Why don’t you come in?”

Every single nerve in his body was telling him to not do that, because there was never a good conversation that began with sitting down in the principal’s office, but before he could act on the instinct Ectoplasm was ushering Izuku inside the already-crowded office. Instinctively, Izuku hovered towards Nejire, and she gave him a sweet smile that didn’t even come close to reaching her eyes.

Nezu invited him to sit in the chair directly across from the desk, and Izuku wordlessly complied.
Nejire stood next to him like a parent might at a student-teacher conference.

“So. How to begin?” It took the Principal a moment to gather his thoughts.

Too nervous to help it, Izuku interrupted with a rush. “I—Ectoplasm-sensei said there was an incident? Did something happen?”

The principal’s nose twitched, just a little, and he looked past Izuku to Naomasa.

“Yes, but—well, let me start from the beginning, I think that might help.

“The first Thursday of every month, the Yūei school board holds a meeting. I did not attend yesterday with the interest of focusing on helping to facilitate finals exams. Lo and behold, there was an agenda item that was rather inconveniently not included in the copy of the meeting minutes that was shared with me.”

The principal pulled over a piece of paper and let his eyes roam over it before continuing. “The board determined that your attendance at Yūei has been ‘disruptive’ and that your writing, and, in particular, the stories concerning the Hero Killer, as ‘inappropriate’ for our student body. They decided on a disciplinary hearing upon which they would review the newspaper’s longevity, and your enrollment status. Until then, effective as of the moment I give you this,” the man held up a small, unassuming envelope. “You, Izuku Midoriya, will be interim suspended and not permitted on school grounds or to participate in school-sanctioned activities.”

…

…

Oh.

Izuku needed… He just needed a second.

He wasn’t... quite getting it. A little rock had gotten stuck in the gears that made his brain work, and everything sort of, just… stopped.

Like when he got his foot x-rayed with his Mom, ten years ago.

Like when he tried to help Kacchan out of the water, after falling from that log.

Like when his brand-new, limited-edition All Might bookbag—the one his Mom had saved up to get for his birthday—was ripped by some random bully at school.

Like when his locker was vandalized for the first time.

Like when he was so scared to tell his Mom that he liked both boys and girls that he just started crying.

Like when All Might told him he could never become a hero without a quirk.

Like when he had failed the practical portion of the entrance exam and thought it was all over for him.

He was—what?
No.

No, no— no, this can’t be happening.

Yūei was everything he had ever wanted. Everything. It was all supposed to have been worth it because—because he made it this far. He did it! He made it—they couldn’t—he can’t lose this—

Principal Nezu cleared his throat and watched Izuku carefully, who barely managed to pay attention.

“That is the official statement I am obligated to give you as the head administrator for the school.”

“And I’m trying to tell them that it’s ridiculous. The school board has no right to withhold an education from a student who was fairly admitted!” Nejire intervened before Izuku could even really process what was happening. “Midoriya is largely responsible for the newspaper’s resurgence, and I don’t care if All Might himself were the one advocating for this, I will not let Midoriya be removed because he shared his opinion with the world. He is a part of my staff, and I’m his editor; I cleared the piece for print, and the paper belongs to all of us. If Midoriya has to go, then I take responsibility as his editor and they’ll have to get rid of me too.”

Izuku was having a difficult time listening. It felt like his heart was fossilizing, and all of his blood and bones began congealing into heavy weights that dragged him into the floor. All the words were hitting his ears just a touch wrong, as if from behind a heavy veil, a bystanding specter haunting the place he died.

Despite that, a little bit of sense managed to shine through. Nejire was willing to put everything on the line… for him?

That was… too much.

“Nejire...”

She didn’t waver, even taking a protective step in his direction. “And this—this is really a fight they want to pick? Because Midoriya wrote a piece about how it’s important to step up in times of evil, in times of crisis? They really want to be the ones seen as punishing a student for that? Do they really want that headline going to the real press?”

“Hado, please,” Principal Nezu interrupted. “Just hold on for a moment.”

Endeavor really did it, then? Was he that hell bent on making Izuku suffer because he refused to write a slanted article about Shōto? Or was it more personal than that? He knew Endeavor didn’t like him, Shōto didn’t even deny it—but was that the final piece? A relationship at the expense of his education?

Truthfully, Izuku felt like he wanted to cry… which, for him, wasn’t all that unusual, but this was a dry kind of sadness. The kind that’s all short gasps and picked fingernails; heart straining against an arrhythmia that definitely wasn’t there before; the shape of his ribs, dilapidated, like an abandoned shed behind an abandoned house, caving in on itself; a mind numbed to the world.

“If this…” Hands trembling, Izuku curled his fingers into fists. “This was all yesterday? Why… why am I only finding out now?”

“Because, I have no intention of giving you this letter, Midoriya. I happen to share in Hado-san’s opinion on the matter of your positive contributions to this school.” He sent the so-named editor-
in-chief a little smile. “No educator worth their salt would allow such a punishment to go unchallenged—to suspend a student from their school for upholding the very same values that institution was built to represent?

You see, interim suspensions, by-design, only impact your status as a student once you are served the notice therein.” He wordlessly dropped the envelope into a desk drawer and kept talking. “I am wholly convinced that we can do away with the ridiculous ruling, and I was hoping to resolve it quietly and letting you know once the outstanding sanctions were nullified. Perhaps it was short-sighted of me… and I do apologize if withholding the board’s decision from you makes me appear as disingenuous, but I wanted you and your classmates to be able to enjoy your final days of the term without this all dumped in your lap. I would not have done so without complete confidence in a reversal. I am only telling you now, because the situation has changed.”

Nejire gripped the back of Izuku’s chair so hard he could feel the material bend slightly beneath her fingers. “What does that mean, exactly?”

Principal Nezu steepled his paws over his desk. “Detective?”

Clearing his throat, Naomasa nodded and approached the front of the office, standing at the principal’s side.

“Our investigative team has been following some leads,” he explained, opening up a little notebook and flipping through a few pages. “This morning at approximately 10:50, our guys raided a villain’s place of residence who was suspected to have ties to the League of Villains. We arrested him and are still investigating the scene, going through his computer, that sort of thing—but from what we can immediately tell, they’re just a low-time thug that was radicalized by the Hero Killer’s message. Based off what we found at the scene, we suspect he was planning… well, something terrible. More importantly, there is strong evidence to suggest that their intended target was you, Midoriya.”

The detective’s words rolled off him, like cold rain, droplets leaving frozen paths in their wake. A shiver broke over Izuku’s skin.

“W-What? Me?”

Naomasa rubbed the back of his neck in a way that suggested he was uncomfortable. “As much the people on my team enjoy reading your articles—they’re really popular amongst us law enforcement folks—to a loyalist of Stain’s ideology? Your work reads as a public denigration of their beliefs. In fairness, the same evidence suggests that Hado-san may have been the intended target as well, which is why she is also present—usually this sort of information is protected, but you’re both believed to have been potential targets. That said, given Hado’s notoriety and the weapons present in the villain’s apartment, we don’t believe the villain would have tried to go after her. I… don’t want to seem insensitive, but of the two of you, a first-year student without a quirk makes for the easier target.”

Blinking, a numb little tuning fork reverberated around his head. Right. He was the scrawny, quirkless kid with the pen, not the hero.

“We tried to call your mother while Ectoplasm brought you here, but we couldn’t get through to her cell number—”

“She works during the day,” Izuku mumbled, distracted. “On Fridays she takes care of Takadaesan… he doesn’t like it when ‘young people’ are on their phones, so she usually turns it off.”
“I see. Well...” the principal leaned back slightly in his chair. “We put our student safety above anything else at Yūei. This is why I decided to bring your suspension up as well.”

He didn’t know what to feel right now. Someone wanted him dead? There was certainly a healthy dose of fear that went into that, but it wasn’t that simple—it was a larger, more complicated jumble of emotions that was taking up all the space of his head and heart, too fresh to be processed, too heavy to be ignored. At least one Pro-Hero wanted him out of school. Villains wanted him dead.

How was he even supposed to feel?

“After the closing ceremony on Tuesday, there will no longer be academically justifiable reason for you to be present on the grounds. With the added publicity that will come once this arrest is picked up by the news...” the mousey principal tugged a bit on a whisker, like a human might with their moustache.

“You will probably be in even more danger,” Naomasa finished. “The power of the press, unfortunately, goes both ways. Villains who hadn’t made the connection before to put you as the ‘Anti-Hero-Killer’, certainly will now. Yūei is one of the safest facilities on the planet, especially with the improvements to the security after the USJ incident, but it’s up to the student and their guardian’s discretion to put their trust in the school. Yūei cannot guarantee your safety, but they can do a lot to ensure it. I’ve volunteered to act as a personal detail to get you safely to and from school for next Monday and Tuesday until a more long-standing arrangement can be made. And of course, we’ll make sure you get home safely tonight.”

Izuku balked at that. “Wh-What? But—but you’re a detective! You—I don’t need—”

Naomasa stopped him with a small laugh and held up his hand. “I want to, so don’t go on about anything like that. Besides, while the connection seems to have been only surface-level, there was at least a reason to believe this thug was connected with the League of Villains. Targeting you makes it a rather direct connection to my investigation, so it is very much my business.”

“I understand that you and your mother will need to discuss before any decision is made,” Principal Nezu said, voice somehow pleasant and severe at the same time. “Obviously, you have every right to refusal of Yūei’s offer to protect you, but it felt deeply wrong to ask you to make such an important decision without the full picture. Midoriya, every faculty member at this school has your best interest at heart. Of that, I promise you. However, with the hostile position of the school board, I understand if you do not feel that Yūei is deserving of your trust. I will do everything in my power to grant you as seamless a transition possible to another institution, should that be what you and your mother decide is best.”

“W-what...? I don’t—” Izuku felt something pitifully close to hope start to close around his throat, and he tried to force it down until he was certain he understood the man’s meaning. “I don’t... I’m not... being suspended? I have a choice?”

“Of course. Should you choose to stay at Yūei, I will make sure the board is swiftly and justly put in their place. We will have to work out the specifics, and there may be a lot that you have to do differently, but we will make it our top priority to keep you safe. If you do not choose to stay, then you are, of course, permitted to transfer your credits to another sch—”

Izuku didn’t even let him finish.

“N-No!” He’d accidentally shouted, and, red-faced, he continued more quietly. “I mean, no, I—I’m staying, I don’t care about some—some villains. I mean, of course... it’s scary to think about.” His voice caught in his throat a bit. “But I won’t let that stop me from writing, or going to school here.
The Police Chief of Hosu City had warned me that there could be consequences to calling out the Hero Killer’s actions in such a public way, but—but I refuse to let that stop me. If I do, then, then villains who hurt people like Ingenium, or like this guy who wanted to hurt me or Nejire… they will have already won.”

Swallowing tersely, the well of tears he’d fought back finally spilled over, streaming down his cheeks. “But, please, sir. If there is anywhere that I feel safe, it’s here, I trust the staff, I trust my friends, everyone…I’m not going anywhere. I don’t care what sort of added arrangements there are or if I have to appear in front of the school board and apologize—or whatever, but as long as I can stay a student here, I’ll do it. I’ll do anything, sir.”

With a deep exhale, Nejire looked to Izuku, smiled, and ruffled his hair affectionately. Izuku sniffled as she turned to the principal. “I support Midoriya completely. He’s way too brilliant to let slip between our fingers. What can I do? What can we do to help? I can disband Go Beyond! Weekly if that is what it takes—anything we have to do.”

It was Naomasa who answered, tone gentling to match the room. “Right now, we’d ask that there be no acknowledgement made by the newspaper. Saying something, or removing the club’s website or anything to that effect would do more potential harm than good. A byproduct to Go Beyond! Weekly’s popularity has landed Midoriya as a sort of… symbol, amongst heroes and against villains. Reacting with an apology might be seen as a defeat; reacting with defiance might be seen as a challenge. Right now, the safest thing is to do nothing until we know more.”

Laughing, just a little, Nejire placed a hand on Izuku’s shoulder and squeezed. “Do nothing? That sounds like a vacation for us!”

“Heh… y-yeah… thank you, Principal Nezu, Detective, for telling me everything. I… I appreciate it.”

With a low rumble, Ectoplasm added, “Thank you for the information, Nezu. Please let me know if the board needs me to make an appearance. Midoriya is an exceptional student and I will gladly produce a testimonial to that end.”

“Your goals are just as valid to this institution as any other student, and we will do whatever we can so that you to pursue those goals without fear of retaliation,” promised Nezu, and Naomasa nodded while putting his notebook away. “We still need to talk with your legal guardian and work out some details on how this will work moving into the summer, and the terms to come, but I am optimistic. Can you and your mother please try to be present on Monday, during homeroom? We may need to talk into the morning sessions, but it shouldn’t take longer than the afternoon.”

“Y-Yes, of course,” Izuku nodded, heart all twisted between worry and anger and hopefulness and relief—so much relief. The conversation hadn’t been more than an hour and Izuku felt like he’d aged a year since stepping through the principal’s door.

When he was finally permitted to leave, everything felt a little further away. Lights buzzing down the end of a long tunnel, rather than above his head. Izuku was a little bit outside of himself. The emotional strain of the situation—death threats, suspension, protection, writing, arrests—had his heartbeat feeling faint. Absorbed as he was in the vertiginous swirl of information and decisions, he nearly staggered backwards when a handful of people in the hallway jumped up to see him.
Each tone reflected the speaker so well it was almost funny.

“Deku!” Worry.

“Midoriya!” Stern.

“Fucking finally.” Sarcasm.

“Izuku.” Relief, warmth, and uplifting.

His mouth was moving on reflex, not really in-sync with his head. “Uh, hi.”

“What happened?”

“Your absence had worried us!”

“Are you okay? You look paler than usual.”

“What’s going on?”

Mouth dry, Izuku glanced to the Detective Naomasa, who was nothing if not patient.

“We can go somewhere more private if you want to talk to your friends. I’m not really on any schedule, and Nezu said the teachers lounge was available.”

Did he say that? Izuku sort of missed the end of the discussion. He nodded, wordless, and just as Naomasa was about to begin leading them down the hall another cluster of 1-A students passed by them.

Izuku felt the air escape his lungs when he was pulled into an abrupt hug.

“Holy shit, Midoriya, your article today was amazing!” It was Sero, loudly, in his ear. He was sort of doing a jumping-dance while hugging Izuku, who was a little too surprised to react. “Mineta and I passed and he did this hella cool move at the end that saved both of our asses and—and—the words you said were so amazing, dude. Thank you!”

Kirishima was there too. “Yeah, man. I-It hit me in a really personal way, from when I was in middle school, and sometimes I remember that and I just—I wanted to say thank you. I even think Bakugō liked it, he just would never admit it out loud haha.”

Dark Shadow cackled a little. “Toko actually smiled!”

“You did a great job, kero. Not all of us have conventionally ‘nice’ powers… our quirks sometimes scare people.”

Shoji nodded. “I’ve frightened people with mine. It was nice to hear—to be reminded that it’s… we’re the ones forging our own paths. Thank you, Midoriya.”

Still totally taken aback, Izuku felt a second wave of tears roll over him, and he hugged Sero in return with as much force he could muster.

“T-Thank you guys, y-you’re the ones who—who are a-amazing. I’m—you all—” He hiccuped against the taller boy’s shoulder, and Sero pulled back with an unsure smile. “S-Sorry, I’m a little em-emotional righ’ now.”

“It’s okay, man,” Kirishima said, voice sounding a little tight. “Crying is super manly! Are you
okay? Did something happen?”

At Izuku’s side, Shōto moved a little closer and Sero stepped back. With a touch so gentle it should have been illegal, he angled Izuku’s face up to look at him. The shine of adoration Izuku saw there made him want to cry harder, but not because he was sad—just, he had too many emotions and couldn’t possible express them all. He was so happy to have so many people who cared about him, who wanted him here, and even though he didn’t even tell them what was going on—the fact that they were all there made his heart break and mend itself ten times over.

Gently, thumbs moved over his freckles, sweeping a pattern of hot and cold. “You’re okay. You’re okay, just breathe. If something is wrong, you can tell us now, or whenever you’re ready. We are all grateful to you. Just relax.”

Izuku shook his head, and then nodded, and then shook his head again. Shinsō laughed a little.

“He does that when he wants to say something but doesn’t know how. He’ll be alright.”

Shinsō didn’t even know how right he was—Izuku didn’t have the words for this, even if words were supposed to be his speciality. Every dictionary would fail this feeling; any thesaurus could never do it justice.

It was the incredible state of knowing, down to the deepest and most core part of our human selves, that he was loved. Something that one could only really glean by reading between the lines.

Meanwhile…

“Yes, that’s right! What an incredible story, huh? Thanks for that. That was Hiyano Hanako, reporting live from outside of Yūei High School. That Deku is something else, isn’t he?”

“Oh, yes, and everyone says he’s just nice and keeps to himself. Who would have thought the Hero Killer’s reign of terror would receive such push back from a high schooler? Only fifteen, and he’s already—”

The channel cut out.

“I hate that stupid brat!”
Well, technically, the remote for the TV had smashed through the front glass… thereby cutting out the channel.

Silence fell over the dimly lit bar, the only sound suffusing the air a light, coil of smoke from the shattered monitor, sparks decorating the floor.

Kurogiri managed not to sigh. “Tomura—”

“No, he makes me so mad! I don’t get it, first that annoying Hero Killer and now this stupid, quirkless brat gets acknowledged for—for what? I’ll kill him, I swear, how will they like his shitty stories about heroes then?”

“The boy is not a threat, Tomura Shigaraki. You must keep your sights set on the current goal—the Symbol of Peace.”

“This stupid kid is almost as annoying as All Might, I hate this—” he scratched, restless, flaking off a few pieces of skin along his chin.

At the other end of the room, the screen that transmitted audio from the young villain’s master flicked to life. It tinted the reddish lounge with a soft, blue glow.

“Patience, Tomura. Master has instructed you not harm him—he may prove useful in the future.”

From his place at the bar, Shigaraki scoffed and stood. “Useful. What a stupid concept. That arrogant idiot Stain was supposed to be useful, and now he’s all cozy up in Tartarus. I’m sick of hearing these nobody’s names already… I’m taking a walk.”

Kurogiri placed down the rag he’d been using to clean a glass and called out. “Wait, Tomura—!”

Waiting. Waiting, waiting, waiting.

He was sick of all of the waiting.

Chapter End Notes

KJFDSAKLJFL;SKDJFLSKDJF SDF

IM SO SORRY THESE TWO CHAPTERS TOOK ME SOO OOOOOO LONG! i deeply apologize to anyone who has left comments and I haven't responded to yet, I'm trying to get caught up with my inbox! I've had so much work to do w/ my new job. I started on oct. 7th and it's been going really well! but it's also been a big transition.

here's what's to come!!

read between the lines: 'summer' begins, and our boys go out on their first REAL date! (izuku refuses to accept that the boba tea date counted, so...)

and then? i-island! I'll be doing a short separate fic -- maybe 4-6 chapters? -- that covers the i-island movie! it will be '2nd tier canon' like the movie--everything that
happens is compliant with the larger story, but it won't be necessary to enjoy the larger narrative!

and then? we'll pick up right where canon leaves us leading into the summer term! there's lots still planned, so thank you for following along! you guys are the real heroes!!

PLUUUUUUUUUUUUUS ULTRAAAAA!!! c(ˆ⌣ˆc)
The Voice of a Generation

Chapter Summary

As Izuku struggles to accept the added pressure of his fame, Shōto does his best to be supportive. Dadmight is there, too!

Shōto had learned exactly three things about Izuku during the course of the conversation with Detective Naomasa.

1. Friday morning, the police arrested a villain who was strongly suspected to be targeting Izuku, and probably would have tried to kill him had the police not intervened.
2. Yūei’s administration had a plan in place to have Izuku dismissed for “improper conduct.”
3. Watching Izuku shut down was a million times worse than seeing him cry.

Izuku was known to cry pretty easily, something Shinsō liked to point out to tease him. It didn’t really strike Shōto as unusual for someone like Izuku, who was expressive in just about every conceivable meaning of the word, and more often than not Shōto could recall him crying happy tears rather than the alternative.

But this had been so, so different.

The soulfire green that seemed to live somewhere between his heart and mind had all but flickered out, irises dark, muddied with emotions Shōto didn’t know how to identify, not to mention explain. It brought to him a discomfort that was only comparable to the way he’d felt in Hosu City. Those memories—they were too fresh to find any comfort in the fact that Izuku had been okay in the end.

That evening had taught Shōto what it felt like, even if it was only for a few seconds, to believe that Izuku was dead.

Shōto never wanted to live through that again.

Releasing a small sigh, he shivered as a sudden chill settled over him. The air coating the inside of his throat had crystallized into a fine layer of frost; unconsciously, his temperature must have dropped substantially.

Numbness would settle into his fingers soon if he didn’t get a grip, so Shōto released the pen he’d been holding and rubbed his hands together to more quickly return them to their usual temperature. He studied the page on his desk laid out before him, still as blank as it had been when he sat down twenty minutes ago.

Since the week of Sports Festival, Shōto had started writing a letter to his mother every week. Shōto saw her almost as often, visiting the hospital on Sundays or on the rare occasion that Yūei had a day off from class. These past few days had been especially busy, so he was just sitting down to his desk for the first time that week. At present, he had been in the middle of attempting to write, but his mind had started to wander.
Every time he visited, he felt a swell of pride seeing the growing pile of his letters that she kept right on her bedside table, knowing how much she cherished them. This would mark the first time since undergoing this particular personal project in which Shōto just really couldn’t figure out what to say.

Or, more accurately, where to begin.

Organizing his thoughts was not usually a difficult task. He’d made it a habit to keep a small list on his phone of things to write about that came to mind throughout the week—they weren’t things that really usually meant much to him, but he tried to keep in mind things that she would appreciate, like a show coming on the TV that they used to watch together or something dumb that Natsuo had done around the house. And the worst part was—this week? He didn’t even bother with a list because he knew that he would spend the entire length of the page telling his mother about Izuku. Just thinking about sharing something like this with her threatened to cause a smile to start spreading on his lips; Shōto bit the inside of his cheek to stop the impulse in its tracks.

Shōto wanted to tell her everything about him.

Literally, there wasn’t a single thing about Izuku that he could imagine his Mom not loving, but since Friday afternoon, it felt a little bit as if the well had been poisoned. The wind robbed of his sails, missing the high tide as it crept back towards the sea, the momentum of all of these new and foreign emotions tapered off by the difficult news Detective Naomasa had relayed to them all.

For Shōto to explain how happy he felt with Izuku… it wasn’t any less true, but it felt spectacularly unfair. Tantamount to documenting how nice a painting looked, while conveniently omitting that it had since been burnt to ashes.

Rubbing his eyes, Shōto tried to clear his head so he could write something. The exam had worn him down physically, and his brain was just not in the proper state to construct sentences right now. How does Izuku do this all day, everyday? Not only by force of will, but writing was something he genuinely seemed to enjoy? Shōto liked it to the extent that he knew it made his Mother happy, but right now, it felt impossible to even jot down a few simple sentences.

There was something to be said about irony there, he was pretty sure, but didn’t want to expend the mental effort to think about it.

Shōto stood up from his desk and stretched his arms out, walking towards the main hall of the house. The air conditioner hadn’t kicked on, so he suspected Natsuo must be staying at his dorm at college for the weekend—he liked it to be blasting until the entire house was arctic. He passed the dining area but stopped when he spotted Fuyumi, sitting down with her laptop, focus so intent she didn’t even notice Shōto walk by.

Curious, he entered the room, noticing a half-eaten container of mochi sitting on the table. There was a single strawberry one amongst the variety, which he quickly claimed for himself.

That got her attention.

“Hey! Hands off!” She tried to swat him away, but ended up just wrinkling her nose in a very ‘dissatisfied-big-sister’ kind of way.

Leaning around the edge of the table, Shōto glanced at the screen of her computer and took a bite of the mochi. “What are you doing?”

“Contemplating the loss of my strawberry mochi,” she muttered, pushing the rest of the container...
out of his reach for good measure. “I was reading about the whole villain thing that happened to your, ah—Midoriya. Is he okay?”

Face souring like he’d eaten a lemon instead of an ice cream, Shōto shrugged. “If you were reading about it, then you should know he’s fine.”

“I didn’t mean, like, physically…” she sighed. “I just imagine it can be kind of scary for him to be at the center of all of this, that’s all. I hope he’s okay.”

The last part was said so softly, Shōto actually thought Fuyumi sounded a little sad. Before he could ask her, she perked up and looked at him with a bright smile. “Oh, hey, why don’t you invite him over to have dinner with us sometime! He’s welcome to—”

“No,” Shōto interrupted. “Even if he were welcome, I don’t want him to come here.”

Fuyumi blinked a few times. “What?”

“I don’t want him to come here,” he repeated, tone harsher than he meant. “It takes more than you saying it for this house to be welcoming.”

“Ah.” Biting her lower lip, his sister managed a smile that was patently artificial. “Right… I know, I know. I just thought—or, I wanted you to… but it’s not important.”

Her laptop closed with a slightly sharp snap, and she began to stand up. “Hey, I think I’ll workout before bed, if you need anything I’ll be in the gym!”

The abrupt change left him a little confused, watching his sister head towards her room, but Shōto often didn’t really understand his sister actions, and he would be lying if he claimed to understand them now.

That said, he did notice that her mochi had been left on the table, so he collected the packaging for her and walked them back towards the kitchen.

He deposited them into the freezer, and at almost the same time his phone buzzed in his pocket.

*Ochako Uraraka (18:08):*

*Hi, Todoroki-kun! Have you heard from Deku at all since school?*

Frowning, Shōto double-checked his messages with Izuku.

*Shōto Todoroki (14:26):*

*I understand if you’re going to be busy this weekend, but, if you need anything at all, please let me know. I don’t know what I can really offer, but I want to help however I can.*

He texted Uraraka back accordingly.
Almost immediately, Shōto received a response.

Ochako Uraraka (18:12):

*UGHHHH i figured, neither have i or shin... I hoped he would maybe talk to you about this but deku doesn’t like to bother other people when he’s upset so. disappointed, but not surprised i guess.*

Shōto didn’t really know what to say to that.

Shōto Todoroki (18:12):

*I don’t really know what to say to that.*

Standing in the middle of the kitchen on his phone, alone, felt a little weird. Shōto started back towards his own room. He sat back down at his desk, still on his phone, pulling up some of the hero news websites he usually perused. Almost all of them had some mention of the story, the combined fame of his family, Izuku’s writing and the rising concern of the League of Villains was enough to warrant attention widely across Japan.

Sighing, Shōto scrolled through one of the better sites, one that reported primarily on facts and figures rather than opinion pieces or sensationalist, alarmist rhetoric.

The police were still investigating; Deku, the popular young writer at the prestigious Yūei High School, believed to be dating the son of the Number Two Hero; intended target of a violent crime; League of Villains; the Hero Killer; Hosu City.

Nothing new.

How ironic, that Izuku had published a story that *same day* about how even someone as insufferable as Mineta deserved to be treated with respect, that no one could decide their futures but themselves, that they were all the ones writing their own stories, only for the world to try to sweep it all out from under him. The school was clearly trying to keep things quiet, making no statement regarding the threat whatsoever—Naomasa had said that was aligned with the police’s suggestion, to not stir up the situation anymore than was strictly necessarily, but Shōto found their lack of response to be indefensible.

This was a student. It shouldn’t matter if there were social politics involved. That the school didn’t immediately, loudly, and *enthusiastically* throw their support behind Izuku was shameful. But then, to find out that they wanted to have Izuku removed because of his writing? Because he wrote what,
a column that inspired students, that reached people all across Japan—even the world—and attempted to restore faith in those who’d lost their way?

How did punishing him for that make any fucking sense?

Shōto expected better of a school for heroes, but then again, maybe that was naive of him—to think that the administration would protect all their students like they had with Shōto’s class after the incident at the USJ. He had to remind himself that many men were cut from the same cloth of his father, who saw dollar signs and prestige instead of names and faces.

With that operating as the standard, Shōto should have honestly expected just as little of his school.

Thinking about all this—it made him want to hit something. Or someone. Like, that small-time villain Naomasa arrested. He sounded like a good option. Shōto had never really had someone like Izuku in his life before, but he very much wanted to burn the person alive who had even considered hurting him.

(And, yes, Shōto was at least self-aware enough to recognize that reacting violently would not actually solve anything. No, he did not care.)

Probably the pettiest part of all was just that Shōto was annoyed that he couldn’t spend time with Izuku like he wanted. They had unfinalized, but tentative, plans to go on their first date soon, and he would have been lying if he hadn’t been looking forward to it. While he didn’t really know what to expect, Shōto had taken to using the time they had the boba tea cafe as a frame of reference, considering several people had implied that it had been something like a date—and he had very much enjoyed that. It was nice to listen to Izuku talk… and to talk to him, in exchange. Izuku liked to ask questions—lots of questions—and sometimes they made Shōto stop and think about things he’d never even considered before. Just… talking was nice. He didn’t know that it was normal to feel this way about other people. To care so much. Errantly, Shōto recalled something Natsuo had told him about being in a relationship.

*When I’m with my girlfriend, I want to hold her hand so I can be closer with her, while still talking to her and paying attention to the things that make her happy.*

His older brother may be a bit thick-headed at times, but this was certainly something he had explained rather well.

It really was just that simple. Shōto wanted to be with Izuku, to spend time with him, to hear him talk, and watch him get flustered when Shōto was near, or listen as he enthusiastically rattled off ten different facts about All Might like they were common knowledge. It was a strange kind of awareness he would never have understood until recognizing it in himself, but now that he’d been granted a week of nothing but having Izuku, Shōto couldn’t imagine trying to go back to the way he’d been even three months ago. Back to life where people came and went, whose names he couldn’t be bothered to remember, without any green eyes and freckles featuring in his day-to-day.

Shōto startled a bit when his phone buzzed in his hand—he still had the article open on his phone, eyes unseeing as his thoughts had taken their own abrupt turn.

*Ochako Uraraka (18:18):*

*I just remembered...I thought deku said you were gonna go on a date this weekend? are you still gonna go? If you do i’d really appreciate if you would tell him to answer my texts :(*
Shōto Todoroki (18:19):

We didn’t finalize any plans. Izu didn’t want to set a definitive day and time until exams were over, but with all of this happening I imagine he is too busy. I probably will not see him until Tuesday.

Ochako Uraraka (18:19):

no said he’ll be at school on Monday too. I think he has a meeting with the principal again?? Ty anyway.

Ochako Uraraka (18:19):

Actually also if it’s not prying too much will you tell me what you guys were gonna do? If you don’t want to that’s OK it’s not my business but im just curious. And happy for you both, so it’s kind of exciting :)

Shōto Todoroki (18:20):

I don’t mind, but again, we didn’t finalize any plans.

Ochako Uraraka: (18:20):

?? but didn’t you have like any ideas

Shōto Todoroki (18:20):

I don’t know what you mean.

Ochako Uraraka (18:21):

You’re supposed to like, plan something! Do something fun or special, like going to a movie or getting dinner. Kyōka invited Yaomomo over to her house and SANG TO HER!! step up your game todoroki-kun!!

Furrowing his brow, Shōto felt even more confused. What game? Was she suggesting he and Izuku play a game, like… a video game? Shōto hadn’t been allowed to play any of their consoles or handheld systems growing up. He could probably use them now if he wanted. They did have a Nintendo Switch… Natsuo was the only one who really used it, but he could probably play it without his father getting… erm.
Actually, on second thought, he didn’t really want Izuku to come to his house.

Shōto Todoroki (18:23):

*I will try to think of something. Thank you for the advice.*

---

Izuku lowered his head against his knees and tried to relax.

*Deep breath in.*

Hold for three seconds.

*Deep breath out.*

Despite his physical and emotional exhaustion, Izuku was struggling to fall asleep. His mind wasn’t just alert but positively *racing*, synapses rapid-firing a million thoughts and questions and speculations and worries everytime he closed his eyelids.

It was Monday morning (technically), and his entire weekend felt like it had been wasted by his utter inability to have any of his good deeds go unpunished.

From Friday evening to Sunday, his memory was a blur, a stop-motion film of jerky and jumpy scenes changes, his attention being pulled from one thing to another. One minute the police were in his apartment, and then the next they were gone; his Mom was hugging him with tears in her eyes, or they were watching the news, a quiet and uncomfortable sort of acceptance falling over their flat; Izuku was in bed, at his desk, on the couch, scrolling through his phone, ignoring the too-many missed text messages he had, too exhausted to want to answer any of them. Sleep came in weird intervals, shallow and dreamless. Contact information was shared, and re-shared, with the police a number of times.

Just as Principal Nezu and Detective Naomasa had suspected, the internet and news media ate the story up—thankfully there was relatively little mention of Izuku’s actual name, most of the stations or social media accounts deferring to his pseudonym. It was strange, in retrospect, to consider that small saving grace—when he had taken up the mantel Kacchan had so kindly bestowed upon him in childhood, Izuku had never considered the possibility that it might someday be a tool to defend himself. Then again, he never would have imagined his life would be threatened because of the scribblings he kept in his *Hero Analysis for the Future* journal, either.

There were a handful of different “angles” that the media chose to pursue in covering the story, some of them casting him as reckless and mysterious, others writing him off as endangering or narcissistic, to make claims about the way things should—or at least, *could*—be. Still others speculated about his “relationship” with Shōto (way, *way* too many for Izuku’s liking, mind you), if this was some kind of PR roadshow that was somehow Endeavor’s doing, or God knows what else. Izuku tended to change the channel very quickly when those stories came up.

Mostly, the news was just eager to talk about the Hero Killer, and by extension, Izuku. If the Hero Killer left a legacy of vigilant violence in his wake, then Izuku had unwittingly become their model
of the opposite. One of the stories—he didn’t even know which one—had dubbed him as the voice of a generation, and almost all of the other media outlets picked it.

Izuku didn’t know how to feel about all of that, if he were being honest.

It sounded like a compliment, like an honor that he probably should just appreciate, but given the circumstances… all it did was make Izuku exhausted. It’s not like he totally hated the idea of being featured on the news—the attempt to keep his identity semi-secret was a pretty good reflection of how he felt about being widely known, actually. It was… tolerable, but not what he had really hoped to gain from the experience of writing for Go Beyond! Weekly. And now, with this involuntary title thrust upon him, Izuku guessed it would probably result in the exact sort of outcome Naomasa had expected: provoke other villains to see him as a common enemy, and rally heroes behind a common belief.

It didn’t really make him feel like he was being bestowed with some badge of honor.

It was more like a crown of thorns—something that just as easily drew attention as it did blood.

And it was all he could think about now, sitting awake in bed, trying to unwind the spiral of his thoughts.

Izuku glanced up to check the time. His room was completely dark, save the weak light of his alarm clock, diffusing sparsely over the shadowed outlines of his furniture and All Might figures. It was five past two in the morning.

“Ugh,” he groaned, rolling his shoulders back before returning his forehead to his knees.

It required someone extraordinary to meet extraordinary expectations, and while Izuku had been trying so hard to set himself apart from his peers for any reason besides his lack of a quirk, the extra attention just made the bar feel that much higher, that much less attainable.

He didn’t want to be forced to leave Yūei. He certainly didn’t want to die. When all of those 1-A students had told him how much they appreciated him, how much his writing meant to them… of course he was grateful—he could practically feel his heart getting stuck in his throat just thinking about it now—but he’d been so torn up by the conversation with the principal and detective that their words just made him feel overwhelmed rather than reassured. With so much stress and emotion pressing in on him from all sides, Izuku felt like he couldn’t breathe, and instead of gasping for air, his lungs were just waiting to give out.

He couldn’t keep it in anymore.

And in retrospect, he felt so stupid. That was the worst part. His education was in jeopardy, the world at large was having a field day with his personal life, the news was eager to sensationalize a threat against his life… and the most terrifying thing to him?

Izuku didn’t know how he was supposed to face everyone else after what happened.

Shinsō, okay, they had a strange understanding between them. They would probably be fine.

But what about All Might? Would mentoring Izuku prove to be too much work and they wouldn’t meet anymore? What would happen to the paper? Nejire was so supportive—too supportive, really—but he felt guilt clench his stomach when he thought about her offer of shutting down Go Beyond! Weekly entirely. She had worked so hard on it, to grow it into the amazing publication that it was now, only to throw it away because of him? What about all the other people on their staff? Would they resent him?
What about Uraraka? Iida? His classmates in 1-C? The tentative friends he’d made in 1-A?

What about Shōto?

*Deep breath in.*

Hold for three seconds.

*Deep breath out.*

Unconsciously, Izuku had curled his hands into fists at some point, bunching up his sheets in the process. He let them go with a huff.

The whole thing was stupid, and it was stupid to feel stupid about it, but he couldn’t help the flare of anger, embarrassment, and shame that was flittering beneath his skin, pounding in time with his guilt-heavy pulse. Why did he have to go and break down like that? There was no changing the fact that Izuku erred a little on the emotional side (okay, maybe a lot on the emotional side), but it wasn’t just the fact that he started crying that bothered him.

It was just—it felt like he’d taken two huge steps back in everything he’d worked towards.

Part of the promise Izuku had made to himself when he accepted his offer of admission to Yūei was that he would try to shed the image of the kid who was trying too hard at an unachievable dream. Izuku didn’t want to be defined by the things he could never have (a quirk) and could never be (a hero), but by all the things he could still do in spite of that. If he couldn’t become a hero, he was going to give everything he had to support heroes, however he could. Even if he had to break every bone in his body, even if it cost him everything, Izuku would do it.

But to reach that goal, he had to be stronger. Stronger than he was now. Izuku owed it to everyone who had helped him to keep trying, all the people who supported him in doing what he wanted to do, writing what he wanted to write, being who he wanted to be. A bit distantly, he was reminded of the way his palms used to feel after being scratched up on concrete from being pushed to the ground. The smell of burnt paper, or the slight chlorine scent of the koi pond outside of his middle school; the taste of blood or dirt in his mouth depending on how hard he’d been hit and where he landed. He owed it to that version of himself to keep going. They—he—didn’t survive all of that for nothing, for him to throw it away just because things became difficult. Deku was the name of someone who never stopped getting up. It was the name he had proudly given to Nejire, the one that he published at the top of his articles, the one he refused to let hold him back.

Riding to school on Monday with Detective Naomasa was a little… awkward.

Izuku was a little too tired to put in his usual amount of effort towards the conversation, so he just sat quietly in the backseat while the detective and his Mom chatted congenially. He was starting to really understand and appreciate why All Might was such good friends with the guy. Not only was the detective really nice and took his job seriously, he had this funny ability to flip back and forth between a comment on the weather and a serial killer like songs changing on the radio. It was also hard not to feel gratitude for the extra steps he’d taken to making sure Izuku and his Mom felt safe over the weekend and into the last few days of school.

The car ride provided Izuku a good opportunity to respond to some of… his many, many missed
text messages.

_Shōto Todoroki (Sunday, July 5, 05:20)_

_I hope you’re okay. I’m here if you need anything._

Izuku felt terrible for not talking to Shōto for the entire weekend, but there just hadn’t been a good time, or he’d been lacking the motivation to hold a conversation. Sighing, he just tried to be as honest as possible in his apology.

_Izuku Midoriya (07:41)_

_Good morning, Shō. I’m really sorry I’ve been MIA this weekend, things were just so crazy. The police were in my apartment constantly and my Mom has been super stressed and… I’m just really sorry. I’m actually relieved to have this extra day at school… I’m really looking forward to seeing you today._

He hit send, closing his eyes for a moment and taking a deep breath. It wasn’t like him to _not_ re-read his message sixteen times before sending, but the prick of restlessness in the back of his mind had dulled a bit of his usual neurosis. Speaking from the heart felt like a nice change after his emotionally exhaustive weekend.

As for Uraraka, Iida, and Shinsō, it felt like a bit of a cop-out, but Izuku deferred to their group chat.

_Izuku Midoriya (07:43)_

_Hey everyone! I’m really sorry about disappearing for the weekend, things were just really hectic with the police investigating and my Mom has been super worried so I’ve basically been within arms reach of her every minute… I had so many texts from everyone and I really appreciate all of you and your support, it was just too much for me to handle one by one. If you text me now things should be slowed down enough that I’ll be able to respond OK, at least I hope._

Separately, Izuku received an answer from Shōto just as he finished with the message to their group chat.

_Shōto Todoroki (07:43)_

_You have no reason to be sorry. Is there anything I can do? Do you want me to meet you at the gate?_
Biting his lower lip, a very self-serving voice in the back of Izuku’s head did have a suggestion, but the thought was really embarrassing and it made his cheeks burn to think about actually writing it out. Should he just… go for it? After the week he’d had, Izuku felt like he maybe earned a little bit of selfishness, and Shōto was offering…

Izuku Midoriya (07:44)

As far as the school and police stuff go, I don’t think so… And it’s ok, you should just go to homeroom, I am with my mom and detective Naomasa so I won’t really be around to talk.

He swallowed after hitting send, thumbs working a way at a second message.

Izuku Midoriya (07:44)

But if you’re okay with it, I could really use a hug…? I sort of just want to be with you right now. This weekend was long and I’m so tired... I hope that doesn’t sound really creepy and weird, sorry if it does haha.

The group chat had already started to trigger responses, and Izuku saw words of reassurance come in from Uraraka and Iida almost immediately. Heart feeling lighter than it had in days, he was about to read them and respond properly when his Mom called his attention.

“Izuku!” she said, loudly, laughing a little when he jumped in place. “Hey, are you asleep back there? We’re here!”

Quickly shoving his phone in his pocket, Izuku scrambled to get out police cruiser, apologizing. “Sorry! Sorry, no, I was just texting my friends. Wasn’t paying attention, sorry.”

Izuku matched his stride to his Mom’s, both of them walking just a little behind Detective Naomasa,. If ever there was a day he was grateful that Yūei was quiet, it was today. Attendance was voluntary for those who weren’t taking make-up exams, sans the Hero Course students who had an extra lesson and training session. Izuku had to be here for the obvious reason of the meeting with Principal Nezu, but his practical course was also supposed to happen today.

His Mom’s reactions were priceless, as she marveled at the magnanimous size and splendor of Yūei. He’d definitely felt the same way during his first few days in attendance, but there was a distinctive warmth in her admiration that suggested she wasn’t just impressed, but proud. Proud, to send her son to such an amazing place; proud that Izuku was doing so well here, the events of Friday notwithstanding. If they had come under better circumstances, Izuku probably would have felt ecstatic to share this with her. As of now, however, the fresh fear of a possible dismissal was still too present for him to be able to relax.

To a certain extent, Izuku had an agenda for the day. He had considered what the school board could have labeled in his writing as inflammatory and as damaging to Yūei’s reputation, and while he didn’t agree, Izuku was willing to scale back those sorts of analyses if it meant he could stay on as a student. That was something he was prepared to do, but the real order of business was getting the board to agree to drop the order for his suspension in the first place. That was what he didn’t
really understand, but the Principal had seemed very confident on Friday that they would be able to handle it.

Then of course, there was the more… systemic problem of Endeavor.

What was Izuku supposed to do if Endeavor kept coming back and pushing the issue? He still hadn’t told Shōto about any of his father’s suspected involvement, up to and including their rather unfortunate first meeting at the Sports Festival, and it was starting to weigh on his conscious. Not talking to Shōto about it felt like a lie of omission, but at the same time, Izuku didn’t want to make Shōto upset or to possibly further damage the already tenuous relationship he had with his father. It wasn’t really Izuku’s place to stoke those particular flames, but the entirety of the situation had crossed the lines of personal-academic-professional so many times it seemed impossible to untangle it all anymore.

Izuku should, he resolved, probably just be honest with Shōto. If he were lucky, they might be able to talk it out or even come to some kind of solution together. He didn’t want Endeavor to hate him, and he certainly didn’t want to be on the Number Two Hero’s (or his boyfriend’s Dad’s) bad side, but things had only gone from bad to worse as far as their interactions were concerned.

The three of them arrived at Principal Nezu’s office in a mostly-empty school, the halls calm and uncharacteristic as far as Yūei went.

The stout mouse-like educator opened the door and greeted them. “Ah, hello, good morning! You must be Midoriya’s mother, it’s a pleasure to meet you. Please, come in, thank you for—oh, just a moment.”

Izuku was stopped in the doorway by none other than the principal himself. “Midoriya, I am happy for you to join us for this if you would like, but All Might has actually asked to speak with you. He is in the teacher’s lounge.”

Blinking once—twice, for good measure—Izuku looked from the administrator to his Mom, who was now a few feet into the office and looking at them with a concerned knit to her brow.

“Is everything okay? It’s not another threat, is it?” she asked, and the principal smiled and shook his head.

“If it’s not anything like that at all. All Might and your son meet regularly to discuss his responsibilities as a writer for our newspaper. Unfortunately, All Might will be helping with the Hero Course training in the afternoon, so he only has time this morning.”

Both his Mom and the principal turned to him then, their expressions expectant. Izuku panicked a bit under their sudden attention. Were they asking him to choose? This wasn’t what he’d been expecting, what he’d been mentally preparing himself for—he had been planning to talk about the dismissal and the school board and his attendance at Yūei, but… All Might wanted to meet?

It was awfully tempting...

“I… I mean, I’m happy to stay here Mom,” Izuku mumbled, scratching his cheek. “But if it’s just going over a lot of what Principal Nezu and I talked about on Friday, then...”

Chuckling a little, his Mom’s confusion bloomed into her familiar smile, her tone brimming with affection. “It’s alright Izuku, I know how much your meetings with All Might mean to you. Go on.”

“Really?” He tried not to grin too much, and she just waved at him with a shoo motion. “I’ll have
my phone! Call me if you need me!”

Detective Naomasa closed the door for them, and the last image Izuku saw was his Mom sitting down opposite the principal at his desk. The policeman nodded in the direction of the teacher’s lounge.

“Could you tell him to give me a ring when he’s done with you? I’m going to go back to my office for the day, but you can call a bit before you are ready to leave and I’ll take you home.”

“O-Okay. Thank you, Detective! I really appreciate your help.”

He smiled good-naturedly and sent Izuku a little wave before turning around and making his way back towards the front of the school.

Suddenly alone, Izuku felt strangely exhilarated. Meetings with All Might were the highlights of his week—probably would remain the highlights of his life, honestly, right up there with kissing Shōto. Usually, All Might would let him know a few days ahead of time so Izuku could prepare for a specific topic: shadowing, the Sports Festival, et cetera. Best case scenario, it was just to iron out some of the details for his practical course that was set to be run today, but he doubted it. Given the timing and impromptu scheduling, Izuku could only assume today’s meeting would be concerning the villain incident and the looming threat of his dismissal.

Even with the likelihood that the conversation would be unpleasant, Izuku managed to be excited. Like, c’mon—it was All Might! Who wouldn’t be excited?!

With an added bounce to his step, Izuku set a fast pace towards the teachers lounge, taking the stairs two at a time and simultaneously reaching and shuffling around things in his book bag in search of—ah. Hero Analysis for the Future No. 13. His fingers closed around the scorched pages at almost the same time that a voice caught his attention from the floor below.

Instinctually, Izuku stopped and poked his head over the railing, only to let out a little surprised gasp.

“S-Shōto?” His voice cracked over just those two syllables, so Izuku cleared his throat and tried again. “W-What are you doing? Don’t you have class?”

Instead of speaking up the stairwell floors, Shōto quickly climbed the stairs after him. Izuku waited, heart pounding from, well, almost running to get to the teacher’s lounge, and now intensifying ten-fold as the pretty, unaffected face of the prodigal 1-A student grew closer.

“I do, but Aizawa-sensei is asleep, and I thought I would see if you…” he paused, licking his lips. “Still wanted that hug? I’m not really a hugger, but I figured if you asked it must be important, and I’m willing to try.”

Unable to resist, Izuku burst out laughing, trying to keep his volume down even as his cheeks felt like they were on fire.

“What’s funny?” Shōto asked, evidently confused.
Izuku tried not to laugh while he explained, “S-Sorry, just you were so serious, I wasn’t expecting it! That you left class just to offer me a hug…”

Hooking a brow, Shōto appeared mildly amused, but Izuku had a feeling he didn’t really think it was all that funny. Somehow that just made it funnier… but, he managed to rein it in with a quick series of successive breaths.

“Ohay, okay, I’m good. Sorry,” he said, and, characteristically awkward, Izuku peeked up at Shōto from beneath his lashes, sort of opening and raising his arms. “So, um, can I…? Oomf!”

Surprisingly quick, Shōto pulled him forward, taking Izuku utterly by surprise when his face collided with the 1-A student’s chest. He had positioned Izuku slightly to his left side, cheek squished directly above the thin-fabric that separated Izuku from Shōto’s heart. He felt unbelievably warm, which, in the air conditioned hallways, was a cozy and refreshing contrast, like a winter’s quilt fresh from the dryer; just his right arm, which brushed against the side of Izuku’s neck, was cold to the touch, but the mismatch was sort of thrilling for his body to try to make sense of in such a rapid series of movements.

Automatically, Izuku closed his arms around Shōto’s midsection, stacking his hands beneath his shoulder blades. There was a tiny bit of stiffness at first, but then, Izuku’s heart fluttered unexpectedly when he felt a warm exhale dance past the nape of his neck, and the arms around him softened, turning from a hold to a genuine embrace.

In truth, Izuku hadn’t expected Shōto to be so good at hugs. The only frame of reference he had was from the sort of standing hug-head-pat Shōto had given him in Hosu City hospital and the half-a-kiss-that-ended-up-in-a-half-hug when they kissed for the second time, but then again, Shōto seemed to be naturally good at almost anything when he tried, so maybe he shouldn’t have been surprised.

In any event, Izuku was going to allow himself this small, peaceful moment. Breathing in, Shōto’s uniform had a simple and refreshing scent, like spirited cotton fields on a windswept day, and Izuku unconsciously nuzzled his face into it, calm and gentle. Like this, he felt more at ease than he had even expected when the suggestion had come to him earlier; he thought himself to be too nervous and twitchy to just enjoy it, but Shōto was grounding, had steadied the rising waves of his restless habits to a low tide. If only for a moment, Izuku felt like he was being invited to let go, to forget about the madness of what was waiting for him on either end of the staircase.

Just then, there was no school, no newspaper, no villains, no heroes.

Just arms holding him tightly, and a chest, rising and falling in an easy rhythm.

Once upon a time, Izuku never would have believed someone like Shōto Todoroki would even notice him—and to be honest, once upon a time, that probably would have remained the case. The Izuku of three months ago wouldn’t have been able to get out a single sentence to someone like Shōto, and now, they were holding each other, and Izuku had just begun to glimpse what was beneath the air of indifference and cold intimidation that followed him. He could see that Shōto was someone with a kind heart that was just learning how to use it properly.

Izuku held him a little tighter.

He felt so unbelievably grateful to be the one with whom Shōto was trying to learn. Never had Izuku been so sure he was the one navigating his own fate as he was in that moment. This was a dream made real by the choices he had made, and he wouldn’t undo them for the world.
As relaxed as he was, Izuku didn’t even fluster when he mumbled, “Shō… you’re a really good hugger…”

A surprised chuckle answered him, and Izuku pulled back a bit and angled his head up. “Now it’s my turn to ask—what’s funny?”

Shōto considered him for a moment, expression impassive. “After I got your message earlier, I asked Yaoyorozu if there was a proper way to give a hug, and she informed me that there is, and that I am very bad at giving them. So hearing you say the opposite was surprising, and funny.”

In mock offense, Izuku gasped. “Bad?! I don’t think you’re bad at all!”

“Hmm.” Shōto let slip a faint chuckle and smiled. Izuku was glad they were still hugging or else his knees might have buckled. “Would you believe me if I said I’ve spent the past twenty minutes practicing?”

“Pfft—” Izuku raised a dubious brow to that. “Practicing? How?”

“You would be surprised by how willing my classmates are to involve themselves in things that don’t concern them,” Shōto explained, sounding thoroughly exasperated. I’m beginning to think I shouldn’t even talk to Yaoyorozu in our classroom anymore without fear of being overheard. Uraraka and Ashido were very willing to organize volunteers.”

Izuku hid his face against Shōto’s torso again, his whole heart shimmering with easy effervescence, all of his affection spilling over into a fit of giggles. “How does that even work?”

“It was a bit like training, actually. There’s a handful of people around your height—I didn’t know that mattered, but they assured me, it does—and they critiqued my form while I hugged someone. Then we would switch to someone else, so on and so forth.” Shōto paused for a moment, brow furrowed. “It was very uncomfortable. Hugging you is much nicer.”

Izuku burst out with a fresh wave of laughter. He couldn’t even imagine how that could have looked: his brain supplied him with the mental image of Shōto hugging Tokoyami, both completely stoic and stiff while Uraraka yelled at them, and he was practically cackling.

After a solid thirty seconds of trying to get his breathing under control, a soft voice whispered up the stairwell. “Psst, Todoroki!”

Izuku felt the brush of disappointment cast over him when his boyfriend pulled away, and they both glanced over the railing. A disembodied skirt, jacket and gloves were waving up at them, but also quickly motioning towards the 1-A classroom. “Aizawa-sensei is getting up, come on!”

They seperated and Izuku was surprised to see that Shōto was scowling.

“I almost forgot,” his blue and grey gaze studied Izuku intently for a moment. “I would like to take you on a date tomorrow after the closing ceremony.”

Eyes wide as dinner plates, Izuku’s already flushed face turned red all the way to the tips of his ears. “O-o-oh! Uhhh, but… I-I mean, probably… maybe? No! Not—not no-no, like, no to the maybe! Ugh. What I mean is, yes! Date. Yes. Uh, need… details. For you and… to date, and us go… and…”

“You’re very adorable, Izuku, but I have to go to class,” a hand came to rest on his cheek, thumb brushing a gentle, cool pattern against his burning skin. “So, just to confirm, we will go out tomorrow after the closing ceremony, then?”
Nodding his head up and down, Izuku managed a pitiful sounding, “U-Um. Y-yes. Yes, please.”

“Okay. I have something in mind, so you don’t have to worry.” Shōto waved and started down the stairs, appearing to have no real sense of urgency as he followed after Hagakure and disappeared around the corner. Izuku watched until they were both out of sight, unconsciously resting a hand against his face and chasing the ghost of frost-tipped that were left in Shōto’s wake.

It took a solid minute of zoning out in fond, dumbstruck silence for Izuku to remember that he couldn’t just stand there all day. All Might was in the teachers lounge, waiting for him.

Shaking his head, Izuku turned back around and climbed the stairs to the next floor up, only slightly dazed as he made his way to the familiar stretch of hallway.

Before he could even knock, Izuku heard a fit of coughing on the other side of the door. It sent a distressed pang off in his stomach, and he swiftly rapped his knuckles on the door.

“Ah! One moment!” All Might called from the other side, and Izuku took a bracing inhale and let it out slowly. The door opened about ten seconds later, revealing the skeletal, but smiling, face of his favorite hero in the entire world, and some of his earlier jitteriness returned, like he’d swallowed a box of fireworks and now had to try to keep them all from bursting out of his throat.

“Hello, Young Midoriya!” All Might stepped aside and welcomed Izuku into the room. “So sorry to take you away from your meeting with your mother and Principal Nezu—are you sure this is alright?”

Bowing politely, Izuku managed to keep from sounding too keyed up. “A-Ah, well. I mean, it’s not that the stuff they’re meeting about isn’t important, but… I don’t think there’s anything new for me to learn. My mom and I talked about it a lot this weekend, so I think she knows how I feel about everything…”

“I understand; I will say first that the point of why I asked you here today is largely for the same subjects, but rather than just focusing on your enrollment and Yūei’s commitment to keeping you safe, I wanted to revisit the path you’ve laid out that’s led you to this point. I think it warrants reevaluating where you’ve been before moving forward.”

Izuku had guessed as much, and he pursed his lips while All Might gestured for him to take his usual spot across the couch.

“I’m sorry I wasn’t there when Nezu told you about what was going on,” All Might continued. “I was only just learning about it myself. The teacher’s received a briefing during the exam, but the gravity of the situation didn’t come to light until hours later.”

“That’s okay,” replied Izuku, sighing to release some of the tension in his shoulders. “Luckily I had Nejire and Ectoplasm-sensei, so I wasn’t completely alone. And Detective Naomasa, he was the one who told me about the villain… he asked for you to call him, by the way, once we’re done.”

The Pro-Hero slowly angled himself onto the couch while listening; Izuku could almost imagine the creaking of his joints, like he was made of metal beams rather than flesh and bone.

Actually, that errant train of thought reminded him of Tetsutetsu Tetsutetsu’s quirk, and Izuku’s hands were already reaching for his journal and flipping through to the page he had divided between the 1-B student and Kirishima.

Does the activation of Real Steel over joints create tension in the metal? Shoulder vs. elbow vs. wrist?
Pausing, Izuku bit the end of his pen, considering if there were other particular lines of one’s body that would bend and could potentially hold torque in its shape when turned to steel. He and Kirishima had seemed like they were both quite mobile during the Sports Festival, but what if his maneuverability—

All Might cleared his throat, and Izuku realized he’d completely forgotten what he’d been doing. He apologized and hastily scribbled a half-formed question out to remind himself to think it through more at a later time before shoving his journal back into his bookbag.

“Sorry, sorry, I just thought of something… not important.” Izuku bowed in his seat and All Might waved a hand.

“It’s no problem at all. I’m not in much of a hurry today—until the afternoon, anyway.” The Pro-Hero did stop to check the time before glancing back up at Izuku. “So, how are you doing?.”

Warily, Izuku smiled, looking down at his lap. “I’m… okay, I guess. I haven’t slept very well so I feel a little, uh, slower. The police were in our apartment a lot this weekend, talking to my Mom and asking us questions… My Mom was, like, on edge, but relieved at the same time? Like, she didn’t seem happy that any of this was happening, obviously, but she seemed to appreciate that the police were taking everything so seriously. It was mentally exhausting, though. And they didn’t actually tell us a lot about the villain or anything…”

“And I can actually share an update with you on that. I’m sorry to hear about the long nights, although I wish I could say I was surprised. While the police were working to make sure you were both safe in the aftermath of Friday, there was quite a bit going on as far as the investigation went on the back-end.”

All Might let out a sigh so deep, Izuku feared that stiff wind might knock him over, but he brightened with a small smile and looked to the quirkless student expectantly. “But we don’t have to dive into it right away! I didn’t even mean to get into it already. I just wanted to see how you were doing, first. Would it make you feel uncomfortable if I were to ask how things are going with young Todoroki? Recovery Girl told me she uh—” the Pro-Hero cleared his throat, simultaneously arching a brow in Izuku’s direction. “Saw you spending some time together on Friday. There was something about a… victory display after his exam with young Bakugō?”

As if he’d been drenched in kerosene, and All Might’s words were flint and black wool, Izuku’s face immediately felt like it was on fire. He started to sputter unintelligible noises, covering his face with his hands.

“N-No!! There wasn’t—a-a display! U-Uh, I, uh—I, I mean—he, I—we did the, uh, faces. Our faces. They were near. Together. B-but that’s it!”

All Might chuckled and raised two hands in an apologetic gesture. “Okay, maybe we should stick to the more pressing stuff after all.”

Now sweating, Izuku nodded his head vigorously. “Please.”

He had barely been able to bring himself to talk to his Mom about Shōto, because it was just so—and he was just—they were—

“Well, the first order of business is just concerning this afternoon. Are you still planning to come observe the practical course? I understand if you want to go home and rest, all things considered.”

Swallowing roughly on the lump in his throat, Izuku shook his head. “No, I’d like to stay and
watch. I... I told Principal Nezu this on Friday, but I don’t want to start looking over my shoulder every day and let this scare impact the way I live my life. If I stopped going to school because I was afraid, then the villains will have already won. And ‘going to school’ means to me doing everything I can to be a diligent student—things like this practical course. So... so, I’d like to stay.”

“Very well.” All Might seemed solemn, but otherwise impassive. “On the subject, in exchange for you telling me that Naomasa asked me to call him, I should mention that Midnight also wanted to speak to you.”

Izuku tilted his head to the side. “Midnight-sensei? Why?”

“I’m not sure—I suspect it has something to do with the practical course this afternoon. I saw that she had brought civilian clothes for her and the other staff members, so perhaps it has to do with that?”

“Oh. Well, um, okay! Thank you.” Izuku nodded, a little nervous, and All Might smiled knowingly.

“All right then, onto the more pressing issues. Let’s start with the villain. I feel like you deserve a bit more of an explanation than you’ve been given so far. His name is Utsuga Hasa, mid-30s, had never been on the police’s radar as someone particularly threatening—Hasa is a fairly low-class villain with a few incidents against their record here or there. Simple assaults or robberies, that kind of thing. But this time was different. He seemed different—that’s what I’m told, anyway. You weren’t there at the USJ, but the League of Villains was very…” he hummed, searching for the right word. “Impulsive. Their members weren’t organized, and their strategy was poorly executed. That is the impression I got from this villain’s history as well, but his approach to this... plan he had was very detail-oriented. Tactical. His ramblings to the police when he was arrested were borderline heretical, if I’m going to be frank about it. Naomasa’s team recovered a collection of news clippings around his apartment—many from the actual press, concerning the Hero Killer, along with a large number of from Go Beyond! Weekly that seemed to have been printed from the website. They had all of yours, but many of Hado’s editorials as well.”

“The guy had... printed out our stories...?” asked Izuku, unable to stop from sounding cagey. It called forth images of a conspiracy theorist, and Izuku’s imagination ran with it, constructing the scene of faceless villain with pictures and articles hanging up in a small room, red string connecting different things together, looking for some ineffable answer that was hidden in their newspaper.

“Yes,” All Might affirmed. “Now, I’m not telling you this all of this to scare you, young Midoriya, but to lend some real perspective to the situation. You’re not a child, but you’re not yet an adult—however, in a world with villains growing stronger everyday, this is not a time to be treating you with kids gloves. Do you understand?”

Averting his eyes, Izuku nodded. He appreciated the Symbol of Peace’s candor, but being reminded of how he didn’t quite fit into the order of the world yet—it left him feeling strangely vulnerable.

All Might studied him, wordless for a few long seconds, before continuing. “As your teacher, it’s my job to give you the best information I can to allow you to make the most informed decisions possible. That being the case, I feel like we need to talk about the direction of these meetings, of your involvement in the school newspaper, and as a Yūei student.”

Izuku swallowed on his bone dry throat and nodded again. He knew All Might wanted to help him to achieve his goals, but his words and tone did little to comfort Izuku. The entirety of the situation,
the tension, the stern and deep blues of his idol’s eyes—all of it made Izuku feel like he was about to reach the peak of a tall mountain, over which he would be at the precipice of everything that was important to him.

It could be beautiful at the summit, or it could be terrifying, and he didn’t really know which one to expect.

All Might settled back on the couch a bit, scratching his chin. “I’ve spent much of the weekend going back and forth on this—in fact, it’s something that first started to really bother me after your encounter in Hosu City. I guess, allow me to back up—we started this program for you, a sort of Independent Study project, because the principal and other faculty members supported the idea that you should pursue your column more intensively. That means more public exposure. More public exposure necessarily means more risk. Just by walking to and from the train, any person is in more danger than if they were to stay inside their homes at all times. That danger is especially prevalent for public figures; they are ideal targets for villains, because when something harms someone in the public eye, it doesn’t just impact a family or a neighborhood, but it can upset the common consciousness of an entire community or even greater society. That is the way of our world, and it isn’t going to stop anytime soon. So long as there are heroes, there will be villains, and as long as there are villains, the public will be in danger. That is something outside of your control.” The Symbol of Peace leveled Izuku with a serious glance, holding his gaze. Izuku couldn’t help but think the shadowed outlines surrounding his eyes looked especially dark at that moment. “But what you do get to decide is how far you would like to continue down that path. How much public exposure you willing to shoulder—the more you write, the larger your audience, the more your life will be in danger, young Midoriya. How much are you willing to risk to make it so your voice can be heard?”

“Everything!” Izuku blurted, almost unthinkingly, the moment All Might finished. Embarrassed, he dropped his head, but he also had no intention of taking it back. It was an automatic response, the kind that skipped the tracks of thought and forced itself to be heard. A reflex. A truth he could intuit just as easily as breathing.

“I—I mean, I understand that there are risks, but this is…” Furling his hands into fists as they rested in his lap, Izuku tried his best to meet All Might’s eye. “I’ve thought about it a lot, too. It’s all I could think about this whole weekend, and this is what I want most in the world, All Might. It’s worth any risk to me if it means I can help people. I know there’s that saying, that actions speak louder than words, but… actions aren’t really an option for me. I want to use my words to make what little difference I can.”

A wistful smile had crossed over the Number One Hero while Izuku was speaking, but by the time he was finished, not a trace of that trademark grin remained.

All Might, in a very matter-of-fact way, stated: “You could be killed for your beliefs.”

“And heroes can be killed for their actions,” Izuku countered, jaw clenching on all the things he wanted to say, making a conscious effort to keep the edge of desperation that was creeping up his throat from making its way into his words. “I know it’s… I know it’s dangerous. But I didn’t apply to Yūei because I wanted to sit in the background and let the world pass me by, I wanted to be a hero. I know I can’t do that—and I don’t want to die, but… the risk was something I had been prepared to take on when I applied here, because it meant I could save people. It’s—my writing is the closest thing to a power I have. And if I can’t save people, then I still… I still want to reach people however I can!”

Voice dropping, just a little, Izuku glared at a patch of the carpet. He felt a little too close to
becoming emotional to meet his idol’s gaze, wasn’t sure he could stomach whatever look All Might might be giving him.

“You… you told me to make my dreams achievable, so that’s what I’m doing. What I’ve been trying to do, I mean. So please… please, help me to become someone who can help people, All Might.”

Izuku completed his request by standing up and bowing as low as he could, trying to convey how much this meant to him, how much he respected All Might, and how much he was willing to lose so that he could be here.

Unseen by Izuku, the Symbol of Peace had taken to leaning forward, resting his elbows on his knees and hands steepled in front of him, effectively shielding the lower half of his face. He appeared to be deep in thought, silence filling the space between them, and Izuku waited in nervous anticipation for some kind of response.

Not really sure what to expect, Izuku winced slightly when he realized a hand was resting on top of his head.

“Okay.”

Blinking, he felt All Might rustle his hair a bit, and Izuku looked up in disbelief.

“...Okay?”

With a smile, the man repeated, “Okay.”

His tone was neither sarcastic nor dismissive, but warm. He gestured for Izuku to return to his seat.

“I can see that you’ve very committed to this. I get it. Resolve like yours is a rarity… it makes me wonder if… well, no, nevermind. More to my point, you don’t give yourself enough credit, young Midoriya. Just because you don’t pull people from the wreckage of a burning building doesn’t mean you’re not pulling people out from somewhere very dark and dangerous in a different kind of way. It may not feel like it right now with all of this piling up, but you’ve already reached the lives and minds of thousands of people.”

Blinking a few times, a tiny, confused smile tugged at Izuku’s mouth as understanding settled over him. All Might was… complimenting him?

“I think you are making a good choice,” he continued, this time with a twinge of relief. “I didn’t want you to put yourself in harms way because you thought it was what I wanted. The decision is yours, and if this is what you want to do, then we’ll make the necessary arrangements to ensure you are safe to continue to pursue your goals, however those end up manifesting. The fate of the newspaper is a bit... transient right now; Principal Nezu still has an uphill battle in dealing with the school board. But, even if that medium is no longer available, you’ve already got the world’s attention.” With a fond look, the older hero tilted his head to the side. “Now you’ve got to tell them: I am here.”

“I—I—A-All Might—” Izuku sniffed, but he bit his bottom lip and forced himself to keep it together. “I-I will! I’ll do it. I’ll tell the world I am here, a-and I’ll make them listen; no matter w-what happens, I can do as long as I’ve got you behind me!”

A sudden cough shook All Might’s frail frame, and, startled, Izuku started to get up from his seat again, but the Pro-Hero was already waving him off. He produced a handkerchief from his pocket and wiped at the corner of his mouth.
“With your decision in mind, I think we need to refocus how you should develop your skills moving forward.” All Might continued as he stowed away the blood-spotted cloth. “Expanding the topics and reasons you write has already shown you have great promise and are able to grow as a writer. Analyzing the why and the what, not just documenting the who and how, is at least part of what is really responsible for bringing you to this point, I think. That was a smart move, but it’s created an imbalance in what we should expect from you.”

“What you… expect of me? An imbalance? What does that mean?”

“Well, this is a bit of what I was referring to earlier: it was foolish to expect that you would be able to increase the number of people you reach without accounting for the added risks. If we are to continue with this program in which you are granted special privileges in the interest of improving your contributions to the newspaper, and thereby the school, its students, and its reputation, then it stands to reason that we must also provide you with the tools to help minimize the risks you may face.”

Izuku tilted his head, letting All Might’s words wash over him. Tools? Like a Support Item? It might not be a bad idea to have something a little more reliable than his cell phone if he were to be caught in a moment like he had been in Hosu City…

“What would you suggest?”

All Might let out a low laugh, glancing towards the window and the world beyond. “It’s not too complicated. The basics you’ve been learning in General Education are an excellent start, but I want you to be prepared to react in an emergency and to keep yourself safe in the event that you’re ever targeted. We will need to train you to respond to situations in ways that exceed the point of a civilian. I don’t want to take this as an invitation to insert yourself in situations that should be left to Pro-Heros, but if you are going to continue to present your opinions and use your voice to promote the messages that you find valuable, then you will continue to incur more threats.”

“Oh! So lessons focusing on responding to emergency or crisis situations?” Izuku felt like he was seeing stars. “That would be amazing! Yes, please! I was just talking to Recovery Girl about taking her medical aid class next term—what did she call it again?”

“Hold on,” All Might requested, a knowing undertone to his voice. “There is one more thing I had to discuss today. Before all of this mess happened, do you recall that I offered to see if there were any sort of summer programs that may be helpful to you?”

Brain taking a moment to reset from the sudden shift in topic, Izuku nodded belatedly. “A-A little. To be honest I think that was when you told me about Professor Shield and I-Island. A lot of the rest of that slipped my mind, sorry.”

“That’s alright, there wasn’t much to it besides that I suggested there may be some programs to keep you involved during the summertime, comparable to how the Hero Course students will be attending a training camp. Ectoplasm surely must have gone over some of the options you all had in class?”

“Oh, right. Umm…” Izuku reached for one of his notebooks, remembering that he had written down some details regarding their optional summer enrollment opportunities, like different specialized camps, retreats, or trips.

If he were being honest, he was just retrieving it for an excuse to avoid All Might’s eye, flipping through the pages lackadaisically. Unlike the Hero Course students, summer programming was not covered as a part of General Education’s tuition, and he knew that a lot of options wouldn’t be
things he and his Mom could afford. Izuku still took down some halfhearted notes at the time, but it was hard to be engaged with something when it came to money—or, rather, his not-having-enough-of-it.

He was that much more surprised by the suggestion that followed.

“The paper will not be publishing for the summer, so it makes sense to use this break time to develop skills that won’t require you to write as intensely. There are a large number of options out there, but with the recent events, I had to scale back a number of them in the interest of putting your safety first,” All Might pulled over a thin manilla folder and flipped it open, thumbing through a few pages before continuing. “The activity or program would have to be ‘school-sanctioned, supervised by at least one staff member, promote your education, and provide helpful experience towards you achieving your career goals’—”

Izuku could feel his heart sink the longer All Might went on. How could he possibly find something that could meet all the criteria on that list? Let alone afford something like that?

“—and I think I know just the place.”

Taken aback, Izuku blinked down at a photograph the Symbol of Peace had presented to him. In it were pictured four adults, all adopting a similar wibet strange pose.

“How familiar are you with the Wild, Wild Pussycats?”
Best-Laid Plans

Chapter Summary

Izuku poses a serious challenge to class 1-A, and Shōto is having a very difficult time paying attention. There's some stuff about a suit. And Izuku wearing it. And it's just a lot for Shōto's brain and hormones to handle.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

“The training camp begins at the end of this month,” Aizawa-sensei stated, with just as little enthusiasm as ever. “And you will all be there. Those who failed the exam need this training more than anyone, so of course you’re going.”

“So all that stuff about not holding back…?” Ojiro groaned.

A truly frightening sight, Aizawa-sensei smiled. “It was a logical ruse!”

The class erupted with an outcry, which their teacher silenced very quickly.

“This is not going to be a vacation. It’s designed to challenge you at every step, and if you don’t take this time to improve, you will be left behind. Including those who failed.”

Indignant, Iida stood tall from his seat, hand raised. “Sensei! While I admire Yūei’s commitment to making us try our best, this is the second time you have deceived us! Surely at this rate we are expected to lose faith in your promises!”

“That’s fair,” Aizawa-sensei shrugged. “It was not, however, a complete lie. Failure is failure; Aoyama, Kaminari, Sato and Kirishima—you will all be taking extra lessons during the camp.”

The man walked around his desk and opened a drawer, pulled out a small pile of blue paper, and dropped them on the flat surface. “These brochures include a list of what you should need to bring with you. The trip will last seven full days, so pack ahead of time. If you don’t remember to bring something, you best hope one of your classmates is kind enough to loan you something or you’ll have to do without because we won’t be taking any trips away from the facilities during those seven days.”

After Aizawa-sensei finished his explanation for the training camp and answered questions, they were instructed to change into their costumes for training, broken up into small groups and instructed to meet in different classrooms. Shōto vaguely caught some conversation from his peers about planning to do something together before the trip, but he wasn’t really listening; he was in the group of students who didn’t have to actually leave 1-A, so he stayed in his seat while most of his peers filed out. Five others remained seated: Uraraka, Tsuyu, Iida, Kirishima and Bakugō.

“So far you’ve only done cooperative training in groups of two or as a whole class, but today’s lessons were designed for five to eight heroes at a time so you can focus on synergy. Being a member of a team, not half a partnership, or working on your own—” Aizawa paused, gaze sliding over to Bakugō, who scoffed and looked away. “—is one of the quintessential parts of working as a
Pro. This particular IAE is new, and I selected the six of you because I think you all have something you can teach, and learn from each other."

There was a pause before Tsuyu raised her hand. “What kind of scenario will we be doing, kero?”

“The lesson today will be an Incident Assessment and Evaluation course, or an IAE, designed as if you were facing a villain. You’ll go to the scene of a crime and try to figure out what happened. Depending on what you learn, you must then choose the appropriate way to handle the situation—seeking an appropriate resolution, whatever that may mean. Most of your hands-on lessons have been focused on improving your fighting abilities, so this is a good opportunity to work on your strategizing, reactive reasoning, and honing your critical thinking skills. Whether or not the situation warrants a fight will be up to you. The only advice I can give you is that coordination and teamwork are going to be the key if you have any hope of being successful today.”

The man paused, presumably to allow for questions. When no one spoke or raised their hand, he continued.

“We’ll be having some help from other members of the staff as well. Come in,” Aizawa’s voice raised slightly and he turned his head towards the hallway. One by one, heroes filed in, all comparably rays of sunshine compared to their own homeroom teacher. “Midnight, Ectoplasm, Present Mic and All Might have all agreed to take part in the exercise. They’ll be playing different roles to help move the situation along.”

“Wait!” Midnight clapped her hands together, smiling vixenly and holding a single finger up in the air. “I brought someone to watch us!”

The woman returned to the door of the classroom and opened it, thrusting out and hauling someone into 1-A bodily. They sounded like they were trying to resist, which Shōto had to admit was mildly amusing.

And then, she tugged on them so hard they fell flat on their face over the threshold.

Oh.

That... that was…

Iida, Kirishima and Tsuyu all said in chorus, “Midoriya?”

Uraraka and Bakugō, the latter of whom was notably angry, said, “Deku?”

“Izuku?”

“So much for intimidating…” sighed Midnight, hands on her hips. At the same time, Izuku crawled onto his hands and knees and stood, red all the way up to his ears. He cleared his throat, a nervous smile doing little to mask his anxiety, and met eyes with Shōto.

“U-Uh,” tittered the green-haired boy, dusting nonexistent dust from his clothes. “H-Hi, everyone. T-Thanks for taking part in the, um, IAE. This is what I designed for my practical final, so I hope you all get something out of it.”

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“Whoa, Mido-bro!” Kirishima sounded thrilled enough for everyone in the room, a toothy grin splitting his expression. “This is such a cool idea! Nice going, dude.”

Bakugō’s chair scraped loudly over the linoleum floors as he stood up. “No, no fucking way am I going to do this—”
“It’s not up for debate.” Aizawa looked at each one of the students individually, ending on Bakugō, but Shōto could not be bothered to listen. He did not care about whatever his classmates or teachers were saying, like his brain was running in slow motion and it was requiring every tiny scrap of his attention to maintain basic functioning.

What—what was Izuku wearing?

Oh—shit, Shōto realized in a panic that his quirk was starting to flare up. He hadn’t realized he’d been holding his breath, body desperately trying to catch up with what was happening. Inhaling sharply, he nearly coughed—his throat felt unbelievably dry all of the sudden. Completely parched. Positively arid.

Sleeves rolled halfway up, Izuku had on a dark gray button-up shirt, the top button left unfastened but accessorized with with a teal-colored tie that Midnight must have tied for him. It was paired with a two-panel suit vest, white in the front and that same dark, blueish-green on the sides, and matching white slacks. His hands were gloved in dark fabric, and it amounted to something surprisingly… menacing? If Izuku could even look menacing. Maybe serious was a better word? But his familiar red shoes detracted slightly from such an association.

“Why are you wearing that?” Aizawa stated bluntly, and Izuku let out a meek sound of confusion.

Shōto’s gaze snapped to Izuku’s face again when he started to speak again. “Uhh… W-Well… that is—see, it wasn’t my idea, it all started with, uh—”

“Oh this old thing?” Midnight slapped Izuku on the back, beaming. “You can thank me for that! I know he’s not fighting, but I thought it was important to make him look appropriately villainous. You know, to inspire the students to really invest in the story. What do you think—I was going for a sort of ‘young mob boss’ kind of look.”

Present Mic and All Might both commended her, nodding and murmuring, pointing out aspects of the suit that ‘worked’ towards accomplishing that end. Izuku seemed even more flustered than he had before and tried to hide himself behind his arms—one of those habits Shōto had started to notice and adore.

Meanwhile, in response to Midnight’s comment, Aizawa ran a hand down his face. “But he’s not even—you know what, fine.”

The man looked at each one of the students individually, ending on Bakugō. “It doesn’t matter because Midoriya is a noncombatant. He was invited to watch since he developed this IAE, not actively participate. Nothing in the IAE is designed so that you will be in any actual danger, although it will simulate real conditions otherwise.”

For Shōto, trying to pay attention to instructions right now was actually physically painful.

“I will provide a few more details once we’re on the grounds, about the average that you would expect from a standard police briefing.”

He felt like he was dying. His chest was going to cave in or explode or—or something.

“You’ll have forty-five minutes to run through the course; if you don’t resolve the situation in time, you’ll all fail.”

Bakugō had sat down at some point—Shōto hardly even noticed when he’d stood in the first place. “Tsch.”
“Sir!” Iida shot up suddenly, hand pointed high in the air. “What are we to do in the condition that we finish early!”

Surprisingly emotive, the teacher raised both brows, thoughtful before supplying his answer.

“I’ve looked over the scenario myself. I assure you, that’s not going to happen. The real question you should be asking yourself is if the six of you even stand a chance.”

“Heh.” Scratching the back of his head, Izuku looked at the ceiling. “I tried to make it pretty challenging. But you guys are all incredibly talented, so…”

“All the more reason to give it your all!” All Might said in his usual resounding tone. “You kids need to get changed into your own costumes, since you’ll be the ones actually being tested! We’ll meet at Grounds Beta in ten minutes.”

Aizawa took back their attention one last time, giving them the opportunity to ask questions, and then they were dismissed. Again, Shōto didn’t notice that his peers chirped a dutiful “yes sir!”— he was a little—um.

Distracted.

The teachers began to file out, All Might leading Izuku with a guiding hand between his shoulder blades, but the 1-C student craned his neck back at the Symbol of Peace.

“U-Um, All Might… can I h-have a second?”

The man paused, smile widening, and glancing back at the mostly empty classroom.

“Don’t take long… and don’t give them any hints!”

Shōto was already standing as Izuku thanked him, but, damnnit, Uraraka and Kirishima were already moving.

“Deku!! Oh my god this was your final project?! I CAN’T BELIEVE YOU DIDN’T TELL ME!”

“A-Ah well… I wasn’t supposed to, in case you got picked for this… which you did… so I guess it was good that I didn’t?”

Nodding approvingly, Kirishima added, “Dang, nice threads, Midoriya! Midnight really went all out, huh?”

He looked down at himself, arms spread out slightly from his torso. “Oh, yeah… this was definitely not my idea. I didn’t even know about it until—um.”

By the time he finished speaking, Bakugō had come over, grabbed the back of Kirishima’s jacket, and started to drag him the other way.

“DEKU! IF THIS PRACTICAL BULLSHIT IS A WASTE OF MY TIME I’LL KILL YOU!”

Hands up defensively, Izuku just nodded, chuckling and leaning away.


“O-Oh, yeah? Um, thank you!”
During the length of his classmates chattering, Shōto had vaguely decided that he didn’t like that Uraraka was standing about as near to Izuku as he usually did, so he moved passed her until he was directly in front of Izuku, just shy of looking down his nose to meet the fond emerald gaze he’d so come to admire.

“O-Oh, hi m. I was, um, s-surprised to see that you were picked to take part in this!”

“As was I,” he hummed in agreement.

Smile just a tad wobbly, Izuku gave him a fierce look. “But you better give it your all! Don’t think for a second this is going to be easy.”

Brows raised, Shōto wondered what had gotten into him this morning. Since the private minute they’d had in the hallway, Izuku seemed… well, not like an entirely different person, but reenergized. Something had sparked within him, and it made his gaze keen, vibrant, and sharp as a blade. All of the things Shōto was learning that he loved most of all about Izuku. The things that dialed up the quirkless student’s—his boyfriend’s—convictions to their highest, most cogent degree, like there was an entire universe inside his eyes and heart, just itching to get out.

Eventually, after several silent seconds, Shōto answered his challenge.

“I have no doubts it will be difficult. But we’ll win. I’ll make sure of it.”

That made Izuku smile even wider, and Shōto would have congratulated himself if it wouldn’t have been off-putting for those around. Shōto could have laughed, recalling his father’s claim that they were going to hold each other back—he could not have been more wrong.

“Midoriya!” called Iida, appearing next to Uraraka with waving arm movements. It broke the momentary tension, which was, in Shōto’s opinion, minorly disappointing. “I appreciate your contributions to our education! Both our final and the practical course you’ve developed will help us to improve as students and heroes! But, we must all get changed quickly if we are to make it to the grounds in time.”

Shōto hadn’t really been listening until Izuku looked at him. He supposed Tsuyu was right in one sense, the suit did complement Izuku’s hair, but greens of his eyes looked extra sharp.

“Do you think Midnight would be willing to sell this?” Shōto asked, gesturing the outfit. “I would like to buy it for you.”

Izuku put his hands up and stepped away. “S-Shō! Don’t even think about it—that’s embarrassing… and, this is supposed to be something that helps, I don’t know, remind you guys that I designed this thinking ‘like a villain’! It’s, like, a costume!”

“We wear costumes all the time,” Shōto pointed out. “You could wear this all the time.”

Uraraka startled them both by putting her hands between them, and Shōto felt annoyed despite the fact that she was laughing.

“Pffft—Todoroki-kun, stop! You’re going to kill Deku.”

“W-What?!” Alarmed, he looked to Izuku, who was very red in the face but didn’t seem to be in poor health otherwise. “We need to take him to Recovery Girl then, I—”

“I didn’t mean literally,” she cut him off, and at the same time, Iida put each of his hands on Shōto’s shoulders from behind, pushing him out of the classroom, Tsuyu following close behind.
He tried to shrug Iida off, but the Class Representative stayed firm.

“Why are you pushing me?”

“Because, engaging in flirting in front of your peers is unprofessional, and we must change or else we will be late!”

“But—”

In unison, Uraraka, Iida and Tsuyu all said, “No buts!”

In all honesty, Shōto could not have told you with confidence how he even got to Ground Beta that day, though he must have managed to follow the others and change out of his uniform with some sense of basic functioning hardwired into his body.

He was walking to Ground Beta now, Kirishima and Iida making idle chat, and Shōto kept his arms crossed over his chest, in which his heart was beating with uncomfortable vigor.

What is wrong with me?

He had never expected love to be so uncomfortable, with as often as his chest hurt and his breath felt short. If it wasn’t the way that even Izuku’s most uncertain of smiles still seemed more genuine to Shōto than anyone else’s in the world, then it was the way he laughed with his whole body—eyes crinkling and nose turning up and hands grabbing his sides as he fought for air against his giggles. And if it wasn’t those things, it was the way he saw light in people who did not deserve it.

Shōto knew Izuku was those things, but it hadn’t been like this before. It was getting worse everyday. Or better, he supposed, but it felt like Izuku was becoming an increasing hazard for his health.

All he could think about was getting this day over with so he could kiss his boyfriend until he was out of breath, and then he would kiss him some more.

“Alright, listen up.” Aizawa called them to attention, and Shōto nearly stumbled back in surprise that they were already there. The girls and Aizawa-sensei were standing right in front of him and he hadn’t even realized. He looked around, unsure if he was disappointed or relieved that he didn’t spot Izuku anywhere.

It would probably help him to focus if he didn’t think about it, so Shōto clenched his jaw and forced himself to focus.

“Around the corner is the building for the IAE. You’ll notice there’s ‘law enforcement’ already on the premises.” Gesturing to some cardboard cut-outs of police and police cars, Aizawa’s lips thinned. “The crime is, as reported to you an on-going burglary of a distribution center for support items. The building is part-administrative office and part-storage and distribution for a large support item manufacturer, in which shipments come from the actual warehouses before being passed onto retailers. An employee hit a security panic button behind the front counter that contacted the police, but you haven’t spoken to anyone on the inside. You can assume there’s hostages since whoever hit the button never left the building, but you don’t know how many. That’s all that you know.”
I see… so the villain probably wants to steal the support items for resale on the black market?” Iida declared. “A distribution center would be less guarded than a warehouse, and more isolated than a retailer. Smart.”

“It was Deku who made this thing,” Uraraka reminded them with a cheeky grin. “He’s probably already thought of everything.”

Bakugō nostrils flared, but he didn’t say anything.

“Sensei, is there anything we know about the building? Or like, the neighborhood? Do we have to worry about pretend-evacuees?” Kirishima asked, poking his head out around the corner and glancing around.

“I won’t answer anymore questions besides this: assume that the police have a handle on everything going on outside of the building, so you can focus on what’s going on inside. You won’t have to block off pedestrians from wandering into the scene; you can assume the police have already done that.”

Shōto pursed his lips, stepping up beside Kirishima and counting the floors, windows, and features of the building that he could discern from the outside. It was fairly modern, the ground floor largely made by glass-paneled windows and an unassuming set of double doors jutting off onto the sidewalk. It was about three or four stories tall, and the masonry seemed on the newer side—or, at least, the architecture seemed to suggest something to that end.

Clearly irritated, Bakugō sat back against the opposite wall. “We need’a know how many villains and hostages there are. We can’t just storm the place. Round Face, go float up to that window and see if you can get any information.”

“But isn’t that dangerous?” Tsuyu asked with a frown, and Shōto nodded when she looked to him and Iida for reassurance.

“It seems like our best bet. With the building surrounded, the teach—” Iida stopped and cleared his throat. “The villains won’t be going anywhere. The most valuable thing to keep in mind is the more information we have before trying to intervene, the better.”

“Then let’s distract them,” Shōto suggested, glancing towards the building again. “There’s a sign on the front that has the business’s phone number. If it’s a hostage situation, they’ll likely have demands.”

Without wasting any time, he pulled his phone from his pocket and dialed the number on the front of the building.

“Who is this?! Is this the police?!” The voice made it rather obvious.

Covering the receiver, Shōto informed the others, “All Might’s playing a villain.”

“This is a Pro-Hero. Are you the one holding up this building?”

All Might chuckled. “I wonder about that.”

What is that supposed to mean?

Out of his periphery, Shōto watched as Uraraka stood back and took a deep, deep inhale, before releasing her own sense of gravity. Tsuyu gave her a gentle push on her back to send her in the proper direction, and she managed to navigate over what was hopefully the villain’s plain line of
He had to keep the villain talking, so he rambled off something that one of his father’s sidekicks might say in such a situation.

“Release the hostages, and you can tell me your demands.”

Uraraka touched down on the awning over the main entrance the girl let out a small sigh of relief before remembering to keep her posture low, creeping towards the window as the others all watched quietly.

“I only have one demand! I want all the police and Pro-Heroes to leave the scene. If you don’t follow my demands, then the hostages will get hurt.”

“Very well,” Shōto said. This was Heroics 101—get the villain to give you as much information by gaining their trust. He was actually starting to wonder if this was really Izuku’s IAE, it seemed too predictable. “But first, tell me about the hostages. Are there any injuries? We can leave the area, but we will want to send in medical personnel—”

“There’s no injuries, but there sure as hell will be if you keep taking your sweet time!”

The line went dead. Shōto pulled his phone back and furrowed his brow. “Well, that was rude.”

“What happened?” Kirishima asked, while from the balcony of the building Uraraka signaled to them—one villain, three hostages.

Shōto shrugged, approaching the corner and peering around, joined by Tsuyu and Iida. “All Might says there’s no injuries, but he’ll start hurting people if we don’t hurry.”

Reflexively, the three of them skirted backwards almost as soon as they had looked around the corner. Someone had approached the front windows—a huge, hulking figure, bulging in size and in muscles.

“All Might,” Iida whispered, informing the others. “It looks like he’s wearing the same mask he did that day we did rescue training.”

“He’s checking to see if we’ve left,” Shōto deduced.

At almost the same moment, Bakugō was storming forward. “Alright, we’ve got the info we needed, so let’s go.”

“Damnit,” Shōto muttered, and Kirishima managed to reach out and stop him. “Bakugō, hold on!”

After a brief kero, Tsuyu added, “I don’t like this…”

“And we only have forty-five minutes to do this fucking special course,” the blond spat, looking like he was thinking about ripping off Kirishima’s arm, but decided not to. “So unless you all like failing too, I suggest we get a fucking move-on.”

Kirishima chimed in, “We’re already down to 42 minutes…”

The suggestion made Shōto uneasy, but he couldn’t deny that they weren’t learning much out here. It just felt too simple. Gritting his teeth, he ultimately conceded, and Bakugō practically blasted his way right into the building—they certainly weren’t earning any points for stealth. The rest of them all jogged in after him, Iida taking up the rear. Once inside, Shōto did a quick survey of their
surroundings. Marble floors, dark trim on the desks and counters, smoke coiling from Bakugō’s explosions.

They had barely crossed the threshold when their assumptions started to fall apart.

The robbery was a front. Bakugō tried to rush All Might the moment the smoke began to clear, but there was no All Might to rush. As if from thin air, he’d vanished.

Iida approached the nearest hostage, Midnight, and untied her gag so she could speak. Disconcertingly, she was moving her head back and forth, as if trying to stop Iida from helping her.

Once her mouth was freed, her breaths coming in short bursts, she managed to sputter out—“A—*a trap! It’s a trap!”*

Not a second later, the quiet interior was violently shattered by an echo of horrible, screeching sounds. It was as if the entire building had undergone a complex gearshift, the ground shaking, the air ringing with a metallic and unpleasant symphony. The lights went out, but they took the sun with them—the glass windows turned black as night, metal crash-like doors sealing off the world. Before their eyes even had the opportunity to adjust, the lights came back on, but they were joined by a wailing alarm that filled the air, causing Tsuyu and Kirishima to double-over and cover their ears.

“Welcome, young heroes!”

All Might’s booming voice reverberated around the building.

“Now the test can really begin.”

**“SHOW YOUR FACE AND FIGHT ME!”**

Borderline cartoonish, All Might let out a stock-quality evil laugh. “Hahaha! I appreciate your spirit! But before you go blowing up the building or tearing down the walls, young Bakugō at least allow me to properly welcome you. After all, you’re the guests of the hour. Or, forty minutes, if you want to be exact. Now, after these forty-seven minutes pass, I’m sorry to say our time together will be over, because the building is set to explode.” Another laugh. “Just like young Bakugō’s quirk, in fact! How fitting. You see, young heroes, there was no robbery. It just made for a convenient means for you all to gather to die. Heroically, I might add. What better way is there to go than to trying to save people? The most plus ultra of endings!”

There was something about hearing All Might say those words with intentional sadism that made Shōto’s blood run cold. Judging by the looks on his peers’ faces, they were in much the same state.

“Best of luck to you all,” said the Number One Hero. “I daresay, you’ll need it.”

And then, his voice cut out, and that was it.

The following twenty seconds of silence were long and very uncomfortable. About five seconds into it, the screen at the front desk, which had been preemptively turned around to face them, illuminated with a numeric countdown. It was vaguely reminiscent of a classic countdown timer for a bomb, and it rather conveniently matched the amount of time they had left to pass the practical. Forty minutes to the tee.

Had Izuku really planned this to such meticulous detail? Or was that a coincidence? Shōto had a sinking suspicion it was the former.
This was Midoriya-chan’s plan? That’s… a bit scary.” Tsuyu finally spoke, approaching the doors from which they entered. “I don’t like the idea of doing what a ‘villain’ tells us to do, but these are seriously bolted down… Assuming he is telling the truth about the bomb, blowing these doors away would probably destabilize the building, kero.”

“So what do we do?” Uraraka said, voice a little pained.

Iida crossed his arms over his chest. “Well... we obviously can't die here... We should try to investigate what happened before we arrived. The hostages must know something if Midnight was able to tell it was a trap.”

One by one, they removed the gags and bondage from their teachers, helping them onto their feet. They were all wearing civilian clothes of different designs, presumably to amp up the reality of the situation.

“So, I’m not sure if you were all listen—” Uraraka began gently, but any further attempt to talk at a reasonable volume was quickly drowned out by the sound of Present Mic positively wailing.

“I can’t believe I’m going to DIE HERE OHHHH!! I’M SO SORRY MOMMA! I’M SORRY GOD!”

Alarmed, Iida began to wave his arms with haste. “Please, remain calm—! We know you are our teachers, but for the sake of this demonstration I would ask that you please remain quiet while I explain the situation!”

“Dude, stop!” Kirishima stepped between where Iida was looming over Present Mic, who was still partially bound and rolling around, sobbing and belligerent. He slightly lowered his voice, enough that Present Mic wouldn’t hear, but that the rest of the 1-A students did. “This isn’t class, these ‘people’ don’t know you! They’re afraid, they’ve just gone through something traumatic, and they just got told they’re stuck in a building with a bomb in it. We need to make them feel safe! Relax, loosen up.”

As if to demonstrate, the red-head walked over to Present Mic and gripped his shoulders, forcing him to meet his eye.

“Hey hey, relax. You’re going to be just fine. That’s why we’re here—to make sure the villain doesn’t get away with any of this. We won’t let you get hurt, okay?” He smiled, pointy teeth and all. “But you’ve got to stay calm, just take a deep breath. Yeah, like that! Be a rock, don’t let anyone decide how you get to feel! You got this, sensei—er—bro!”

Sniffling dramatically, Present Mic nodded his head up and down.

“Alright,” Kirishima stood back up to his full height, addressing the three adults. “Now that everyone is relaxed, can you please tell us what happened?”

“I—I don’t know!” Midnight was shaking. “It was so confusing, a-and it all happened so fast and —”

Uraraka squeezed her shoulders reassuring. “Hey, hey, deep breaths. Just try to tell us what you think happened. Start by who you are and why you’re here today.”

“R-Right... okay.” Their teacher reeled in her emotions and looked around at the troop of 1-A students. “Well. I am a clerk at the front desk.”

“I’m just a bystander, yo!” cut in Present Mic, looking like he might return to his earlier panicked-
sobbing at the drop of a hat. “I was supposed to meet someone out here, I’m trying to go wholesale with my sweet new merchandise and I got dragged into this mess!”

Ectoplasm, emotionless, shared, “I, too, am a bystander. I believe I was the last one inside before the incident began because I noticed the villain before he had done anything. He was very large and imposing, so he stood out.”

Iida cleared his throat, and, per Kirishima’s advice, tried to act a bit less stiff.

“So you all did see the robber enter, but he vanished as soon as we arrived? How?”

Ectoplasm shook his head. “No, it wasn’t like that. The man was just sort of looking around, and he was on the phone. When I went to move around him to attend to my own business, he got off the phone and approached the front desk, and then he just—pulled out a weapon. A knife of some kind. When he pointed it at the young lady here,” he paused, nodding towards Midnight, “I rushed to try to stop him but he got a solid hit on the side of my head, and I was dizzy for a time. I must have drifted, because I don’t really remember getting tied up.”

“Yeah!” Present Mic jumped in. “And after this scary dude got taken out, I knew I wasn’t gonna be any help so I just did what the villain said, which was to not move and not resist. Ain’t trying to get stabbed today, no sir.”

The picture of remorse, Midnight nodded along. “That’s right. He came up to the front desk and didn’t say a word, just immediately pulled a knife. I managed to hit the panic button while he forced these guys into restraints, but then he held the knife to my throat and he demanded that I tell him how to activate the security system. I was really confused, b-but I told him… because of the kind of support items we deal with here, we have federal grade security. Any attempt to enter the building through illegal means will trigger a complete lockdown. Like, erm… blasting through the front door…”

Veins were threatening to pop out of Bakugō’s forehead. “YOU GOT SOMETHING TO SAY TO ME?!”

“Ignore him,” Shōto advised.

Midnight warily nodded and continued. “After that, he forced me into restraints, too. But he set up these little devices all around, I think they were projectors, because right after you called he ran out the back they sort of, switched on?” While she explained, she approached one of the walls and indicated a small disc, no larger hand the palm of one’s hand, and pointed to a series of them down the walls.

“It was like a hologram! It looked so real, and he moved up to the window… I’m sorry I don’t know anything else, I was just so scared…”

Kirishima gave her an encouraging smile. “Hey, that’s okay! The important thing is that you’re safe, miss, you have no reason to be sorry!”

“So, All Might wanted to learn about the security system… probably to make sure he could effectively trap us inside,” Tsuuu said, pointer-finger pushed thoughtfully into the corner of her mouth. “And then he must have armed the bomb remotely after the lockdown went into effect, so we couldn’t force our way out.”

“So then, what should we do?” Kirishima said, brow furrowed. “Check if we can actively disarm the bomb? Or try to see if we can disable the lockdown?”
Uraraka held a hand to her chin, a doubtful hum in her tone. “Maybe that is the test? While it’s tempting to want to worry about All Might, we are probably supposed to focus on the hostages.”

“No,” Shōto said, lips pressed into a thin line. “I think that is exactly what Izuku would expect us to do, actually. I keep thinking… he said something while we watched the final exams together, and it’s sort of been stuck in my head. Exploiting weaknesses—that’s exactly what villains do, that was the whole point of pairing us up against teachers who could counter our powers. But he didn’t know which ones of us were going to be doing this when he planned it, so he must have designed it with the most fundamental of heroic principals in mind and expected us to fall into those: rescuing people who need our help.”

Clearly troubled, Kirishima’s mouth twisted into a grimace. “But that’s not really a weakness we can just overcome, man. That’s what heroes do!”

Frustrating though it may be, Kirishima was right. If they were going to have any chance to pass this, they still had to find a way to win without compromising on their morals.

Easier said than done.

“You failed,” Aizawa informed them, as if they didn’t already know.

They couldn’t disarm the bomb, but they did get the security system switched off and evacuated the hostages… only for All Might to appear on the roof of the building, gloating about how their actions had in fact made it possible for him to steal the support gear from the building’s vault. He had a sack slung over his shoulders and everything, giving them a friendly wave before taking off into the sky at breakneck speed.

So, they failed. Not terribly, mind you, but they had been irrefutably bested by All Might and Izuku’s careful planning. Later, he would learn that was very much the point—no matter which parts of the plan they tried to poke holes in, there was at least two other pillars that stood up to prevent the entire plan from failing. There was no way to catch All Might, save the hostages, disarm the bomb, and prevent the goods from being stolen—that was what Izuku had tried to accomplish. They were forced to make hard choices.

And in the end, Shōto wasn’t upset—in fact, he felt like they did a pretty good job, considering they had failed before they even really started. They walked into a trap that had an active bomb; had it not been a practical course designed to test them, they would all have been dead the moment the blast shields came down.

Izuku, visibly nervous, stepped out from behind Aizawa after their instructor had finished formally restating their failure.

Bakugō brushed passed him and said something too low for Shōto and the others to pick up on, but Izuku’s eyes widened and he glanced behind his shoulder as the blond stormed back towards the main part of campus.

Predictably, Izuku’s friends had closed ranks around him before Shōto could get close. He stifled a sigh.

“Deku! That was so unfair…!” Uraraka’s posture slumped once she was in front of him, her usually
cheery tone underpinned by a touch of something else. Disappointment, maybe. “I mean, I knew it was going to be hard… but did you have to make it that impossible?”

“Are you kidding?!” Izuku held both his hands up in front of himself, excited. Shōto noticed he was holding his notebook in one hand and a pen in the other. “Because of what it was, it was supposed to be impossible. The fact that you guys did so well—I mean, it was incredible to watch! Like you two—” His voice was starting to speed up. “Kirishima, Uraraka, you guys did an amazing job keeping a level head with the high-stress of the situation, your interactions with the hostages were, like, perfect. You kept them focused and calm while gathering information. And Tsuyu, you managed to provide a balancing, logical perspective, and it was thanks to you that they managed to access the security system in the first place! Oh and Iida, your idea to split up and search for the bomb was a really important step to using your time well, and the fact that you were able to adapt to Kirishima’s instructions on interacting with the hostages so quickly…” By then, Shōto had managed to squeeze his way beside Izuku. Green eyes gazed up at him, shimmering with triumph. “And S-Shō, the way you figured out early on that there was more to what was going on than what the villain was telling you? Using outside information is always allowed—in real life, your fights aren’t going to exist in a bubble, and if you have to use outside knowledge in order to win, that’s part of bringing experience to the table. The fact that you picked up on that, well, not hint exactly, but parallel with your finals, that was just, wow.”

He took a deep breath, for which he was long overdue, considering he’d not paused to breathe since he launched into his observations.

“If you’d all had more time, I have absolutely no doubt you would have been able to figure the whole thing out. It was amazing!”

A little flustered, Iida adjusted his glasses. “W-Well. You certainly did not make it easy on us. Your plan was thoroughly thought-out and deceptively complex. I applaud your ability to use villainous principals to your advantage by baiting us with hostages, but I am severely worried about our friendship now knowing that you have the capacity to be so cruel, Midoriya.”

“I-It wasn’t me being cruel!” Izuku let out a disbelieving laugh, covering his cheeks with his hands. “I didn’t even design this originally with the idea that p-people would actually do it, you know? I was just trying to make something that was going to really challenge any hero. It was just, like, a xanatos gambit superimposed onto suppression-evacuation-rescue heroism that was executed through an IAE. It’s not like I was actually the villain or that I would ever do anything like that!”

Almost pouting, Izuku looked to him as if to confirm—I wouldn’t do anything like that, would I? And Shōto couldn’t help but smile, the tendrils of admiration that had rooted themselves deep in his ribcage creeping up, tangling with his vocal chords, fondness slipping into every word. “Izuku, I think you’re forgetting that you’re smarter than all of us.”

Kirishima’s eyes were blown wide. “Yeah… you lost me at ‘challenge’... I mean, whatever that was, holy crap. It was, like, too good!”

“HAH!” a familiar voice boomed, belonging to the hero that dropped from the sky moments later. All Might towered over them, his smile near-blinding as he beheld the six of them. “Well done, all of you! I hope you kids didn’t get a bad impression of me after that—what a test! Don’t listen to my dear colleague, your performance was the farthest thing from failure. It was designed to test each and every one of you in different ways, and I couldn’t be more impressed!”

The other teachers, sans Aizawa, who was, Shōto noticed after a quick look around, curled up in his sleeping bag on the sidewalk, had come over when they saw All Might return.
“And of course, a special thank you to Young Midoriya for setting up such a challenge for us!”

“Thank you, All Might!” Izuku leapt in place. “I—I feel… a little overwhelmed, if I’m honest. I didn’t know what to expect when I proposed the idea to you, and you were so supportive… And so much of the credit goes to Ectoplasm-sensei for allowing me the flexibility to take on a project like this, and for being such an excellent teacher. And to see my— to see my friends working together and overcoming all the obstacles you threw at them. I—I guess I’m just—grateful.” Shōto raised a brow when Izuku’s face turned red, all eyes now on him. He ducked his head, avoiding any one person’s gaze. “I was so worried things weren’t going to work, and… thank you, everyone!”

Present Mic sniffled, loudly, and his voice sounded thick with tears. He threw an arm around Ectoplasm. “I want a Midoriya in my classroom!”

“Get your own,” Ectoplasm nudged his colleague jokingly, and he flashed Midoriya a scary-yet-reassuring grin. (It wasn’t really the man’s fault, his quirk just made his smile look particularly menacing.)

Privately, Shōto considered echoing the same sentiment—yes, as much as he loved listening to everyone acknowledge that Izuku was incredible, he also would also appreciate if he could be the one to have Izuku’s undivided attention.

Midnight had started to say something, and it took Shōto a minute to fix his attention back to the conversation.

“He does clean up well, doesn’t he?” she said, lips pursed. “Impossible to make look like a villain, though.”

“It’s the shoes,” Uraraka teased, but Iida argued, “It’s his demeanor in concert with his height!”

“Midnight, do you need this back? Would you be willing to sell it?” Shōto asked, gesturing the suit, which everyone found rather funny. Unphased, Shōto simply waited for Midnight’s answer.

“I don’t know how I feel about bartering with an Enji’s kid, I feel like he could get mad.” Midnight hummed.

“Even better,” Shōto urged. “My wallet is in the locker room. Name a price.”

Izuku hid his face in his hands and put up a feeble argument. “Noooooooooooo—no way! You are NOT buying this suit!”

After Shōto bought the suit, All Might said they were welcome to go home (Aizawa-sensei had to be hauled in his sleeping bag to his office by Present Mic), or they could elect to remain on the school grounds until their regularly scheduled dismissal.

Shōto, finding himself beneath a shaded patch of trees on the grounds, was more than happy to stay at school for a little while longer.

“And then,” Izuku was laid out in the grass beside him, skin decorated with little sunbeams that filtered their way through the overhead trees, and his hands were moving all over the place while he talked, words rapid-fire. “All Might told me that he would let me know the exact date range, but
it should be at the end of the month! Like, I think it’ll line up at almost the exact time your class is going to your training camp! It still feels unreal… I don’t know who I’m most excited to meet, to be honest. I feel like I have the most questions for Mandalay and Ragdoll, though, quirks like theirs are sort of rare. I mean, how does they work? Is it parallel processing, or do they just connect with someone and then it just opens a channel between them? I read that Mandalay’s limit is ten, but I wonder if that’s simultaneous, or if she can control which specific channel receives which specific information? Does she open pathways between people? And Ragdoll—how do all the people she ‘Searches’ get catalogued in her mind at the same time?"

When Izuku finally paused to breathe, Shōto used the opportunity to do his best to answer each of Izuku’s points one-by-one.

“I don’t know their group very well, but I have met them a handful of times. They’re all very… Hm.” He considered what exactly the Wild, Wild Pussycats were… besides, well, wild.

Truthfully, they were mostly the kind of Pro-Heroes that used to give Shōto headaches. High functioning, flashy, and eager to help whenever possible, their troop of four were all things lively and vibrant—things that Shōto was decidedly not.

When he failed to respond, Izuku blinked up at him, brows knit together. “Shōto?”

Shaking his head, Shōto cleared his throat. “T-They’re very much like you, actually. I think you’ll get along with them. They have a lot of energy, and I remember them smiling a lot. As for your speculation as to their quirks… I feel like they may be questions better posed to someone like Shinsō, but if I had to venture a guess, it’s probably a bit of both—parallel processing and unconscious pathways.” Pausing, the 1-A student lifted his right hand from the grass and flexed his fingertips, ice crystals forming over his knuckles. “I can’t speak for others, and I doubt my experience was a common one. Because of the way my quirk was… selectively developed, I’ve been trained in how to use it from the moment it manifested. The point where conscious use and unconscious reactions cross for me is a blurry one; I think it has less to do with choice and more with intention and instincts.”

Shōto halted his use of his right side, the ice fading from his fingertips in the midday warmth. To his left, he realized that Izuku was scrambling to get out his notebook, and, a little exasperated, said, “You know you don’t have to rush, right? I’m not going anywhere. I’ll answer any questions you have, whenever you have them.”

Sitting up, Izuku visibly swallowed on a lump in his throat before nodding. He didn’t say anything but managed an unsure smile, and Shōto considered how best to complete his train of thought.

“If I threw something at you, you would probably try to catch it or avoid it, depending on the circumstance. That’s an instinct. If you knew it was coming and wanted me to hit you with it… for some reason… you could make the choice to act against your instinct to defend yourself. That is how I feel like my quirk works, for me. It’s not so much parallel processing as it is just… another layer to your instincts. I don’t always make a conscious choice to do something involving my quirk, but I can. If I see an attack coming, I don’t necessarily think, I need to use my ice to defend myself, I just know I need to defend myself. When and if my reactions manifest through my quirk, it is usually just an extension of that basic line of thinking. The degree to which they are active and passive thoughts can vary.”

“Active and passive…” Izuku’s brow furrowed, focusing on a spot on the ground. “That’s… that’s a great way of thinking about it. And it makes so much sense! Thinking about a power as something that has to be activated, on and off, probably isn’t right—so that means, are our bodies constantly making up for their degrees of difference, and if they manifest like an instinct… but
what if? No, that makes sense, too… and then what about… yes, that would still apply!”

A little amused, Shōto waited while Izuku went through the motions. He noticed Izuku’s hands moving while he organized the overflow of his thoughts, and without really meaning to, reached over and grabbed one of them.

Izuku stopped mumbling immediately, shoulder’s tensing as he sputtered an apology. “S-Sorry! I didn’t—didn’t realize I was doing that… again.”

“It’s alright. Talking freely is hardly something that warrants an apology.”

A moment of quiet followed. There, in a place past where the sun could not fully reach; not quite alone, but not quite with company; not quite in the forest but neither in the city; Shōto could hear the faint rumble of cars, and the song of a breeze rustling the trees, and his own heartbeat. It was simple. Gentle, like the way a feather falls against gravity.

They held each other's gaze until Izuku looked away, down at their joined hands. The sound of a smile edged into his voice.

“It’s so strange… this whole weekend, I felt really bad, you know? I was worried that this thing with the villain and worrying my Mom, and then the news was making everything worse, and I thought I was going to have to leave Yūei, I was so scared that I would lose… everyone. And things with the school board aren’t fixed, and All Might and Principal Nezu both said things are going to be different if I’m going to stay here as a student… even though I know it’s not even close to being over yet, it feels so hard to be anything but happy.”

And in that moment, another piece of the puzzle Natuso had left him with fell into place.

You’re happy because they’re happy.

Yes. Very much so. The realization was a tremor that ran beneath his skin like lightning.

Izuku was still looking down, but Shōto could see that his cheeks were coated in a shy blush.

Do you have any idea how unhappy I used to be? Could you?

Tempted though he was to ask the questions that tipped his tongue, Shōto opted not to risk tarnishing the moment, could not bare to be responsible for taking away Izuku’s smile. Instead, he reached forward, a finger hooking beneath his chin, and nudged Izuku’s flushed features up so he could see him better. Shōto was unsurprised to find that, even when flustered, Izuku’s eyes still held their happy little twinkle, adoring when he leaned into Shōto’s touch.

Physical contact was something that Shōto was surprised to discover he enjoyed so much, but he found he couldn’t help himself when given the opportunity to hold Izuku’s face in his hands; because Izuku was smaller than him, it felt like he’d been entrusted to hold something precious just by cupping his freckled cheeks. He didn’t presume to mistake Izuku’s smallness for weakness, but the physical difference between them just sort of added to Shōto’s urge to be… affectionate.

It also didn’t hurt that most of the time, being close enough to Izuku to trail his thumb over his freckles, was the natural final step before Shōto could capture his lips in a kiss.

They had moved closer, both sitting up in the grass now, and if Shōto just moved forward a little more—

Izuku’s phone rang.
“C-Crap, sorry—!” Izuku awkwardly reached around his pockets in search of his phone, producing it after a minute and answering the call. “H-Hi, Detective Naomasa! You’re… o-oh, you’re here already? Sorry about that! I’ll, um, I’ll be right out… Okay, bye.”

Shōto sighed, getting to his feet and helping Izuku up in the process. “I would have preferred to take you on a date tonight, but I suppose tomorrow will do.”

“O-Oh yeah! Um, should I… bring different clothes? Are we going to leave right after the ceremony? I was just going to wear my uniform, but if I need to, I can bring a change of clothes…”

With a small smirk, Shōto pulled Izuku along, back to the proper path leading towards the gates so he didn’t leave Naomasa waiting.

“Yes, please bring something casual to change into after the closing ceremony.”

Izuku nodded and waved when they spotted the detective. With a quick glance around, Izuku leaned up and kissed his cheek before turning and sprinting the other way.

“Okaybyeseeyoutomorrowthankyouspendingtimewithmebye!!!”

Shōto barely blinked before he was gone, crawling into Naomasa’s cruiser and out of sight. His mouth pulled up into a proper smile, and waited for the car to be gone from sight before turning the other direction to begin his own commute home for the evening. There was a lightness in his chest that carried him all the way to the train station.

The closing ceremony for the first term was not a particularly lively event, at least by Yūiei standards. It was a formality at best, where all the classes gathered, the Principal said some niceties, and some secretary-or-other from the school board made an appearance. Uraraka, rolling up her cuffs and cracking her knuckles, had to be held back from going up to the woman before the ceremony started. (“I promise, I just want to talk!”).

Separated by class and rank, 1-C was near enough that Shōto could pick his boyfriend out of a crowd, but far enough away that it was irritating not being able to see him. Well, the reason he couldn’t actually see Izuku was because he was actively being blocked by a taller student in his class, but Shinsō was about the same height as Shōto so he was able to spot his purple mop of hair above the heads of other students. When it came to the two of them, if Shinsō was enduring the hardships of socializing, that meant Izuku was never far away.

For his own part, Shōto hadn’t slept very well the night before. It wasn’t unusual. It had been a familiar, if faded, nightmare, one that cropped up just regularly enough to be haunting, the memories scorched around the edges like a burnt polaroid. Tōya. His mother. Nothing new. It amounted to making him feel sleepy, and he nearly slipped into sleep a few times during the ceremony as a result. Shōto’s mind was wandering at every given opportunity, going back and forth between feeling too spent to really think about anything in particular and feeling excited to spend the day with Izuku.

Considering he had exactly zero experience, Shōto was actually feeling rather confident with the date he had planned for them that afternoon. It hadn’t really required much work on his part, to be fair: today marked the seventh day of the seventh month, which meant it was the beginning of the
Festival of Stars. Shōto wasn’t above taking advantage of good timing, and for the *Tanabata Matsuri* to conveniently fall on a Tuesday that year; the louder, more obnoxious parts of the festivities would hold off until the coming weekend, but there was always enough of a celebration on the seventh to make something of a modest matsuri. With any luck, it would be the right amount of fun without the weight of a metropolitan, congested nightmare hanging over their heads.

Uraraka and Yaoyorozu had given him a bit of a crash course on what was the sort of appropriate threshold of ‘date-like’ activities, and then Kirishima and Kaminari took turns critiquing their suggestions—all of which, Shōto should note, was advice bestowed upon him entirely unsolicited.

He wasn’t worried—he sort of had an unfair advantage going into this, after all. He had *Izuku*. Izuku, who had found a way of making a stay in the hospital pleasant with nothing but his smile and a deck of cards; Shōto didn’t want to tell his friends that their advice was wasted, necessarily, but he also knew that it didn’t matter what sort of activity he had planned for them.

Once the ceremony ended, the students were all swept up into crowds, and he decided it would be easier to text Izuku to meet him at the front gates. That way, they could both have the opportunity to change from their uniforms without trying to navigate through the immediate throngs of students.

Shōto must have moved quicker, as he waited near the front gates with no sign of his boyfriend in sight. Closing his eyes against the daylight, he rested his head against the wall and tried to wake himself up a little more.

One of his earliest memories had been of festival, and it was one of the only frames of reference he had for the subject, so the evening would be a bit of him relearning what exactly went on during these types of things. Thinking back to it now, Shōto must have been too young to clearly remember which particular matsuri that had been. He could recall that it had been cold, though, so it was unlikely that it had been *Tanabata*. Whatever the case, he, his Mom and Natsuo had gone somewhere in the afternoon and stayed out past nightfall, and at the end of the evening Shōto found himself on a rooftop terrace of some larger-than-life building overlooking an otherworldly image of Saitama prefecture. Fuyumi and Tōya had probably been there, too, but it had been such a long time ago now he could remember but only few details, and almost all of them were of the view.

They were so high up that he couldn’t see anything clearly; it was like gazing into an oil-paint rendering of the real world, brush strokes bold and unrefined. There had been something immutable and mystifying about that night, in the way Shōto remembered it—indeed, that may have been exactly why he remembered it in the first place. Paper lanterns adorned buildings and little vendor stalls, children and parents crowded the sidewalks as floats stampeded loudly by, and a large number of heroes had come to make public appearances, only adding to the fanfare. The whole experience had been stamped into his memory with a trademark of childlike wonder, conditioned to fit to a distinctive emotional roundness, making all the lights seem especially bright, the food especially tasty, and the people especially kind—much more than Shōto could have possibly known them to be.

He was told later that he fell asleep before the fireworks started, and he wasn’t able to be bothered to wake up for them. It didn’t really matter, anyway, as his Mom hadn’t taken them there for any of the colorful fanfare or even to really partake in the festival.

She had brought them there for the sky.

It was more breathtaking than any fireworks could have feigned to be. Maybe it *had* been *Tanabata*, because from such a heart-stopping height, and with his naive gaze, Shōto swore he
could have reached out and grabbed the stars themselves. How could it be possible that something so pretty, like snowflakes and stardust falling against a black ocean, were in fact suns and planets that existed thousands of lightyears away? He couldn’t understand it, his little world too small to know what to do with that information.

And from up there, each and every star had seemed so much brighter than normal. Closer, too, like he could just reach out and grab them; they were the same delicate color as his older sibling’s hair, and they sparkled a little, like Mom’s eyes when she laughed, but, no matter how many times he tried to reach up, he couldn’t close his hands around any of them. Not a single one.

Now, Shōto was older. He knew better.

But when he opened his eyes, standing at the gates of Yūei, Izuku was running to catch up to him from the front steps, smiling and waving the whole way.

And yes, Shōto was older, and he knew better, but he couldn’t help but think that, just maybe, after all of those years today would be the day he reached out, and the stars would finally reach back.

Breathless, Izuku asked, “Ready?”

It didn’t even matter where they were going or what they were doing anymore. If it was going to be with Izuku, Shōto knew his answer would always be the same.

“Yes.”

Chapter End Notes

happy thanksgiving!!!!!!!!!! once again im SO SORRY this took me so long... i rewrote the section with the hostages a million times and it kept dragging so I really wanted to try to speed this section up and ended up reworking a lot of it but... they're finally going on their date ok!!! more details on tanabata next chapter, along with what All Might has planned for Izuku's summer break. I'm thinking there's just goingt to be ONE more chapter before we hit I-Island, so bare with me!!!!!!!
	hank you so much for reading and following along, all of my love you to all!
PLUSSSSSSSSSS ULTRA!!!!!!!!!!! ( "∀´ " )
In which, Izuku and Shōto try their hand at this whole 'dating' thing.

(alternative summary: a shameless, self-indulgent 14k words of straight-up tododeku fluff. yeah.)

Standing before a wide thoroughfare that clamored with every sort of sensory experience imaginable, Izuku was having a difficult time figuring out what to even do with himself. Where to start? How?

So much was going on, he had to, by necessity, allow the world to fill in around him in fractures.

The sweet but unforgiving summer heat, intense and distinctly metropolitan. Troops of yukata-clad dancers and the sound of plucked shamisen. The excited jeers of children, the laughter of families, and the shouting of shopkeep’s attempting to peddle their wares. Overhead, an endless display of lanterns, adorned with crepe paper streamers, festive banners, wafting pennants and floral garlands. Splashes of color, the world was in its entirety a haphazard and chaotic dream. Otherworldly. Mystical, in the way tanzuka fluttered with the same breeze that tousled hair and chimed bells.

If the scene of *Tanabata* that afternoon had been a painting, then the artist had dipped their brush into the glittering ink of the stars themselves, giving life to a vibrant canvas that left no corner untouched. Musutafu had never seemed so bright. It made Izuku’s heart race, pulse jumping to catch up with the celebratory energy in the streets. Adrenaline ran all the way to his fingertips, caught in a high that he couldn’t quite explain. It was just the effect of a *matsuri*. Infectious, spontaneous, spirited—the streets surrounding Musutafu Porta had taken on a life of their own.

Absorbed as he was, Izuku jumped when cold fingers threaded together with his own. In his awe of the way the city had transformed for the festivities, he had all but forgotten that he wasn’t alone—more than that, he was on a date. With a rush of color flooding his cheeks, Izuku’s eyes darted to the side. Shoto’s right side was a shock to the system, chilly in spite of the sun and cloudless skies overhead.
Considering how he had been a nervous wreck on the train—he’d been far too keyed-up to hold much of a conversation—Izuku didn’t feel nearly as anxious as he expected. The fact he and Shōto were really—really going on a real date had come up faster than he would have thought possible; between writing and editing Mineta’s article for print, studying for finals, the almost-incident with that villain, watching the IAE, and attending the end of the semester ceremony, Izuku had been abiding to such an intense schedule for the past two weeks that it felt almost unreal to slow down for even a second. To take more than five minutes to do anything that wasn’t related to school or his other academic obligations would put him on-edge.

But just then, he wasn’t anxious. He wasn’t even really all that nervous—a little, sure, because this was Izuku Midoriya. It was just enough to have him restlessly eager, sporting an excited smile.

“Isn’t it all amazing, Shō? Everything is so colorful! I wonder if any Pro-Heros will make public appearances? Or if they’ll attend as civilians? I heard for Miyako Odori, Best Jeanist was there in a completely denim yukata. Oh, and look at how many tanzuka are already hung, geez, I don’t even know if we could fit ours’ anywhere? I didn’t even think about the fact it was Tanbata until you brought it up when we were on the train, so I should probably think of some wishes… I wonder if we’ll see anyone we know. I think the parade day on the weekend is more popular, but there’s a lot of people here even today! What do you think, Shōto?”

“It’s… loud.”

Izuku, amused, asked, “Well, yeah! Haven’t you been to a matsuri before?”

“Technically, yes.” Shōto scanned the surroundings with a blank expression. “But it was before my Mother was put in the hospital, so it was such a long time ago I don’t really remember much about them.”

“Oh, uh… welllll,” humming in slight embarrassment, Izuku scratched his cheek with his free hand. “I’m not exactly an expert at these myself. I didn’t really have a lot of friends before Yūei, so there wasn’t anyone to go with besides my Mom? And, well, Kacchan, but that was a long time ago. Anyway, since my Mom had to work a lot, we only came out to celebrate matsuri a few times after I stopped going with Kacchan, so… it’s not that I haven’t been to them, but this is the first time in awhile?”

“Oh.” Shōto was quiet for a moment, and Izuku watched him from the corner of his eye as he craned his head around to look at the overflowing displays. “Well, that changes things. I was hoping you would be able to take more of a lead on what to do… This may have been my idea but I don’t really remember much about them.”

An abashed, delighted laugh slipped past Izuku’s lips before he could stop himself, surprised to hear how simple but sweet Shōto’s plan for them had been. He tightened his hold on the cool-tipped fingers that made his own hand tingle before leading them towards one side of the walkways. “Hey, that’s alright. We’ll just have to learn how to do a proper matsuri together, okay?”

Izuku caught just a slight smile playing at Shōto’s lips when he glanced to the side. “Okay.”

Neither of them had eaten lunch, what with the lengthy closing ceremony and the forty-five minute train ride to get to Porta afterwards, so they both agreed rather quickly to begin with food.

“For the love of All Might…” Izuku gaped like a fish, ironically, at a stall of taiyaki, fish-shaped
pastries filled with sweet creams or pastes. “It all smells soooooo good! There’s crêpes over there too… and is that barbecue? Oh there’s kakigōri… and oh look—”

“We can get whatever you want,” Shōto said off-handedly, following behind Izuku and eyeing a yakisoba stall intently. “I’ll pay.”

“Oooh no you won’t,” he shot back with his best attempt at a glare, which managed to snap Shōto’s attention from the food stalls momentarily. “After that stunt you pulled with the suit when, I told you I did not need it, I’ll be paying for my own food today.”

That made Shōto frown. “That wasn’t really my fault. If the suit hadn’t looked so nice on you, I wouldn’t have been forced to buy it.”

“Forced,” Izuku scoffed, willing his cheeks not to flush and standing his ground. “Well, you still shouldn’t have done that, and I brought money, so,” Izuku stepped up to the booth for kakigōri and started to gather his yen, though the dramatic impact was sort of lessened since there were two people in front of him in line. “I’ll be getting us kakigōri, and that’s that.”

Perhaps a bit exasperated, Shōto got in the line with him and just shook his head. “Okay, but it would be rude of me to be the one to invite you out to something and expect you to pay for yourself. At least let me buy every other thing we find. Is that fair?”

Grinning at his victory, Izuku nodded. “Fair is fair. Now what flavor do you want?”

“Uh.” Shōto blinked at the sign listing all the combinations of shaved ice, syrups, and toppings. “Strawberry and milk.”

That was almost exactly what he ordered when they got bubble tea together, Izuku pointed out with a little laugh. “You really like strawberry, don’t you?”

“Yes,” Shōto hummed. “It’s a pretty universal flavor, so I can get it almost anywhere with any kind of dessert.”

Izuku quickly exchanged words and money with the vendor, and they stepped aside while their kakigōri was prepared. He, opting for variety, went with melon.

“Don’t you ever get bored of that? You should try something new once and awhile!”

“Izuku,” Shōto, deadpan, accepted his strawberry and milk shaved ice, utterly deadpan. “Everything about today is new to me. At least let me have this one familiar thing.”

Barely able to contain his giggles, Izuku thanked the stall vendor for their treats and exited the line. “Okay, okay! Is that why you picked this to do today? Because it was something new?” Together, they walked out, under, and between the giant paper displays, no longer holding hands so they could enjoy their shaved ice. The streets were flowing with pedestrians, but the hour was early and the day inconvenient enough for working-class people that it wasn’t overwhelming. The bustle of festival-goers lent itself to making the matsuri feel lively, but not crowded.

After a thoughtful moment, Shōto replied, “That was part of it, I suppose.”

He then proceeded to scoop up his kakigōri and popped a spoonful into his mouth, and, vaguely, Izuku recognized that it was deeply unfair that Shōto could do such mundane things as eating and walking and still look so heart-stoppingly pretty. Even observing him just, exist, was entirely too much for Izuku to bare privately, and after a few seconds of too-intent staring, he had to look away, throat tight and mouth dry; he took a big scoop of his own shaved ice to help himself calm down.
Shōto, evidently, did not notice any of Izuku’s internal struggling, and he continued to speak unphased.

“I also just thought you would enjoy it. You always have so much energy and you seem so happy. That’s the same way I remember festivals.” Conveniently, he had, at that same moment, passed beneath a shiny, almost cellophane-like banner that dazzled under the sunlight. All that was missing were some pastel bubbles, bishie sparkles, and perhaps some yuri for good measure, and he would have looked like something out of shojo manga. “It just made sense to bring someone like you to somewhere like this.”

It was matter-of-fact and sincere and sweet, and god he’s way too pretty what the heck—but before Izuku could even attempt to come up with some kind of sensical response, he—fell.

Tripped something in the street as a consequence of not looking where he was going.

Except, wait, the concrete didn’t rush up to meet him—he had stopped halfway down before gravity started to work in reverse, only adding to his vertigo, and just as quickly he was standing upright as if he’d been rewound in time.

“Izu? Are you okay?” The worried words traveled down his nape, and Izuku had to fight a chill at the accompanying breath of cold air.

It took him several long seconds to realize that Shōto, with his infallible reflexes, had caught him, which only served to fluster him more. His brain was doing laps in an effort to catch up with what happened. They were in a sort of backwards hug, one of Shōto’s arms swung around his middle and pinioning him upright, and Izuku could just barely feel the brush of the taller boy’s chin against his messy curls.

If he hadn’t been blushing before, then Izuku certainly was now. He could feel virtually every hard line of Shōto pressed up against him—and his arm was around Izuku’s midsection and—oh my god I’m going to pass out oh god he’s so warm is this heat stroke? Is this what death feels like? Death probably isn’t allowed to feel this good.

In a scrambled flurry of limbs and wheezing apologies, Izuku stood up on his own and put a healthy distance between them. “Oh, no, no, uh—I’m so sorry! You just surprised me and I wasn’t paying proper attention and then—I can’t even walk in a straight line, ugh, I’m sorry. Did your kakigōri spill at all?”

After doing a quick sweep of the surrounding area, Izuku came to miraculous conclusion that, somehow, neither of their frozen desserts were lost; he managed to keep a grip on his without dropping it and Shōto’s avoided splashing his shirt.

At first, Shōto didn’t say anything, and Izuku thought he was going to have to wallow in the awkward silence of another of his abject social failures, but after a beat or two, Shōto started to… laugh.

And what a sound it was.

Izuku wanted to glower for the sake of his own pride but found himself unable to hold even a pout, let alone hold a full grimace. It was like trying to be angry at snowfall; how dare it be so pretty and gentle and frustrating?!

“We’ve only been here for five minutes, Izuku—” Shōto snickered.
Embarrassed, Izuku covered his face with one hand, kakigōri in the other. “I know!”

“And you’ve already almost managed to injure yourself.”

“It’s not my fault,” he insisted, but he was too caught up laughing to really do much else.

His cheeks were bright pink, and he had a feeling that wasn’t going to be changing anytime soon. A special brand of euphoria had swept up in him, and Izuku could feel the tension he’d been storing in his shoulders slowly start to fade.

Just then, beneath a thousand streamers spanning a thousand more colors, during the course of a life where it felt like fate tried to wrong him at every opportunity, Izuku couldn’t help but think things had never felt so right.

It was almost easy to forget the promise he made to himself that morning, the one that’d he’d been avoiding thinking about all day.

_I have to tell him about Endeavor and school board before the day is over. I have to. He should know, and I don’t like him… not knowing._

Izuku didn’t want to keep this from Shōto—it felt too much like a lie, like he was hiding something without even really meaning to—but he didn’t even know how he would broach the subject of Endeavor let alone _what_ he would even say.

“Hey, Shōto! I know you and your Dad sort of don’t really like each other… at all… but I also think he’s trying to have me kicked out of our school and he might hate me at a personal level for opposing him directly when he tried to force me to write a story about forcing you to use your left-side and—”

Actually, you know what? Izuku could wait a little longer to bring it up.

Just a bit longer.

The afternoon proceeded in much the same fashion, the day arbored by an air of vibrant summer and shameless leisure. It didn’t take long for them both to abandon their task of trying to re-learn how to go about a proper matsuri; they were both too focused on learning about each other.

Conversation came to them easily. So easily, in fact, Izuku was convinced half the time that this was all just some wonderful, bizarre dream. In the real world, his days never go _this_ well. Everytime Shōto would answer one of his questions, Izuku found himself unconsciously holding his breath, waiting for some kind of disappointment, waiting for the other shoe to drop, waiting for Shōto to tell him that he talked too much or that he was annoying and high-strung or—or something. There was always a _but_, a stipulation, a ‘well, actually’ that, for Izuku, was as good as an eventuality.

But it never came. No catch. Shōto seemed just as engaged in the conversation as he did, no matter how mundane or complex the subject, trivial or abstract.

It took him well over an hour to notice that Shōto had taken to consciously positioning himself so that Izuku was always to his right, using his quirk to just barely cool the air to a more comfortable
temperature. He decided not to say anything about it since Shōto hadn’t brought it up himself, but
he certainly noticed.

The gesture was so simple, but when Izuku realized, it had struck him silent for almost a minute. It
was an act that was Shōto at its heart: quiet, considerate, unassuming. He’d never felt affection like
this before, and had certainly never wanted so badly to share it with someone else.

Izuku was certain this was the first time he’d ever felt something like this—he didn’t know how
love was supposed to feel, but this had to be it—the act of falling more and deeper with each
passing day. He had always imagined love was supposed to be something bigger than the sun and
all the stars, something dignified and impossible to understand—he never would have imagined it
could be this simple. That it was just, laughing and smiling so often that you forgot you were ever
alone, or jumping at the littlest brushes of their hand against yours, or being charmed by the way
their hair scattered in a breeze.

Shaking his head, Izuku tried not to let himself get too caught up in his thoughts. Overthinking
tended to land him into trouble, so he was doing his best just to focus on the present and enjoy their
time together.

They talked about a lot of things.

About anything. About everything.

And still, Izuku never ran out of questions, and Shōto never ran out of answers.

Shinsō would tease about how talking to Izuku was like the whole seven clicks or less game on
Wikipedia, except instead of seven clicks to get to Hitler, it would less than seven conversational
turns before he ended up talking about All Might.

He wasn’t wrong, necessarily… but Izuku also didn’t want to admit that he was right, either.

Izuku asked Shōto what it was like to have actual classes taught by All Might, ever-curious as to
how their educations differed across departments. At least half of 1-A and 1-B’s Heroics lessons
seemed dedicated to hands-on training, whereas Izuku and Shinsō only had “training” insofar as
their physical education course, which held very little difference than any other physical education
class you would find in a typical Japanese high school.

He could have spent his entire life just walking around Musutafu Porta like that, quizzing Shōto on
anything that came to mind, eating whatever sounded good, soaking in the sunshine, joking easily
and often. Izuku laughed so much his sides hurt; Shōto’s brand of humor took some getting used to,
but he had come to appreciate it more and more. Everything to Shōto was so serious, even jokes,
but it really suited him. His idea of being funny was asking Izuku if it would be in bad taste to buy
tanzuka for strangers so they could write mean things about Endeavor on them and hang them with
all the other wishes.

(As funny an idea as it was, Izuku wasn’t able condone it. Shōto seemed only minorly
disappointed.)

They talked about silly, unimportant things, too, like speculating as to why Hawks feathers were
red when he was born blond, which gave rise to Shōto conspiratorially suggesting that Hawks
might have a bird for one parent and a human for another. He had, evidently, a whole host of
theories about quirks and lineage that of which Izuku had a sense he was only scratching the
surface. They talked about the summer—summers past and the summer to come. For the both of
them to have come from such different walks of life, they shared some startling similarities in that
respect: both Izuku and Shōto had spent the larger part of their summers growing up alone, indoors, and with a twinge of envy for all of those kids running around outside.

Izuku’s experience wasn’t nearly as harrowing Shōto’s. At least his mother came home every night after work, and they would eat dinner together. Izuku had some friends intermittently, and he and Kacchan had played together for awhile before the news of his lack of a quirk drove them apart. For Izuku, the worst of it had never been missing his Mom during the days, but that of none of the friendships he managed to make would last longer than those other kids discovering his quirklessness. By comparison, Shōto’s upbringing sounded so lonely. It hurt Izuku’s heart to imagine how Endeavor’s idea of training and parenting sounded like they were indistinguishable—to think Shōto had literally been training since he could use his quirk, not even allowed to play with his own siblings… Izuku didn’t have any brothers or sisters, but his home had always been one filled overwhelmingly with love. His Mom never let having to work so much impact their relationship, and she was the most important person in his life as a result.

As the afternoon wore on, Izuku and Shōto had walked across the nearby bridge and found a place to sit beneath a canopy of trees in the Saitsuin Park—Izuku had set a timer on his phone for 15:30 to remind him to text his Mom and Detective Naomasa, and it had timed well with them walking by the area filled mostly by young families having picnics. They selected a semi-secluded, shaded spot and settled down in the grass, sated on festival food and pursuing random pop-up shops.

Izuku sent off the messages he had promised—reporting that he was safe, that nothing unusual had happened, no suspicious characters, et cetera.

Waiting for his Mom to reply (Detective Naomasa responded in record time to confirm he had received the message), Izuku lowered his phone and looked up, a question on the tip of his tongue, but he stopped before the words were even half-formed. Whatever errant curiosity had crossed his mind was forgotten with one look at the boy beside him.

As ever, his expression was inscrutable, gaze distant as he looked out towards one of the many waterways that carved Musutafu’s coastal border. From where Izuku was sitting, he had a perfect view of Shōto’s profile. His cheeks weren’t really rounded like Izuku’s, but they weren’t as angular as Iida’s—from the shape of his eyes to his sweeping, pale complexion, everything about him seemed smooth, so much that it was a little difficult to believe he was even real. Izuku traced the slope of Shōto’s nose and hard line of his jaw with his mind’s eye, features framed by hair the color of winter’s snow, highlighting the stormy grey of his right eye.

Shōto really was objectively pretty. Not just, like, pretty, but even the asymmetry of his features as manifested by his quirk were, somehow, perfectly symmetrical.

Thinking about that set off a twist of disquiet that tied his stomach into an increasingly tight series of knots the longer he sat and studied the aspiring hero beside him. There was just something… off about seeing him from one side; it created a genuinely incomplete vision of his whole person. There was no trace of crystal blue eye or accompanying scar, nor the fierce red hair he’d inherited as part of his paternal lineage; the half of himself that Shōto had resented for so long.

There’s almost no resemblance between him and Endeavor like this.

Unthinkingly, Izuku produced a few words, his observations taking shape in the form of a question.

“Hey, Shō?”

“Hm?”
“What is your Mom like?”

Sudden as a clap of thunder, Shōto’s head snapped to Izuku, his gaze just this side of intimidating and he almost immediately regretted asking. But, after just a few tense seconds, the ice behind his glare softened, and his responding words were the epitome of warmth.

“My mother…” His voice was twinged by pride and something softer—something difficult to explain, like the way sunshine feels on bare skin. “Well, she’s sensitive to temperature, and she prefers the cold, like Natsuo and Fuyumi to a lesser extent. She has what my father referred to as a weak constitution… but I don’t know if that’s really true. For someone who went through all that she did, I would not label her as weak. She has a gentle heart, and she’s more… fragile than she used to be as a result of her marriage to my father, but that hasn’t taken away her individuality. She still sees things for what they are and makes informed choices and judgments. She’s patient, kind, and forgiving. It’s sort of hard to explain… but she has a spirit to her that is much stronger than you would think by looking at her.”

As he listened, Izuku could feel his heart growing lighter. He’d never heard Shōto so open before. A gesture of trust, Shōto wasn’t just sharing something that was deeply personal, but it was also something that Izuku was almost certain no one else had ever heard before.

With just the smallest of twitches at the corner of his mouth, Shōto looked back out to the water. “In any event, I’m grateful that she is in my life again.”

“Thank you for telling me.” Izuku smiled in earnest. “I had always wondered what she was like, after the Sports Festival, but… that really explains a lot.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, I’ve only met your Dad, and he’s… well.” Izuku coughed and made a face, which earned him a chuckle from Shōto. “I didn’t know what to imagine when it came to your Mom, since the only thing you told me was… how you got your scar. I guess, I just wondered what kind of person she might be now? It’s not my business, sorry, it was just—I think about everything and I can’t help it. But now it makes so much sense! Of course she’s like that—she’s just like you.”

Izuku looked at him, beaming, but it felt like he’d missed a step going down the stairs when Shōto looked at him. It wasn’t hostile, exactly… but he also didn’t know what else to call it. He didn’t look angry, necessarily… just—intense?

“What?! No! I didn’t mean to sound like I was!” Anxious, Izuku began to backtrack, rambling in an effort to make amends. “Asking about this was probably inappropriate, I’m so sorry. I don’t know your Mom so I shouldn’t have said anything, I just—you’re—you’re not like Endeavor at all. When this all started, when I published that story about you… you seemed so angry? But all you did was—you talked to me and let me explain what happened and that was it. I-I mean, you were a little intimidating—but once we talked you were just… understanding. I didn’t expect you to forgive me, and you didn’t even have a good reason to, but you just… did. And then, getting to know you more and more has just been… it makes sense to hear about your Mom, because you had to get those qualities from somewhere, and it wasn’t Endeavor. You’re someone who’s forgiving, kind, observant, and that’s just like—”

At long last, he stopped talking, but only because Shōto had dragged him in and kissed the words right from his lips.
Izuku was frozen for a few mind-racing seconds, heart thudding loud in his ears before his eyelids fluttered closed. The last thing they’d both eaten was a strawberry \textit{wata-ame} (because it was the only flavor Shōto would agree to share), and the remnants of the spun sugar crystals left a confectionary, sticky-sweet taste where their mouths met. If that wasn’t dizzying enough, Shōto’s lips felt different, too, and it had taken Izuku completely by surprise. A kiss of fire and brimstone, his own instincts trilled at the sensation—there was an urgency, tender and hard-pressed both, burning the sensitive skin of Izuku’s lips, the heat just skirting the line of sufferable. Any more and it would have probably scorched his skin, was like sipping on tea that was too-hot but tasted far too-good to pace himself.

And while he was no masochist, at that moment, Izuku couldn’t help but hope that just maybe he would end up burned.

It had only lasted perhaps five seconds and was over almost twice as fast. Izuku inhaled sharply when Shōto pulled away.

“Sorry. I didn’t mean to interrupt you, I just—you took me off-guard, and I really wanted to kiss you.”

“D-Don’t apologize,” Izuku managed to find his voice, breathless though it was. “It was, um—hot?”

Brows raised, Shōto gave him a bemused look. “Thanks?”

It took Izuku a few thick-headed seconds to realize what he’d said. He started to wave his hands frantically between them.

“I—\textit{I didn’t mean it like that! Temperature! I was talking about temperature!!}”

“Oh. I didn’t realize… Are you okay? Did I hurt you?”

“N-No. It didn’t hurt, it sort of…” he lowered his head, staring defiantly at a particular blade of grass that looked like All Might’s hair. His cheeks were much now much hotter than his lips had been a few seconds ago, mortified. “I—uh, didn’t \textit{mind} it. Very much. A-At all.”

“Are you \textit{sure}?!” Even more intent than usual, Shōto reached a hand out and angled Izuku’s chin up so he could look at him. “I didn’t realize what I was doing and if you get hurt because I can’t control myself—”

From indignant to flustered in two seconds flat, Izuku didn’t know what to do with himself, wanted to wring his hands at how casually Shōto went from kissing him breathless to worrying about him.

“Shō, I’m \textit{fine},” Izuku insisted. “I do think your quirk was, um, \textit{reacting}… but it didn’t burn me. It was just, like, hot to the touch. Like if you left metal in the sun, almost?”

Shōto studied him for a moment longer, perhaps ensuring there were no signs of deception in his expression, only for Izuku’s phone to go off and cause them to flinch apart. His Mom finally responded to his message.

Hastily, Izuku reclaimed his personal bubble and pulled out his phone, reading through his Mom’s… rather embarrassing words of encouragement for their date, along with her relief that everything was going smoothly.

Izuku took his time responding, using the opportunity to breathe and try to calm his heart after—after \textit{whatever that was}. 
“Okay, my Mom says, er, hi. And that she said she wants me home by eight-thirty… with the villain threat and stuff, she doesn’t want us out very late. Sorry if that’s really early.”

“No, it makes sense. I think I’d feel better if you were home by then, too.”

Rolling his eyes, Izuku replied, “Don’t go and get all protective now, I already have All Might, Detective Naomasa and my Mom worrying over me!”

“I don’t think I can help it,” Shōto said bluntly, almost pouting. Izuku swore he could feel an arrow pierce him straight through the heart. “After what happened with the Hero Killer, and then the Nomu—you’re one of the most important people in my life. I would worry about your safety even if the incident with that villain hadn’t… almost happened.”

“O-Oh.”

Shōto’s special brand of honesty had, not for the first time, taken Izuku off-guard, and he could feel his gut twisting as a flood of memories from Hosu City washed over him in visceral snippets—the thick air of the alley, the taste of oxidized copper on the roof of his mouth, the mind numbing pain in his abdomen after the Nomu had almost taken off with him. The terrible, heartbreaking worry he could remember seeing in Shōto’s mismatched gaze after running to make sure Izuku was okay after the Hero Killer was finally stopped.

With a little sigh, Shōto added, “And besides, you could probably afford more people worrying over you rather than the alternative. You seem to have a way of ending up in troubling situations, you know.”

“Pfft—” Izuku covered his mouth with the back of his hand, stifling a laugh. “Really? I never noticed. It’s not like I have the worst luck in the history of the world.”

“The worst luck? Really?” Shōto raised a brow. “Am I that bad of a date?”

Shaking his head, Izuku laughed as he pulled himself to his feet. He stood up, brushed himself off, and offered Shōto a hand. “You know I don’t mean it like that. Now come on, let’s go hang our tanzuta before it gets dark.”

There existed a wealth of lore that wove the mystic tale of Tanabata, of which Shōto was, admittedly, only vaguely familiar. He knew the basic story of the holiday: Orihime, weaver and daughter of the god of the sky (or maybe it was the sun?), and a cow herder, Hikoboshi, fall so in love with each other they both began to neglect their responsibilities. As punishment for their negligence, Orhime’s father separated them and forced them to spend all year separated to focus on their duties, but for a single day—the seventh day of the seventh month—during which they would cross the stars to be together, hence the sort of romantic-sounding name for the holiday. There was more to it, about wishes and rainfall, tying into a sadder side to the story, too, but it wasn’t a holiday his family particularly observed so the deeper spiritual meanings were lost to him. Shōto knew that some shrines would even advise on what color tanzuta were supposed to represent which type of wish, all of it tying back into gogyo setsu, but that seemed to be a tradition that was obsolete in the modern context of Musutafu. The tanzuta were, at least, hung on the conventional sasatake, rows upon rows of towering bamboo all decorated with a kaleidoscopic crowns of paper wishes, criss-crossed between the large paper displays that extended down the main drag of the
When they approached one of the booths selling *tanzuka* for 200 ¥ a piece, Shōto asked if Izuku knew how many he wanted; he was adamant that this was at least one aspect of the date for which he would pay.

“Hmm… well, I guess I’d go off I remember of what me and my Mom used to do. We would write a wish for my Dad, that he was safe overseas, for good fortune in health, and then my Mom and I would always put up an individual wish, something for ourselves, you know? I, um, always made silly wishes though, like wanting to be a great hero like All Might someday. Heh.” He paused for a moment, scratching his cheek shyly. “So uh, anyway, I guess I’ll do three again?”

Three seemed like a reasonable amount, so Shōto bought six total and they walked over to one of the tables filled with markers and pens for public use. Izuku picked up a marker and immediately started to work on his, but Shōto hesitated, not really sure where to begin.

For a task so simple, it felt unusually daunting. What sort of things would he wish for? Shōto had never really thought about the world in those terms. Setting *goals* and making *wishes* weren’t really the same thing. He’d been born and bred with expectations that he could—indeed, that he would—achieve greatness. Wishes were like… *dreams*. Abstract.

Unsure, he considered Izuku’s earlier examples and decided to expand from those basics.

One for his Mom. *I want my mother to be able to enjoy all the happiness she deserves outside of that hospital.*

One for his family. *I want my siblings to live healthy and fulfilling lives.*

One for… himself…

…

“Izuku,” Shōto raised his head, brow furrowed. The green-haired boy was not yet finished with his own *tanzuka*, which Shōto found surprising considering he had started first. “What are you going to wish for for yourself?”

“Hmm,” Izuku rubbed his chin, but kept his gaze down at his poised marker, unmoving over his last *tanzuka*. “That’s actually what I was just stuck on. It feels weird thinking of something I want… I mean, I know what I want to achieve but this feels different, somehow?”

“I was having the same problem,” Shōto agreed, surprised by Izuku’s response.

His head shot up, a wide smile on his face as he blinked rapidly at Shōto, like he’d suddenly been struck with a memory.

“Oh! That gives me an idea!” His eyes were alight with excitement. “The first ones were probably easier because it’s natural to want to wish good things for others! But we’re having a hard time making a wish for ourselves, even if we both *should* get a wish… so let’s wish for each other, okay? You wish something for me and I’ll wish something for you—it’ll even out that way!”

Shōto didn’t mind that idea, a mild smile on his face as he observed Izuku’s enthusiasm. “Okay.”

…Except, after another three minutes, he was having the opposite problem. How could he come up with a wish that could contain everything that Izuku desired? Shōto couldn’t even scratch the surface of all the things he could wish on his behalf; good fortune in his writing and academic
goals, happiness greater than the number of stars in the sky, health and safety from villains, to make sure he smiled every single day—how could he possible condense everything down into a single strip of paper? Maybe he should buy more *tanzuta*?

Lips pursed, Shōto recognized that getting up and handing *all* of his money over to the old woman at the booth would probably seem strange, so he settled on just the one.

He just hoped his wish was encompassing enough.

With their final *tanzuka* written, he stood up, and they walked around to find a spot to hang theirs’ amongst the already-crowded displays. Once they both found places with enough room to squeeze in their own messages, a volunteer offered to help hang them high up amongst the others. To that end, he revealed that he had limb-stretching quirk, which prompted Izuku to pull out his notebook and ask the young man a dozen or so questions while he hung their *tanzuka*, who seemed surprised but eager to indulge Izuku’s curiosity. Shōto thought he seemed friendly enough, and he let his attention wander from their chit-chat for a moment.

As a habit, his eyes were trained to scan the crowds for anything or anyone suspicious. It was unlikely someone would try to hurt Izuku in such a public place, but villains could strike at anytime for any reason, and Shōto was not one to let his guard down.

The familiar sound of Izuku’s excitement beside him returned him to the present conversation.

“That’s so cool, Nobito-san!” Evidently, he had learned the volunteer’s name during the Q&A. “So then, is the limit of your stretching shared across your limbs, or can each of them…”

Actually, now that Shōto was paying attention, he couldn’t help but notice that the way Nobito-san was leaning over Izuku’s shoulder to point at his notebook was rather unnecessary. Their cheeks were practically touching, and the guy didn’t really seem to even be looking at the notebook, his dark eyes were much more intent on—

“Izuku,” Shōto clenched his jaw while placing an arm around the shorter boy’s waist and pulled him in—away from the intrusive presence on his other side. “We should probably go, other people may need Nobito-san’s help, and we wouldn’t want to hold him up.”

“W-wah?” Izuku seemed a little overwhelmed for a moment before shaking his head and closing his journal. “O-Oh, of course. I can finish writing out the rest of my notes later, so sorry to have bothered you, Nobito-san! Please excuse us, and thank you for all your help!”

With a quick smile, Izuku crossed his arms and notebook over his chest and bowed politely before Shōto began to move them along in the other direction.

(If he had reserved a glare for Nobito-san while they walked away, well—Izuku didn’t really need to know.)

Shōto had planned for them to stay around Musutafu Porta until six thirty, which was crawling up close rather fast now. They had only another hour to spend before the car he’d requested would arrive at the the pick-up point a few blocks west. Izuku had suggested they try to make their way towards a particular stationary store he had heard about on the outskirts of the Porta, recommended to him by Nejire, who had turned her nose up at the poor state of his *Hero Analysis Journals*. 
“It is pretty beat up,” Shōto mentioned as they made their way towards the store, “we could get you a new one while we’re there.”

Izuku hummed. “Mmm, maybe, but I think I like it the way it is. The burns and water stains and stuff adds personality.”

“It’s… paper.” Shōto glanced warily at the journal in his hands, still open from the fresh notes he’d finished on that overly-friendly volunteer. “How does it have a personality?”

“Not, like, personality-personality. I meant, it makes it unique!” Izuku dropped the pen he’d been using into the margins of his notebook and held out his right hand. “Like the scarring on my hand. It kind of makes my hand look weird, but I like it. It makes me think of the good things I did earning those scars!”

Shōto smirked, almost exasperated with Izuku’s uncanny ability to make even some of the worst things into points of pride. He had given Izuku some of those scars, and the last thing he felt was pleased about it, but Izuku was happy to remember earning them? It was at the expense of Shōto’s own stubbornness, blinded as he had been by a bitter history, and then their run-in with the Hero Killer that had led to Izuku’s hand’s permanent disfigurement.

“And besides, getting a new notebook would… w-would…” Izuku had started to say something else, but he’d stopped moving, turning his head as if someone had called his name. Shōto, confused, followed his gaze across the sidewalk to a building on the corner, fronted by a color-block wonder of a store.

“Izuku?” Shōto prompted when people started to walk around them; they were blocking part of the sidewalk. “Did you want to go in there?”

He made a little meep of a sound, looking back and forth between Shōto and the store. “I—well—the stationary store—and that’s—I don’t need to it’s fine!”

Raising a brow, Shōto looked closer and read the name of the store—ah. Benelic. It was a name Shōto had heard on occasion, as it acted as a proprietary seller for all the major toy manufacturers. Most notably, they sold the Pro-Hero’s Ultimate brand, the producers the premier action figure lines for the Pro’s. They were the only officially licensed seller to use the brands of all the big name heroes. There were lots of other brands that had the licensure to different heroes—there weren’t exactly non-compete clauses when it came to promoting images of peace and justice—but Pro-Hero Ultimate became well-known amongst collectors for the yearly updates of the top ten heroes list, down to the details of updating costumes and even battle scars.

It was, as far as Shōto knew, the only one his father took any part in. Not by choice, but it was part of building the image of a hero.

Benelic also hosted Acorn Republic with their mountains of Ghibli merchandise, and still others like video game developers like officially licensed Nintendo and Pokemon products.

“We can go in if you want,” Shōto said, barely resisting the urge to laugh. It was rather obvious now what had sparked Izuku’s interest. There was a huge—indeed, life-sized—cut-out of All Might in front of the glass windows, advertising the launch of a new line of action figures that were, coincidentally, modeled after the way he dressed as a teacher at Yūei. Shōto could recognize that weird, yellow pinstripe suit from a mile away.

Looking adorably frustrated, Izuku pouted, his resistance visibly crumbling. Shōto didn’t mind if Izuku wanted to go in; indeed, he’d prefer they do something that Izuku was excited about rather
than just walk around to pass the time.

“You could get one of the new models and I bet All Might would sign it for you,” Shōto pointed out, and that must have been the tipping point because Izuku jumped up, grabbed Shōto’s hand, and broke into a full-on run towards the front doors.

“Oh okay fine but I’ll only take a minute I promise thank you thank you thank you!”

Unable to help himself, Shōto laughed in surprise as he was tugged along at full-speed, allowing Izuku to snake them through the other festival-goers. They were all walking along the outer streets of the matsuri at a respectable pace and seemed more than a little concerned about the two teenagers running by at breakneck speed.

The store was two floors, filled mostly by children and exasperated-looking adults. On the first floor, there was a huge and intricate display featuring the top ten heroes, and Shōto let Izuku go ransack the All Might display on his own; as much as he respected the Symbol of Peace, Shōto had never really been one for collectibles. He was perfectly content watching from the side as Izuku stood amongst children that were at least 20 centimeters shorter than him and pulled down an All Might figure from a shelf, hugging the box to his chest. He looked not unlike a child on Christmas.

“Whoa! Is that the All Might keychain from the Golden Age: Go Beyond line?! I thought it was a promotional exclusive?” a bespeckled girl asked, tugging on Izuku’s arm and gesturing his bookbag.

“It is! My mom got it for me when I was in the hospital!” Izuku beamed, turning his bookbag around to better show-off the aforementioned accessory. It was the same one he had accidentally texted Shōto about weeks ago, and it sparked the attention of the kids around him, all of them clambering to ask if they could see Izuku’s keychain. Shōto still didn’t really get why it was such a big deal, but Izuku and at least eight children could tell it wasn’t just any keychain, taking their turns ooh’ing and ahh’ing.

“How did your Mom get one?!”

“She had to go all the way into the Yamanashi prefecture. There’s a speciality store there that always gets these limited edition items!”

“Do you have the other Golden Age: Go Beyond figures? I begged my older brother to get me the Dragon Hero: Ryukyu’s new model but he said Wash was cooler. Can you believe that? Wash?!”

“Well, Wash does have a pretty unique quirk! But I think Ryukyu’s is more versatile, so I can understand why you like her. Maybe you can ask for a Ryukyu figure for a holiday, or you could save up money and buy your own!”

“Do you go to Yūei?”

“Do you know All Might?”

“Is he a good teacher?”

In hindsight, Shōto probably shouldn’t have found the whole thing to be so painstakingly cute, but watching Izuku interact with children did something funny to his heart, forced him to look away out of concern for his own health. It was so sweet it actually made him ache.

While Izuku was preoccupied, Shōto decided that he promptly needed to get a grip and opted to browse the other figurines. There were a surprising amount of kids gathered around his father’s
display, which Shōto couldn’t help but find deeply ironic; Endeavor had never exactly liked children.

Driven by some kind of morbid curiosity, Shōto picked up one of the figures and studied his father’s familiar scowl.

Well, the designers certainly deserve credit for accuracy.

Endeavor knew how to manage media attention, but he didn’t voluntarily partake in anything promotional. It was, perhaps, why people could remain mystified by the idea of the Flame Hero when he was such an entirely awful person. To most people, Shōto’s father was opaque, an unknown. A larger than life hero with a rather flashy, obvious, quirk. But he never made public appearances for the sake of them, didn’t volunteer information about himself or the rest of their family, and made it a point to avoid interviews whenever possible. Seeing his likeness in the shape of any sort of merchandise was in rare form, and this particular partnership had only managed to get the licensure rights to his father’s brand through pressure from the other top agencies—it doesn’t make for much of an Exclusive Top Ten Figures collection if the number two spot was empty, after all.

Just as Shōto began to set the box down, a shrill voice to his left cut above the general din of the store.

“Oh my god, is that—? You’re Shōto Todoroki!” chirped a girl with cat-like eyes and olive-toned skin. She was with another girl, and the pair of them were probably just a little bit younger than he and Izuku—maybe twelve or thirteen? It wasn’t exactly clear if they were talking to each other or addressing him, but he didn’t really want to make a scene and he started to walk away without a word.

Shōto cringed when her friend squealed, which drew even more attention even if he was getting further away. “From the Yūei Sports Festival! It really is him—I’m such a huge fan! Wait, Todoroki-san! Can I get a selfie with you?”

More eyes and voices followed him, and he was suddenly very aware that he didn’t know where Izuku was anymore. He wasn’t near the All Might display, and those girls were coming up to him, and he really just wanted to get back to his date.

“Please, Todoroki-san!”

Thoroughly frustrated, he considered harshly dismissing them both—it took very few people to turn from casual fans to being harassed by a dozen people, and he was in no mood for that today—but he didn’t have the chance before Izuku had appeared between them.

“Hi there! Are you guys fans of Shōto’s? That’s so nice of you!” There was a certain edge to his voice that was unfamiliar to Shōto. “Why don’t we all go outside where the lighting is better and I can take that picture for you guys!”

“Oh my god, you’re Deku! So are you guys—is this a date—oh my god, oh my god—!”

“Erm, yep, that’s me. Here, this way—”

Less than a minute passed and they were all out of the store, and they managed to lose any of the other wandering eyes that had fallen on them in the confines of the store.

Shōto found the whole thing supremely unnecessary, but he didn’t complain as Izuku accepted one of the girl’s cell phones and quickly snapped the pictured they’d asked for.
They took turns bowing and thanking them before disappearing into the crowds, little shocked sounds of delight following them even as they disappeared from view.

Izuku had a noticeably large, rectangular box added to the shape of his backpack, so Shōto suspected he finished his purchase and there wasn’t any reason to go back in the store.

“Why did you offer to take that picture for them? It’s not like I minded, not really, but I also don’t usually… take pictures with strangers.”

“O-Oh… well, um.” Izuku scratched the back of his head, ears turning red. “I guess they just reminded me of, well… me? I probably should’ve asked you, I’m sorry. I just felt like I had been there before, seeing a hero you really admire up close… they were clearly really nervous to talk to you, and if had been me, it would have just… meant a lot. It took everything in me to talk to All Might for the first time, and all of that for him to tell me…”

There was a soft pause in Izuku’s voice, and his gaze went slightly unfocused, far away from the streets of downtown Musutafu for a moment.

“Izuku?”

“O-Oh, uh, sorry. It doesn’t matter now haha. But yeah. I just felt for them… Plus I figured it’d be easier to just take the one picture and get out of there quickly instead of drawing a crowd, so I just sort of, acted quickly? I hope you didn’t mind too much.”

“No,” Shōto wore a small smile in response to Izuku’s sincerity. “I didn’t mind.”

After a final stop by the food vendors to get some cold teas to help combat the heat of the setting summer sun, Shōto and Izuku started walking west, towards the waypoint that he had requested for their ride. Unlike the time they ran into each other at Takadanobaba station, since he had time to plan ahead for this, Shōto just sent for a car to take them home in favor of relying on a rideshare or to bother with the trains.

“I grabbed that map from the information desk like you asked,” Izuku said, patting the side of his bookbag while they waited. “I hope it’ll get dark enough that we’ll actually be able to see things, though… I’ve never done this part of Tanabata before. Where are we going, again?”

Before he could answer, Shōto spotted a dark sedan pull around the corner, and they climbed into the backseat when it parked neatly in front of them. The driver was an older man, perhaps around the age of his father, and Shōto recognized him as the man that usually acted as Endeavor’s primary chauffeur; Shōto had to resist the urge to roll his eyes. He would not put it past his old man to have asked the driver to keep tabs on them.

“Hello!” Izuku greeted, something Shōto had not done, ever, upon getting in one of his father’s cars. The man looked almost as bewildered as Shōto was amused. “Thank you for picking us up! The traffic must have been bad because of the festival, but we really appreciate it!”

“Er… you’re… welcome. To Tsubomi, Shōto-sama?”

“Yes,” Shōto answered, and he glanced to his right, where Izuku, visibly curious, had tilted his head to one side and was gripping his seatbelt with both hands.
“Tsubomi? Why does that sound familiar?”

“It’s a real estate company,” Shōto answered with a shrug. “Apparently there is a nice view there. I can’t vouch for it myself, but my sister mentioned it and it sounded like it might be nice.”

Immediately, Izuku’s eyes brightened, shifting from emerald to polished jade in less than a second. “Oh, okay then! That was very kind of your sister.”

*Kind?* Shōto’s lips twisted into a frown. That was certainly one word for it.

Really, it had been more like harassment, dealing with her poking and prodding and drilling Shōto for information over the weekend about what they would be doing for their date. It was hard to know who was worse in that respect, her or Uraraka, as they both had vested interests in getting on Shōto’s nerves for one reason or another.

He decided to keep that thought to himself.

“Yes. It was… *kind* of her.”

Riding in the car permitted that they travelled quickly, so the drive to Tsubomi took only about fifteen minutes. He and Izuku talked a bit on the way, but for the most part, they just sat in comfortable silence. Their destination wasn’t far from Shōto’s neighborhood, although his home was more inland, and the world darkened in increasing degrees while they headed to their final stop of the night. Street lamps came to life as the burnished-red outlines of sunset began to creep further over the horizon, and Shōto realized with a quick glance to his side that—*wow*, the sunkissed glow of twilight really brought out the freckles of Izuku’s cheeks. Too bad for the presence of their driver; he would have liked to try his own hand at kissing them one-by-one. Eight wasn’t that many, Shōto guessed he could do it in less than a minute if Izuku would sit still. Now that he was thinking about it, he was even able to imagine it, down to what he was sure would be Izuku’s giggly, flustered reaction.

It only made it sound more tempting, if he were being honest.

The light also showed off the few freckles that trailed down his neck, usually harder to see with his school shirt and collared jacket.

Frankly, Shōto wouldn’t mind kissing those, either.

“We’re here. I will await your return, Shōto-sama, and um…?”

“Izuku Midoriya! Thank you again for this, sir,” Izuku gave an excited little jump as he began to unfasten his seatbelt, turning to Shōto. “I don’t really know this place, so you lead the way!”

As they stepped out of the car, almost immediately, Shōto was hit with the sting of salty breeze, and he involuntarily took in a deep breath of the warm seaside air, calm and far-reaching as it settled within him. They were in the empty parking lot of a three-story building that was, from a cursory look, almost entirely made of dark glass, reflecting the dusk that had settled deep into the surfaces of Musutafu, just this side of illuminate. In another twenty minutes, the world would be dark; but right now, it was, at least, picturesque. Cast in bronze, dripping with tones of sepia, Shōto couldn’t fault his sister’s recommendation. The place was beautiful, and remarkably quiet.

Izuku eventually floated around the car to join him on the other side, and Shōto led them towards the front of the office building which backed up into a tiny coastal stretch of beach and a pier. “Where *is* this place? Are we even still is Musutafu?”
“Yes, but this is primarily an industrial peninsula, so it doesn’t usually permit access from the public. Tsubomi just happens to have their corporate office here as a sort of exclusive selling point, I guess.”

“W-Wait, are we allowed to be here?!?”

Shōto smirked, looking at Izuku from the corner of his eye. “My old man has a lot of connections, and I’m not above exploiting a few of them for special occasions.”

“O-Oh,” Izuku’s voice was faint, unheard by Shōto as he, at the same time, pulled out his phone to recover the instructions his sister had given him. There was supposedly roof access, if he used the door code and they followed the steps his sister left for him.

As they passed the small stretch of parking lot that led into the sands, however, Izuku stopped following.

“Wow… This place is so pretty. I thought the only beach around here was The Dagobah beach park, and that’s been awful for so long, but this is… I didn’t know Musutafu even had a place like this.”

Shōto found himself backtracking to stand beside Izuku at the gate wedged into the sandlind.

“It is an amazing view,” Shōto agreed with a hum. “Though I’m not familiar with the other beach, Dagobah…? W-Wait, what are you doing?”

He stopped when Izuku shrugged off his bookbag and knelt to untie his laces.

Confused, he looked back up at Shōto and said, “Taking off my shoes so I can put my feet in the water?”

“But… then your feet will get wet.”

Izuku laughed, leaving his shoes and socks behind and calling over his shoulder as he rushed towards the bay. “That’s the point! It’s—ooh it’s warm!”

After dipping in just the tip of his toes, he waded into the waters up to his ankles, tides rushing around him and leaving a trail of spume in its wake. Izuku twisted in place, looking back at Shōto with a glowing smile; the pollen of starlight and dusk had mixed together in a sleepy, almost dreamlike lighting, catching in the color of Izuku’s eyes with such abrupt affection that it actually made Shōto’s mind go blank.

“Aren’t you coming? The view of the stars from here is perfect, just like you said!”

Shōto blinked once, and then a second time for good measure. This was—wait. This was not what he had intended. They were supposed to go on the roof to get a better view, not the beach. He was about to point out as much, but a little twinge caused the words to catch his throat—no way could Shōto be responsible for dashing the spirit from Izuku’s smile.

Honestly, with that look on his face, he could have asked Shōto if he would help him hide a body and he’d already be on Amazon ordering bleach and shovels for two-hour delivery.

Letting out a breath he hadn’t realized he was holding, Shōto eventually joined him in taking off his shoes and cuffing his jeans to keep them from getting soaked. The water rushed up to greet him, and Izuku held out a hand once Shōto was in to his ankles too.
For all the light pollution to their backs, the darkness stretching out into the bay created enough contrast to turn the sky into a black backdrop decorated with and endless stretch of stars, like polaroid snowfall. Frozen, ephemerally beautiful. It was the culmination of a peaceful place between nature and civilization, with the hum of the city to their backs and the steady brush of the sea beyond.

“It’s nice, isn’t it?” Izuku asked after a few minutes of letting the silence take form and lay down gentle roots in their memories.

Shōto didn’t think nice even began to capture how lovely it was, but he nodded all the same.

“All right, let’s give this stargazing thing a shot…” Izuku decided with a small sigh, sticking his tongue out as he focused on recovering the map from his pockets. He produced the pamphlet they’d procured earlier from one of the booths around the festival and turned it over, trying his best to flatten it against his thighs and holding it upright for them both to see.

“Oh, now let’s see here… I’ve never really star-gazed before, not like, on purpose. So I have no idea how to read this, but… let’s see… Orihime Boshi should be somewhere over there? It’s supposed to form a… I don’t know what to call that. A diamond with an antenna coming out of it?”

Brow furrowing, Shōto looked around with his head tilted straight up. “That’s not very helpful. They’re all points in a plane. Any of them could form almost any geometric shape..”

“Right, but look, here,” Izuku laughed and shook the map around. “It’s supposed to look like this. Orihime Boshi is super bright so… oh wait, is that it?”

Holding the map in one hand, Izuku pointed high and leaned closer into Shōto’s line of vision, who did his best to follow the path of his arm up into the dark blue-black skies.

“This says if you can find Orihime, then Hiko Boshi should be to the southeast, so… that’s part of this one, which looks like… uh. A headless stick-figure trying to stomp on a spider. So just find that!”

Unable to help himself, Shōto let out a laugh. “That is even less helpful than a diamond with an antenna.”

“W-Well! It’s what I see when I look at the map!” Izuku defended, cheeks puffed out. “Anyway, come on, you’re supposed to be looking! It’s like, about level-ish with the moon in the sky...”

Shōto managed to find that one a minute or so later, and with the two primary stars identified, they took to trying to map out the rest of Japan’s summer skyline. After a little while, they put the map away, and, per Izuku’s suggestion, took turns making up their own constellations based off the shapes they could find. It was fun, if only because Shōto much preferred the patently bad descriptions Izuku came up with in trying to point out the different shapes of their personal constellations.

While Izuku picked out a new set of stars to name, Shōto’s gaze wandered to him, observing the wide, relaxed smile that brightened his whole face, or the way his eyes reflected the universe beyond, or the way the the delicate shade of white-blue moonlight cast his complexion in a shade that was almost translucent.

The view really put the stars to shame.

Shōto had a moment of distant self-awareness, taking in the place and company in which he found
himself.

It was more than a little surprising, in hindsight.

If someone had tried to tell him that three months ago, after enrolling at a school he was dreading attending, he would be here, holding hands with a boy—with his boyfriend—standing on a small slice of Musutafu’s coast underneath the stars, water warm and ankles sticky with salt and sand as the waves rushed in around them—if someone had told him that this would be his life, Shōto would have, frankly, recommended they seek professional psychiatric help.

None of this really felt real, all the edges of his senses colored by the uncanny irreality of a dream. Somewhere past the sun on that lonely strip of beach, the air was thick with summer, biting with just the barest echo of sea spray as the waves came in; their fingers had threaded together again, a perfect fit, without Shōto even realizing when or how it had happened.

When did he become the person to take his shoes off and walk in the water? When did this life become his? Could it always be like this?

“Shō?” The soft fondness of Izuku’s voice brought him back. “Did you hear me? You looked like you were zoning out… are you, um, okay?”

“I am,” he said simply, the ghost of a smile creeping into his voice. “I was just… thinking, about who I was three months ago. And who I can still become, I suppose.”

“Oh?” The shift in subject seemed to take Izuku by surprise, but he just smiled and looked to Shōto expectantly. “And who do you want to become?”

Honestly, he admitted, “I’m not sure anymore. Before I… met you, he was tempted to say, but decided not to be quite so obvious. “Enrolled at Yūei, I never would have imagined I’d be here, and it’s only been just a few months. It’s a bit surreal. I still want to be a hero, but the future feels like it carries a different meaning to it now.”

Izuku nodded in time with his words, smile only growing wider by the time Shōto finished. “Well… that’s one of the things that makes Yūei so great, you know? It gives you all the skills you need to be a hero, but you still get to decide who you want to be and how you’ll use those skills someday. Whatever you end up doing, I know you’re going to be amazing!”

Surprised by the blatant praise, Shōto’s heart skipped a little, and his face felt hot. He felt compelled to look away, clearing his throat.

“Thank you. Although if you keep up with that, you’ll make my ego worse than Bakugō’s.”

“Aww, don’t be mean,” Izuku chastised, though he snickered. “Kacchan doesn’t have… that big of an ego. He does have a really amazing quirk and handle on his own abilities, so it’s not like he is completely talking out of turn when he’s being… the-way-he-is.”

Humming, Shōto commented, “I suppose that’s true. I think he’s starting to grow on me. We worked well together on the exam, and during your IAE.”

“I don’t know, Shō, for your exam you guys only escaped the grounds because the explosion you made completely leveled the entire testing area…”

“But we did pass.”

“There are a lot of ways to pass an exam that don’t involve nearly murdering the principle—”
Izuku said, exasperated, but he was interrupted by Shōto’s phone that began to play a loud melody from its place in his pocket.

He quickly silenced the alarm, but frowned at the words on the screen that were set to serve as a reminder: Izuku had to be home in thirty minutes, and Shōto would be damned before he got him home past his curfew—not just for the sake of Izuku’s safety, either. (He really didn’t want to make a bad impression on Mrs. Midoriya, considering he was dating her only son.)

“I suppose it’s time for us to go back,” he sighed, slipping his phone back into his pocket and reaching for Izuku’s hand instead.

Before he could grab it and start to lead them back to shore, however, Izuku made a strange sound, bordering on distressed. “Um—w-wait! We can’t go back yet!”

“Why?”

From zero to sixty, he was suddenly talking a mile-a-minute. “Well, um, while we—that is—there’s, uh, something I need to tell you! I promised myself I would tell you about it today, and today is nearly over… so… so we can’t go back yet.”

Izuku’s eyes revealed a small but palpable degree of anxiety, and Shōto was a bit taken aback by the sudden shift in his attitude. It was more than a little unnerving.

“I’m listening,” he replied slowly, which prompted Izuku to continue.

“Okay—okay. Uh. Crap, I didn’t think this through enough… Um… okay, so, you know the whole thing with Yūei’s school board trying to dismiss me. There’s sort of—some background stuff going on. It’s been going on for awhile, and I wanted to talk about it sooner and I probably should have but it all sort of got bigger than I thought it would? A-Anyway! So… I guess I’ll just… the school doesn’t actually want to get rid of me because of my writing.”

There was a pregnant pause while Shōto let that sink in. What sort of reaction was Izuku expecting of him? Maybe Shōto wasn’t understanding something, because he was just more confused.

“Okay… but why else would they want to dismiss you? You didn’t do anything wrong.”

“Mm, well… it sort of all goes back to the story I published about you, actually… They wanted to have me removed before the article about Hosu City was published. I just didn’t really tell anyone because I thought it sort of resolved itself but that doesn’t seem to be the case anymore. And, well, All Might thinks it might be… becauseofyourDad?”

Shōto gave no reaction. The words hadn’t arranged themselves in his head in a way that made sense, not yet—they were sort of disjointed chunks of a few sentences that didn't quite fit together.

“S-So, basically, the afternoon of Sports Festival—after you and I had that, uh, talk, outside the stadium, your Dad found me in the hallway on my way back to the viewing deck. He sort of… maybe… said he would have me kicked out of school if I didn’t write a retraction and ‘proper analysis’ on you?” Izuku’s voice twisted higher and higher with each syllable, like he was bracing himself for a punch. “Of course, I told him no. But he wasn’t happy about that. I-It all happened pretty fast, but I remember him saying that he wanted you to use your fire properly and that if I helped by writing something, I might be able to help you come to ‘your senses’ or something… but… anyway… I don’t really know what would have happened after that because All Might showed up and said he wanted to talk to your Dad alone, so I just kind of… left. And it was after
that point that the school board started to put pressure on the principal and faculty to have me removed from school—"

His words were starting to run together, and Shōto was having a difficult time keeping up with the sound of sea foam bubbling around their ankles at the same time. What he could discern, however, was that Izuku seemed markedly overwhelmed, to the point that it brought a recent memory to the fore of his mind, cutting through his haze with razor-tipped precision—Izuku had that same look as he had when he broke down in the hallway surrounded by their friends on Friday. There were no tears for Shōto to wipe away this time, but he could practically feel the frayed edges of Izuku’s composure unraveling before him.

He only had a single frame of reference when it came to comforting people, and so Shōto tried his best to emulate the things Tōya and Fuyumi used to do for him.

“Hey, hey. Please, breathe.” Shōto tried to close some of the physical distance between them, but when he edged closer, Izuku began to curl in on himself. An automatic reaction. Defensive, like he was afraid of being touched.

Sighing, the hand he’d started to reach towards Izuku dropped. “I can’t understand you when you talk that fast. I’m… just trying to understand. Keep going, but breathe.”

Izuku swallowed on a lump in his throat before coughing, and his words came slower than before—though they still sounded gritty as wet sand. “I—I mean, I don’t know for sure that it’s your Dad who is responsible or anything, or if the school board just—just, I don’t know, really hates quirkless people or something? And I would have told you sooner! I really would have, I just, it was one of those things where I thought it would go away before it even became problematic enough to warrant telling you. At first I didn’t want to bother you after all the drama of the Sports Festival, and then it seemed like your Dad might have backed off after everything that happened in Hosu City. But then the principal said there was a second huge push to have me removed so… I don’t know anymore. I feel like I was being dishonest, like a lie of omission, by not saying anything to you and I felt bad about it, I wanted to say something sooner but the situation has just gotten out of control, especially with all of what happened last week…. There was just never a good time and I always have so much fun when we’re together… a part of me never wanted to ruin that. I’m—I’m sorry.”

The waves moved out, a continuous ebb-and-flow, filling the quiet with nature’s special brand of tension. Perhaps it was the effect of the steady sea or of Izuku’s resilient, bright green eyes holding his gaze, but Shōto found he was… not calm, exactly, because while he felt the bubbles of anger rise in his chest and constrict his throat, he was, more than anything, resigned.

Shōto didn’t really know what to say, besides that he wished he was surprised.

It had seemed too easy, after all, that his father hadn’t been more insistent and had left their conversation on the Izuku half-unfinished.

Make your own mistakes.

Was this what his old man had meant? Make Izuku suffer for his choices? It wasn’t enough that he had manipulated every aspect of Shōto’s life outside of Yūei, but he was going to teach him a lesson by making an example out of Izuku?

“S—Shōto? The water…” Soft as falling mist, Izuku’s words had him looking down at their feet. A thin sheen of ice cracked around where his ankles met the ocean. “I’m sorry if I r-ruined today… I really had a great time, I just—”
“Izuku.” Voice sharper than he intended, Shōto made himself take a deep breath, forcing calm into his voice. “…Nothing is ruined. The absolute last thing I want is for you to apologize for my father’s actions. I just need some time to process this, I think.”

Wordless, Izuku moved his head up and down, this time reaching out to grab Shōto’s hands.

“Okay… I don’t know if there’s anything I can do to help, or if I would just make things worse by getting involved, but I—I don’t want Endeavor to dislike me. So if there’s some way I can get him to…I guess, leave me alone, or make him forgive me or something, I want to try.”

“It’s a nice thought,” Shōto answered dryly. The fact that Izuku was holding his hands was the only thing keeping them from furling into fists. “But I don’t think it’s worth your time. He hasn’t earned the right to talk to you, as far as I’m concerned. The fact that he approached you at the Sports Festival in the first place—”

Shōto’s jaw snapped shut with an audible click. The flavor of a memory began to twist together, his imagination filling in the details where they’d been left out. The idea of his excuse of a father would corner a student and threaten them—it wasn’t the same, he knew it wasn’t the same, but it was close enough to mirror things from Shōto’s memory that it evoked a very specific kind of fear, one he’d not felt in a long time.

Please! Stop pushing him! He’s only five years old!

Get out of my way—

The unmistakable sound of skin on skin.

The pause. The—

—thud.

“Did he hurt you?” Shōto asked suddenly, his head tilting to the side. It felt as if the weight of worlds rested on Izuku’s answer. “I want you to be honest—if he laid a single finger on you, please tell me.”

“No! No, he didn’t! It was just, he had activated his flames so it was really hot and I was, um, backed up against a wall… but he didn’t hurt me at all. I promise.”

It wasn’t as much of a relief as it was ‘one less thing to add to the growing pit in his stomach,’ but Shōto nodded all the same.

“Are you sure you’re okay?” Izuku asked, a wobble to his voice that was nothing short of upsetting. “I want to help, I don’t want this to make things worse between you and your Dad, but I don’t know…”

Shōto closed his eyes and counted backwards from ten.

“I’m fine. As much as I appreciate your offer to help, my father only confronted you under the pretense that he could use you to control my actions. Which means, the root of the problem isn’t you. It’s me. So I will handle this.”

“Wait, but—you’re not to blame either! At least let me be there when you talk to him, or—isn’t there something I can do?”

“Izuku, trust me on this. My father has too much pride to have this conversation in front of anyone
else. If I’m going to get him to be honest and to legitimately try to reverse his actions with the school, then it’s something I have to do by myself. Please try to understand that.”

Shōto offered a thin smile when Izuku looked disappointed, and as gently as he could, he squeezed Izuku’s fingers.

“You didn’t want to tell me because you were afraid you could ruin something, but you’re not the kind of person who ruins anything. Your voice reaches people and offers them comfort and understanding, and I know that’s why you want to help, but I need to deal with this on my own. I will talk to him and I will sort this out. Okay?”

When Izuku still looked unsure, lower lip worried between his bottom row of teeth, Shōto noted the way the minute movements of his facial muscles caused his freckles to wink up at him. It reminded him of his earlier observation in the car just before they arrived. He leaned forward and placed a kiss at the corner of Izuku’s eye, and then another on his cheek, and he got to the third one near his nose before Izuku started to laugh outright.

“W-What are you doing?!” he snickered, pushing Shōto back by placing both hands against his chest.

“Kissing your freckles. I thought it was obvious.” He started to move Izuku’s hands out of the way, but he put up a rather defiant fight before Shōto captured the last one of the freckles the left half of his face.

Whining, Izuku began to run back towards the sand, leaving Shōto in the water. “Stop! That’s not fair, I was trying to be upset and you’re all—you’re trying to—distract me!”

Shōto smirked as he followed him back onto the shore, sand soft and squishy between his toes. “Is it working?”

“Yes? I mean—no!! Maybe! I don’t know!” Izuku threw his hands up before marching back towards the wooden gate, near which he’d left his shoes and backpack. “It was a mean trick either way!”

“I’ll kiss the rest another time,” Shōto promised, laughing when Izuku sent him a look that was somehow both flustered and admonishing at the same time.

They approached the car once their feet were dried (with some help from Shōto’s quirk and very carefully regulating his temperatures) and climbed into the backseat, setting a course for Izuku’s apartment. Shōto was experiencing a lot of emotions and didn’t really know what words to put to which feelings, but he was also rather exhausted from the day and with poor sleep from the night before, he might not have the mental and emotional capacity to process everything right then. Izuku was, of course, still the epitome of good spirits when interacting with the driver as they headed towards his house a few wards south.

When they were about seven or eight minutes away, Izuku pointed out the window toward the coast that was just visible between buildings as they moved down a mostly empty street. “That’s the Dagobah beach there, I mentioned it earlier. Have you ever been there?”

“No, I haven’t.”

“I don’t blame you,” he said with a sigh. “It’s turned into a total junkyard. I don’t know why but people started to dump their garbage there and it never got cleaned up, it’s always getting worse… I forgot how nice the beach could be before going back there tonight.”
Voice fading off with a hum, Izuku turned back to catch Shōto’s eye, smiling fondly.

“What is it?” Shōto asked after a moment, wondering if there was something on his face.

“Oh, uh, nothing,” he answered with a faint redness to complexion that suggested it was not, in fact, nothing, but they were almost to Izuku’s so Shōto decided to hold off asking until they were out of the car.

He stepped out while Izuku thanked the driver again, walking around as Izuku opened his own side door. At the point when Izuku would have to punch in the code and they would go their separate ways, Shōto turned to him.

“Back there, it looked like you wanted to say something. Was it really nothing?” he asked with a skeptical tone, and Izuku’s eyes shot straight down.

“Aha, no… you got me. I just—I guess I wanted to say…” He crossed an arm over his chest and held it with his other hand, eyes and voice imbued with that same, simple vulnerability that had struck Shōto so entirely the first time they spoke, and the same one that he fell in love with more every passing day. “Thank you, for today. And especially for listening earlier. I feel stupid for taking so long to tell you about it, and then I just couldn’t stop talking, but I feel so much better now that you know. I don’t know what I was so afraid of… so thank you.”

Izuku looked up, tentatively, before Shōto realized his eyes weren’t searching for his own, but were looking at his lips.

That was more than invitation enough as far as Shōto was concerned, and he pulled Izuku into him before catching his lips in a warm, soft kiss. It was slower, and Shōto was determined to make sure he was more careful of his quirk this time, but even with the added effort it felt just as natural as catching Izuku from tripping over his shoes, or watching him talk with children about his much-loved heroes, or laughing while he made up silly descriptions for the stars, or dreaming up an impossible wish that Shōto hoped beyond hopes would come true.

“You don’t have to thank me,” he said as stepped apart, thumb tracing the four freckles he still hadn’t kissed yet. Another time, he decided. “I had a great day, too. You make it easy to be happy.”

“O-Oh, umm… thanks? Or… you’re welcome? Wait, which is it—?” Izuku murmured to himself, and Shōto couldn’t help but feel just a tiny bit smug when he could feel Izuku’s cheeks heat up beneath his fingers.

“Good night, Izuku. Please go inside or your Mom will be worried if you stay out any later.”

“Right! Thank you. Good night, and I’ll talk to you later, okay? Um, I’ll text you tomorrow!”

He waved as Izuku entered the gate to the apartments, letting out a low breath of air as he watched Izuku until he disappeared beyond a corner.

Shōto craned his neck, letting out a sigh as his eyes came to rest upon the dark skies again. Wishing upon the stars, huh? It was almost impossible to see them from the heart of the city with all the lights clouding the skies, but he decided to search for them just one more time that evening.

*I want my mother to be able to enjoy all the happiness she deserves outside of that hospital.*

*I want my siblings to live healthy and fulfilling lives.*

...
I want the world to give him back the same kindness that he gives to the world.

Chapter End Notes

thanks for reading & journeying with me this far!! this has been an amazing experience to write and I'm still so thrilled to keep going.

I have a lot planned still and I know the updates have been hitting slower lately, my new job has really eaten up my time... I'll try to respond to your comments in a timely manner, but please know that they mean the WORLD to me and I check my inbox no fewer than 20 times a day just so I can revisit and reread all the kindhearted, thoughtful things you all say. It keeps me going and makes me want to write even more!!! I could not be more grateful to have such incredible people following along as these two dorks fall into love.

a few notes of appreciation:
this is the fanart that inspired Izuku's suit from the previous chapter, I can't believe I forgot to include it at the time! please check out and appreciate the very talented シルヴァー's work!
-one of the awesome folks following along made a Spotify playlist w/ fanart for this work and I'm so touched ;-; check it out here, thank you Awkward_Thumbs_Up!!

//(happy sigh)//

Next time: Shōto confronts Endeavor (pt. 2!), Izuku prepares for his summer trips to I-Island and to work alongside the Wild Wild Pussycats, Shigaraki makes an appearance, and... Mei Hatsume is getting into ghost hunting?! What's the deal with that?!

SEE YOU ALL THEN!!!! PLUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUS ULTRAAAAAAAAAAA
(✧‿✧✿)
Close Encounters of the Worst Kind

Chapter Summary

Shōto has had enough, and Izuku tries to be a normal teenager. It doesn't go very well.

Shōto made the decision to let go of his anger—at least for the night.

It was for the best, he reasoned, to approach the situation with a level-head. At minimum, he wanted to get in a night’s rest before trying to talk to his old man. His emotional state was simply worn too thin from the day he’d had to even attempt to approach the oncoming conversation with anything close to calm.

That’s not to say his day had been bad by any means; quite the opposite, in fact. Izuku’s entire presence was a shock to the system, like sunshine on a midsummer morning, but being out beneath those beating rays all day had a tendency to drain you just the same for the light they bring. Something reminiscent of working the muscles sore after a long day of training—never before had Shōto’s heart been put through these sort of trials, and he was emotionally spent as a result.

So, he wasn’t going to say anything to his father until the morning, maybe even wait until the afternoon so he could gather his thoughts and try to figure out what exactly he would say, ask, and do as a result.

… that was Shōto’s plan, anyway.

“Hold on.”

Pretend you didn’t hear it. Keep walking.

“Shōto! Hold on!”

He barely made it five paces down the hall towards his room before his father raised his voice, ringing out to him from the kitchen. It wasn’t like this was the first time Shōto had been on the receiving end of his father’s provocations before, and normally, he could have just brushed it off. He was prepared to do just that, turning on his heel and calmly returning to the threshold that connected the hallway to the dining area and the kitchen beyond that.

“I’ve been trying to get ahold of you for hours! You can’t just ignore my calls.”

Don’t say anything.

“I didn’t have high hopes that this boyfriend of yours was going to help you to shape up, but the fact that you’re already acting so out soon is disappointing.”

Had it just been some derisive comment or another, it would have been fine.

“If that Midoriya boy is to thank for your worsening behavior, then—”

Like a wire pulled taut, Shōto felt something in the back of his mind—or perhaps, in the center of his chest—snap.
“Keep his name out of your fucking mouth.”

So much for putting it off until tomorrow.

Shōto’s jaw was clenching his jaw so tightly, his teeth began to hurt. A small voice in the back of his mind acknowledged that this was a bad idea—all it took was the slightest bit of arrogance from his father to make his will crumble—but a much louder, much angrier voice wanted to be mad. Shōto wanted to be outraged on Izuku’s behalf. He was far too forgiving to hold people accountable for the weight of their misdeeds, but Shōto was not like him—he was not willing to just let this go.

His father could bully and try to control him as much as he wanted, but Izuku was off fucking limits.

Endeavor, for all of Shōto’s fury, hardly seemed to react. The only sign that he’d heard Shōto at all was the imperceptible degree to which his eyes narrowed.

“What did you say?” he asked, tone crafted to carefully conceal the rage that underpinned the words, eerily hanging in the shadow of memories that told Shōto it was familiar.

“Are you seriously going to pretend you don’t know what I’m talking about?” Shōto demanded, disdain dripping from each syllable like acid. “If you are going to say anything involving him, it best be an apology; otherwise I don’t want to hear it. Not that you deserve forgiveness, but I’m sure Izuku would be happy to put this behind him.”

Shōto curled his fists together so abruptly, small pillars of ice and fire shedded from his skin.

He couldn’t bring himself to raise his voice. Rather, his tone darkened, a barely subdued storm. His indignation and fury on Izuku’s behalf were manifesting into something much more malevolent than yelling could ever convey. “You bribed members of the school board to have him removed from the school. What kind of hero does that? What kind of person does that?”

This time, Endeavor’s tone barely contained the veiled threat of his words.

“You are speaking on matters you do not understand,” his father said, harshly, observing the emission of Shōto’s quirk as it rolled off his arms. “And get ahold of yourself. You’re not a child anymore, you should have better control of your quirk. You’re not a slave to your emotions.”

The order was innately dismissive, and it caused Shōto to falter more than he expected—and certainly more than he liked to admit. He could tell himself all day that he didn’t care about his father’s petty remarks, but there was just... something about his father’s specific brand of condescension that always worked to make Shōto feel so small. Like it was specially formulated to nettle under his skin and make him feel responsible for whatever was wrong, that he was somehow to blame for not nodding and agreeing and falling into every step his Dad laid out for him.

He was the child, and his father was the adult; he was wrong, and his father was right. It was a rhythm as familiar to him as his own heart beat; there was no winning in moments like those, and frustrated the hell out of him.

If he let his quirk continue to manifest through his feelings, it just proved his father’s point that he didn’t have control over himself; if he forced himself to stop, it demonstrated compliance with his old man’s orders, a willingness to yield to someone like him. Both options sounded miserable, if he were being honest.

In the end he opted to swallow his pride, no matter how much it pained him. It wasn’t the first time
that he had to bite back a few scathing words when his father was involved, which gave meant Shōto had plenty of experience at reining it in.

Quirks like his present most obviously when the powers are consciously activated, but they are as tied to reflex and instinct as any other facet of his personality; it’s not like Shōto can just turn off his quirk entirely like a light switch—he had to do something with that raw energy.

He inhaled deeply, internalizing the dual reactions of his left and right side, and tried to disperse them through his body instead. Flashing white-hot rage ran over his blood while bitter, cold air filled his lungs, but he managed to coalesce them into something feigning normal by the time he released the breath.

“Explain, then.”

His father’s scowl deepened. “What?”

“You said, I don’t understand,” Shōto seethed. “Explain it, then. Tell me how I am misunderstanding a situation in which you paid people to do what you want. Tell me how I am misunderstanding you telling them to remove Izuku from school because of some—some notion you have on whether or not he deserves to be there.”

“The fact of the matter is this: if he had a quirk, and made such a mockery of the school’s reputation with that—I hesitate to call it an article, but let that suffice—in which he made a fool of not only Yūei but our family’s name in the process, he would have been expelled. Plain and simple. Yūei insists on managing this issue with kid’s gloves, afraid of hurting feelings or receiving public criticism because he is quirkless, but they’ve gone too far in the other direction. You talk about deciding on whether or not he deserves to be there? Then it’s only fair we hold him to the same standard as all other students, and there is a long list of people who would be eager to take his seat in that school, and take the opportunity seriously. Many more who have been dismissed for much lesser mistakes.”

“Take it seriously?” Shōto could have laughed. “Just because he can’t apply himself in the same kind of training that people with quirks do, doesn’t mean he doesn’t take things seriously. You’re not his teacher, or the person running the paper, or his parent, and it’s their decision how and to what extent he should be disciplined for the mistake with that story.”

His father’s blue eyes flashed. “And it was out of respect for Yūei’s decision that I gave him a choice—were he anyone else, he wouldn’t have even been given that. He picked the outcome that would lead to this, and he has only himself to blame for the position he finds himself.”

“What choice?” This time, Shōto did laugh, carding a hand through his hair in frustration. “Stand up for himself and his integrity as a writer, or bend to whatever threats people make towards him? You decided what his options would be, and you had no right to do that. Taking things into your own hands—no one forced you to involve the school board, that was all you.”

The man closed his eyes, leaning over the counter and resting his knuckles on the stone surface. It was clear he wasn’t done, so Shōto waited, doing his best to keep up without interrupting with the string of curses that felt very tempting to let-loose.

“Yūei is an institution that produces the best heroes in the world, Shōto. I was disappointed by their decision to admit him—his exam scores were impressive, I will grant him that—but that isn’t going to save his life or protect the peace when a threat arises. It was irresponsible of the school, but I had no intention of getting involved in the beginning until he began to draw an audience. Yūei has adopted this position that they are producing students ready for a globalized, superhuman
society, and that was their reason for admitting him: without a quirk, he is still an active player in this world. Which means, he is not absolved of the responsibilities of the role he has chosen for himself.”

Shōto tried to hide the reflexive wince he performed when his father’s steely gaze looked up to study him.

“All Might and that boy both see the world through the same rose-colored lenses, but at least All Might has never relied on other people’s strength to make his ideals a reality. I may not agree with the way he parades around the title of hero, but I cannot deny that he has always taken action to back-up his claims. What this boy is doing is reckless by comparison. He isn’t ready to play at being a public figure if he can’t even accept the responsibility that comes with having an audience— if he could not swallow his pride to make the future he wanted a reality. If any individual decides that their own ideals are more important to uphold than to prioritize their goals, then that is their choice, but they can’t cry out in unfairness when the path changes in a way that doesn’t favor them.”

Shōto’s temples were throbbing, and he let his father’s disparaging speech sink in for a few seconds.

So it was... a test? To see if Izuku would make the right decision... by doing what his Dad said... and he failed?

No—no, that’s stupid. This isn’t Izuku’s fault. Izuku can’t be blamed for having a good heart.

“You still put him in that position to begin with,” he finally said, unfurling his fists and shaking his head. “It doesn’t matter if you don’t agree with the school’s decision to support him, to endorse his writing. Forcing the school’s hand because they’re not meeting some standard you put forward isn’t right, no matter how you try to justify it. So, just, fuck—mind your own business, and leave him alone. If you don’t, I’ll—”

“You’ll what? What would you honestly do? You can’t go anywhere and can’t fight me, so don’t make threats you can’t keep. It shows weakness that is not befitting my son.”

“Maybe you’re right for now, but if you have even a shred of decency left after everything you’ve done to us, you’ll leave Izuku the hell alone. He’s important to me. Isn’t that enough? You drove Mom away, you pushed Tōya until—”

Like a blown fuse, light and heat erupted in the kitchen in an instance. It was sometimes difficult to remember that his father was the Number Two Hero in the world, until he did things like this— Shōto had reflexes that challenged most Pro-Hero’s, but his father still managed to cross the kitchen, grabbed him by the shirt collar, and lifted him off the ground in a fluid, blink of movement.

Fire rolled off of him, a clear sign of threat and warning, but Shōto just grabbed his arm with his left one and tried to force him to release his grip.

Between the shock, heat, fire, and anger, Shōto felt like he was dry drowning, oxygen burning around him quicker than he could take it in.

“That is enough,” his father said, expression inscrutable, features shaped with sharp angles that radiated with a black, tar-like kind of anger. “You will not show me such disrespect. And do not equate him to them.”
“R-Respect?” Shōto’s words broke around his attempt to breathe. “And w-why not? You push—away—people you perceive as f-failures—and—”

A gasp, faint as a falling autumn leaf, silenced him from the farside of the room, reverberating like a gunshot in the forest. Both Shōto and his father turned their heads, neither having realized they’d been heard.

“S-stop… please…” Fuyumi hiccuped, eyes shining with unshed tears. Her hands joined his own on his father’s arm, and Shōto could feel the weight on them guiding him back down towards the ground. “You both… you’re both… we’re family! …Please don’t do this. Dad, you don’t have to like Shōto’s friends but if you don’t at least try to accept this then… Please… just stop. You don’t have to win every fight, and not all of them are worth fighting. I can’t lose another brother, please.”

The Todoroki house was silent for three head-pounding seconds, and then, like deadweight, Endeavor’s arm fell to his side. He turned away from his children with cold indifference and took a few steps back towards the kitchen. Shōto held his neck where his shirt had started to dig into his skin, glaring, and Fuyumi, clearly worried, busied her hands around him as if to check for other injuries but unsure of where or how to start.

Shōto wasn’t sure why he expected anything else, really. That he could force his father to see reason, to understand that his so-called ‘merit-based’ appraisal of Izuku was unfair and should not have any bearing on Izuku’s actual status as a student. Indeed, a cruel part of him suspected that none of this was even true, that his old man had been waiting on any excuse to target a quirkless student and force them out of a place he didn’t deem worthy. It all felt rather morally convenient that his father could frame the whole thing to make it sound like he was taking some kind of high ground when, for Shōto’s entire life, the man had talked about and treated quirkless individuals as second-class citizens.

Rather suddenly, his old man turned halfway around and looked back over his shoulder. Both Shōto and Fuyumi watched him cautiously, his scowl especially pinched.

“I stopped with Yūei.”

Shōto’s gaze narrowed. “What do you mean?”

“Last week…” Endeavor cleared his throat, and Shōto could hardly believe it. His face didn’t give anything away besides vague impatience, but he seemed… was his Dad actually… sheepish? “I told you I would let you make your own mistakes. I made some calls Wednesday and withdrew what I had… asked of the school board. I may not agree with the circumstances, and I still do not approve of the school’s choices, but you’re my son. It’s not worth earning your resentment over one seat in that school. So… I’ve dropped it.”

Blinking in disbelief, Shōto looked at Fuyumi as if he expected her to helpfully provide that this was a dream or that he was dissociating from reality. When she gave him no such clarity, he turned his gaze back to his father. What?

That wasn’t an apology—but it was unnervingly close to one when it came to his father.

“I hoped you would have understood before things got to this point,” admitted the Pro-Hero, facing them again. “I hoped it would resolve itself quietly and he would simply study somewhere else while still holding him accountable for his mistakes—cushioning him from consequences isn’t going to do that boy any favors if he has any hope of being successful as a public figure, especially without a quirk, but I never expected him to make this kind of impression on you. I can tell he is… important to you, so I had resolved not to involve myself anymore.”
“Dad…” Fuyumi called quietly, but he didn’t respond. Didn’t say another word, in fact. He turned around and exited the kitchen towards the east wing of the house, leaving them with the weight of nothing but his words to tether down the silence.

Eventually, Fuyumi broke it, carefully resting a hand on each of Shōto’s shoulders as if rousing him from sleep. “Are you okay? You’re not hurt, are you?”

It took several seconds for her words to process, but he managed to shake his head. “No, I’m fine.”

“I’m glad,” she quirked a smile, but it didn’t reach her eyes as her hands slid off his shoulders. “I was going to ask how it went with Midoriya, but I imagine you’re probably not in much of a mood to talk right now. You look exhausted.”

That was an apt observation; he felt exhausted from the moment he walked inside, and that conversation effectively zapped whatever remained of his energy. “Yes. I’m going to… try to go to bed.”

Without warning, he turned and headed towards his room, retracing the steps he’d tried to take twenty minutes ago and then some. At that moment, with how tired he felt, Shōto was lacking the mental fortitude to try to decode how his Dad was going to degrade Izuku one moment and then turn around and then… what, give some warped sense of approval the next?

Quickly, Shōto changed and readied himself for bed, going through the automatic motions of brushing his teeth and washing his face without really realizing. He was too preoccupied with—well, everything else—to pay mind to such basic functions.

How did he have such a good day and awful day at the same time? Why was everything always so give-and-take? It felt he’d been fated to a life split down the middle in more ways than one—if he was happy in one respect, it felt like something else had to suffer for it. His time with Izuku out at the festival had been some of the most fun he’d had… ever, really, but it had to come with the burdensome knowledge of his father’s involvement in trying to have Izuku removed from Yūei.

That was another troubling thing, he noted, laying back against his sheets and pulling the covers over him, torn between racing thoughts and being physically fatigued. His father had only played a part in it. If he had withdrawn what he’d asked of the school board, then why was the school still trying to have him removed? Was his Dad just lying to save face?

No, probably not.

Shōto’s respect for his old man was all but nonexistent, and yet, he knew Endeavor well-enough after spending fifteen years under the man’s brutal conditioning to know better. His father held a strange but consistent code of ethics, and lying had no part in his sense of morality. He wouldn’t lie just to make an argument sway in his favor, just like he never made empty threats or promises he would not keep.

So he should be glad, then? Shōto should feel relieved. The issue with his father turned out to be a non-starter, in the end. Izuku was going to be able to continue to attend Yūei without looking over his shoulder, the fear of being dismissed no longer hanging over him, and while his father wasn’t necessarily supportive… he also wasn’t going to oppose it, at least not in any way that mattered.

The day was not ruined. If anything, this was the best news he hadn’t known he’d been waiting to receive.

So why do I feel still feel so bad?
Maybe it was the lack of energy—Shōto hoped that’s all it was. There was some kind of clinging weight to his lungs, though. Like pebbled lead had fallen into the base of his throat and blocked any air from coming or going. The word uncomfortable came to mind, but that wasn’t quite it—that usually pointed towards a direct source or something being out of equilibrium. An imbalance that needed to be corrected, in effect, except there wasn’t anything that he could point towards and say that’s what’s bothering me.

Sighing, Shōto groaned and pushed the palms of his hands into his eyes. He would sleep on it. Tomorrow, he had a full day of his father’s training ahead of him, along with a lesson with his English tutor, and, more than likely, an exclusive question-and-answer session with his sister at some point.

The light was already off, but he let one of his arms drape over his eyes anyway, closed against the faint pale stripes of moonlight that painted the wall and floor from his window. There was something about the position that was inherently relaxing, perhaps in the way it stretched his muscles up and in, taut but releasing tension.

Tomorrow, he would train, and then on Thursday, he was planning to go see his mother. Maybe he and Izuku could go out again on Friday.

The thought brought to him a small smile, a tiny huff of a laugh sneaking out

*That’s one of the things that makes Yūei so great, you know? It gives you all the skills you need to be a hero, but you still get to decide who you want to be and how you’ll use those skills someday. Whatever you end up doing, I know you’re going to be amazing!*

Izuku had such faith in him. Shōto was unused to that, and the memory of his excitable green eyes beneath the stars, reflecting the sea—his own face felt a little hot remembering it. For so long, Shōto had been living on spite alone, the human equivalent of a car running on nothing but fumes… to suddenly have some other purpose to keep going wasn’t just a breath of fresh air, but a sweeping inhale of a summer wind, citrusy from flowers and heady from pollen and salty from the bayside breeze. It gave him some kind of reverse pride, a burning desire to be successful for the sake of someone else. Shōto just hoped he could be worthy of the compassion and empathy with which Izuku approached the world.

Just as he skimmed that fine line between waking and sleep, a buzz near his ear had him cracking open an eye and pulling his phone over, squinting at the offending brightness.

*Izuku Midoriya (21:39)*

*I’m beat from today, so im gonna pass out as soon as I send this but thank you again for today. I had so much fun and I feel a million times better after talking to you about the school board thing. thanks for listening and understanding. Sleep well Shō :)*

Shōto considered texting back, but since Izuku said he too was about to fall asleep, he decided against it—truthfully, he was probably too tired to text back anything resembling sense anyway.

So instead, with a tiny well of hope in his chest, Shōto allowed himself to seek the quiet refuge of dreamless relief.
The following morning, Izuku slept in only long enough to see his Mom off before she headed into work for the day.

“Have a good day sweetheart, oh and I left some rice for you on the stove. It should still be hot. Love you.”

Smiling, he saw waved as she stood in the doorway to their apartment. “Thanks! I love you too.”

With breakfast in mind, and intent on trying to soak up a bit of well-deserved lump-on-the-couch time, Izuku turned around and helped himself to the aforementioned rice and heaped it into a bowl, cracking an egg overtop it. The residual heat of the rice cooked off the rawness of the egg while he parked himself on the sofa.

His Mom had left the news on for him, but it was turning out to be a mercifully slow news day. In a superhuman society, no news usually meant good news for the heroes, and Izuku hummed to himself while flipping through the channels. It had been an active enough news cycle that any of the more gossipy-treatment of his personal affairs had fallen largely into the background, thank All Might.

While perusing the channels, Izuku ended up stumbling upon a special that was piecing together the events of the Tokyo Sky Egg bombing. It was probably one of his favorite villain incidents… not that he should really admire villain incidents, but, if had to pick one, the encounter with Number 6 and so many high-ranking Pro Heroes of the time, all in Tokyo during the height of a huge media event—it was amazing to rewatch the footage from that day, no matter how many times Izuku had seen it. It was hard to believe that six years had already passed, seeing as Izuku could remember most of the fanfare from that day—news broadcasts interrupting daytime television of the summertime to break the story as it unfolded, the heroes all working together, All Might’s masterful use of his Nebraska Smash ultimate move—the only real loss that day was the fact that they didn’t end up capturing the villain.

That said, with the comfort of hindsight, Izuku let himself get sucked into the show while he enjoyed his breakfast, because he knew how this story ended. The damage of the Sky Egg had since been repaired, and there were no fatalities nor any mortal injuries; it would all come to have a happy ending.

It took almost an entire hour of mindless television consumption for Izuku to realize he’d never checked his phone that morning. (That is, mindless to the extent that this was Izuku Midoriya; he only ended up getting his journal for idle notetaking while watching and eating). As was his habit, he had probably shoved the device under his pillow or knocked it off the bedside table when turning over at some point during the night, so he quickly washed his dishes and went to search for his misplaced phone.

He found it, unsurprisingly, half-concealed beneath his pillow.

Shōto Todoroki (05:14)

Izuku blinked at the timestamp before even bothering with the message, recalling the stories they’d
exchanged in respect to their families yesterday, and frowned. Did Endeavor have him awake and training that early? Or did Shōto always get up so early, voluntarily?

Sighing, Izuku shook his head and decided to worry about one thing at a time.

Shōto Todoroki (05:14)

Good morning. You don’t have to thank me for anything. I know neither of us really have much to go by in terms of comparison, but I thought the date went perfectly. That may just be that’s a consequence of spending time with you, though.

Izuku’s hands shook, color flooding his cheeks in an abashed shade of red. Was Shōto being… flirty? Did he even realize it? Was he doing it on purpose, or was Shōto just doing that thing where he was so honest it made Izuku want to die?

He really doesn’t feel like I ruined things?

Izuku wished he could believe that.

As convincing as Shōto had been yesterday when kissing him goodnight, Izuku simply couldn’t ignore the inescapable stone that had settled into his stomach that demanded he feel guilty over the whole thing. The situation was just weird—because it was Endeavor, his boyfriend’s father, and it was related to the paper, and Izuku’s enrollment in Yūei… the whole thing felt like a gnarled, knotted series of tree roots that were all wound together. Three distinct tracks of his life that should have had only the occasional overlap had now become so irrevocably wrapped up in each other, Izuku wasn’t sure if there were even defined lines anymore.

Somewhat exasperated, Izuku continued reading, unplugging his phone from the charger and returning to his spot on the couch.

Shōto Todoroki (05:19)

I will try to make this brief, but we can talk more later if you want. I talked to my father. I think you were right that he just does not like you, although I suspect now that it may have had more to do with you standing up to him than any other reason. That’s just my guess, though. The point is: he said he dropped it with the school board. I wish I could take more active credit, but he said he dropped it last week… Whenever he and I argued last and I called you to talk. He told me that he wasn’t going to involve himself anymore. I wish I could convince him to see you the way I do, but I at least hope this can be seen as good news: the school board’s dismissal is off.

Like a reverberating piece of metal falling down a narrow chute, Izuku’s thoughts noisily and uncomfortably shifted into place. Talk… Endeavor… dropped… dismissal…?

...Really?

Just like that?
Endeavor had called off the whole thing just because he and Shōto had argued? Without Shōto even knowing about the situation, Endeavor just decided to drop it? Could it really be that simple?

Izuku supposed that not everything had to be a grand victory with fireworks and triumphant adrenaline—some could be unremarkable, quiet, and still reach a satisfying conclusion. Was this one such occasion? Endeavor, who seemed to hate him from the moment they met, was really willing to just leave Izuku alone and let him continue to seek his education in peace?

So why did it not feel right? Was he missing something?

Scratching his head, Izuku decided to think on it—maybe he could just accept the silent accomplishment with grace. Communication was the most effective tool towards achieving understanding, after all, so maybe that was just what needed to be done. Shōto had asked Izuku to trust him when it came to dealing with his father, so that’s what he would do.

It may be far from Endeavor approving of him, but even begrudging acceptance was more than he could have ever expected.

Shōto Todoroki (05:31)

*I will not have my phone until this evening, so I will not respond for sometime. Have a nice day, Izu.*

Smiling, Izuku thumbed out of his messages with Shōto and checked his other texts.

First, his group chat with Iida, Uraraka, Shinsō, and Shōto.

Ochako Uraraka (08:22)

*Hey friends!! Most of 1-A is going to get together for a mini-field trip to the Kiyashi Ward mall tomorrow. A lot of us need to get some stuff for our camping trip, but I know Deku said he had to get some stuff for his summer placement thing on I-Island, thing too? We’re going to meet up outside the Wookies sign at noon and figured if you guys were bored you should come too!*

Tenya Iida (08:23)

*Good morning, Uraraka. I have already informed you that I will be attending.*

Ochako Uraraka (08:26)

*I knooow but I wasn’t going to make a new GC just to ask deku shinsō and toodoroki*

Tenya Iida (08:26)
Oh. That makes sense. Understood. I did ask Todoroki at the end of the ceremony yesterday if he would be free and he said no, but if Midoriya is going he will likely change his mind.

Hitoshi Shinsō (08:30)

lol whipped

Ochako Uraraka (08:31)

I mean you’re not wrong… but also shinsō you’re UP this early??? Im impressed!

Hitoshi Shinsō (08:32)

idk if it actually counts as being ‘up’ if you never slept but ill take it.

Tenya Iida (08:32)

Shinsō! That is highly irresponsible behavior for a Yūei student! You are supposed to be the model for all General Studies students!

Hitoshi Shinsō (08:32)

thanks

Tenya Iida (08:34)

IT WASN’T MEANT TO BE A COMPLIMENT!

“Pfft…” Izuku laughed in the empty apartment, his chuckle mixing in with the sound of the TV. The three of them went on for a little while longer, Shinsō managing to expertly avoid agreeing or declining the invitation. If Izuku was a gambler, he’d have put money on the fact that Shinsō probably wanted to go because it was likely Kaminari was going to be there, but Izuku would never say that aloud. (He had no doubts that Shinsō would eagerly use his quirk to walk Izuku right off the roof of the tallest building he could find in five minutes.) Even if the two were becoming friends, Shinsō probably wouldn’t agree to such a large social obligation without knowing that Izuku would at least be there, too.

Shōto did not reply to the conversation at any point, which wasn’t unexpected if he was training with Endeavor. From what Izuku could tell, those would wear on well into the afternoon and sometimes even the evenings, depending on the point of focus for that particular session.

He typed out a quick message to his Mom, asking if he would be allowed to go out with the 1-A
students before replying to the group—she would almost certainly say yes, but Izuku wanted to make sure it was still acceptable now that the imminent villain threat seemed to have died down.

Separately, Uraraka sent him a link that he really shouldn’t have followed, but morbid curiosity led him to making a small lapse in judgement.

He ended up on Twitter.

It wasn’t his fault, really. The link was to a meme featuring a cute kitten, and well, one thing led to another, as they say.

Down the rabbit hole he went.

> i dont blame deku for being nervous in the #tddk SportsFest pic. like not to be too dramatic but if i saw shoto todoroki irl i would let him punch me in the face and then id thank him

> when someone asks me why i like tododeku when I know full well its probably a media stunt:

*unintelligible dolphin noises*

> 'deku is quirkless' = ok concept

'our stupid minds can't comprehend how anyone could be so good so we don't perceive any quirk'

= galaxy brain

hhhh #tddk

> roses are red

and deku is green

todoroki u better

love that smol bean
(or ill come take ur kneecaps i s2g)

> literally no one:

me: people who dont believe tddk is real have no rights. anti-tddk's are NOT protected under the constitution. if you are anti-tddk i WILL find you and then you will be sorry buster. unfollow me right fucking now if you are not a tddk believer, this is not a joke. please leave.

i feel like todoroki would pick grass type starters just to spite his dad

> jk he would do it bc they're green just like his bf

> tododeku was literally just like:

what if... i wrote a article and confessed my love for you and we were both boys?? haha just kidding
...unless?

> im just saying that toxic masculinity is a disease and tododeku is the cure.

> the todoroki girls imagine: "i love... you (shy)"

the todoroki that deku actually got: "i must pretend to be indifferent to you to maintain a reasonable distance or we will end up in a gay marriage."

> LMAOOOO MY MOM DOESN'T REALLY GET TODODEKU SHE JUST THINKS THEY'RE LIKE... REALLY CLOSE/BEST FRIEND?? and she said WILL U BE THE TODO TO MY DEKU???

MOM????????????????????????????????

Laughing and blushing bright red all the way up his nape, Izuku forced himself to click out of the godforsaken site.

He had only one more text message unread, and he opened the app and blinked at the words with a thoughtful furrow to his brow.

Nejire-chan!! ⭐️ (09:01)

Did she change her name in his phone? He didn’t really remember adding the flower or exclamation points… but now that he noticed, Izuku figured he would just keep it. This sort of suited her better anyway.

Nejire-chan!! ⭐️ (09:01)

Midoriya!!!! HAPPY SUMMER BREAK!!!! Do you wanna get lunch this weekend?? I have so many ideas for some SUMMER PROJECTS and I want my star writer’s input!!! ☆☆☆

Disbelieving, Izuku shook his head.

In spite of the jeopardy he posed to the Nejire’s paper, something she’d put so much work into keeping alive in spite of the struggling staff, she had never once faltered or let his place on the staff be considered something to bargain over. It was a degree of loyalty that was almost worryingly; that she would sooner let herself be dismissed from Yūei than allow the threats made by the school board towards Izuku become reality… it made his heart glow with warmth and admiration.
With a happy little sigh, he let his phone fall to his chest and closed his eyes. It felt like maybe he could have a normal summer, at least as normal as living in place like Musutafu permitted.

One by one, he took to responding to shooting off messages as appropriate—wishing Shōto a good day and that he was glad to hear the news and that Izuku would be glad to meet with Nejire sometime to talk about her summer ideas—and stretched before settling in for the remainder of his day.

On his first visit back to Room 315 of Kisarazu Hospital after the events of Hosu City, Shōto had purchased a pack of playing cards from a little convenience store attached to the train station. He’d made the decision on a whim, not giving it much thought beyond having them might give him and his mother something to do while chatting.

In retrospect, perhaps it was on account of the simple, positive association they held for him with hospitals; he’d fondly acquainted learning to play poker from Izuku when they stayed in Hosu City General Hospital Room 509, and Shōto thought his mother might enjoy playing it on occasion, too.

That had been about six weeks ago.

“I’ll raise.” His mother pushed eight cotton balls into the middle of the table, surreptitiously impassive.

If you had asked him back then, Shōto would have certainly told you that his competitive nature came from the training and teaching his father had drilled into his head for fourteen straight years. Now, sitting across from his mother’s hospital bed, trying and utterly failing to read her stoic, blank expression... he wasn’t so sure.

She was kicking his ass.

Down to his last ten cotton balls, it’s not like he could raise in return. He was holding a full house, and considering that she’d had four of a kind last turn, it was unlikely she had that strong a hand twice in a row. She was probably bluffing.

Shōto narrowed his eyes, studying her unnervingly calm visage.

Probably.

“I’ll—” he began, but they both jumped when Shōto words were cut-short, his phone buzzing on the table’s surface between them. He’d set it off to the side at some point, and the vibrations made the deck quiver.

Tenya Iida.

Shōto raised a brow. Why would Iida be calling him? He was out with Izuku, Shinsō and the rest of class 1-A at that mall—maybe Izuku needed something and his phone had died?

“Just a moment.”
No longer in *intense-ass-whooping* mode, his Mom smiled at him with all the warmth of a midsummer sunset, nodding quietly and making a *shoo*’ing motion, insisting that he take the call.

Characteristically bereft, Shōto picked up the phone and began, “What is it?”

“Oh—good—hello. Uh. Well.” A pause, which was unlike Iida. “Todoroki-kun, you’re going to want to come downtown as soon as you can. We’re at the police station…”

“There’s been an… incident.”

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Kiyashi Ward was a place polished to marble perfection, glossy and unapologetically alive, and standing at the cusp of it all, the rainbow sheen of everything that could be filled Izuku’s head like the froth of a rushing river.

“It’s so fucking early,” Shinsō shielded his eyes with a hand, looking deeply unhappy to be anywhere outside of his bed.

Kaminari laughed. “Dude, it’s like, noon.”

“Exactly.”

Unaffected by his friend’s attitude, all Izuku could do was beam. He’d never, just, *gone out* with friends, not like this. Not so many at once, and definitely not anywhere so overflowing with energy and people. It was still foreign to think that his peers wanted to spend time with just… just *because*. It had been almost a decade since that was a normal thing for him, and it still took some getting used to.

Kaminari led him and Shinsō towards the rest of Class 1-A, near the center of the ground floor, and Izuku waved when he spotted Uraraka, Iida and the others.

“Hey! Hi everyone! Thanks again for inviting us along to this!”

“I am not here voluntarily,” Shinsō pointed out by raising his hand, but Izuku paid him no mind.

“Wow, there are so many shops, and huh, they really took advantage of the space by building upwards rather than outwards, I wonder how many floors there are—securing a place this size must a huge task, too, I imagine there’s got to at least be—”

Tokoyami huffed a small laugh. “You’re scaring people, Midoriya.”

“Oh, right,” Izuku blushed when he realized a group of children had been walking by and were indeed staring at him, their expressions ranging from confused to concerned. “Ahah. Sorry!”

“Hello, Midoriya! It’s nice to see you.” Iida welcomed him with a jerky wave of his arm, and several of the others politely greeted him and Shinsō as well. The interaction felt a tad formal, and perhaps just a bit awkward by extension, but he knew they meant well and Izuku really liked the 1-A students. They had all been happy to talk to him during the Sports Festival and during their final exams, so while he didn’t know them extremely well, he knew they all had good intentions.

Almost all of them, anyway. Kacchan and Shōto were the only ones not present.
Truthfully, Izuku was a little relieved that Kacchan hadn’t come. While he didn’t like the way things were between them—if they couldn’t be friends, Izuku at least didn’t want to enemies— he had a feeling Kacchan would have ended up making a scene, and he didn’t really feel up for dealing with that right now. Spending time relaxing with his friends… that was all Izuku really wanted to accomplish today. Repairing old friendships could come later.

Not a moment later, as if Kirishima had been reading Izuku’s mind, the redhead swung an arm around his shoulders and let out a sigh. “Look at us, ditched by our boyfriends, while Momo and Jirō are all happy and functional… How’d we end up with the antisocial stubborn ones?”

“I’m still stuck with one,” Izuku said under his breath, nodding towards his fellow 1-C classmate who looked like he was planning homicide while Kaminari chatted his ear off, and those near enough to hear all laughed. “But really, Shōto said he would have liked to come, but he is visiting his Mom today.”

Mina began to fan her eyes, lower lip quivering. “Oh my god, it’s still so weird to hear someone say his name—that’s so freakin’ cute.”

“W-Well, it did take some getting used to…” Embarrassed, Izuku scratched his cheek. “It feels normal now. Calling him Todoroki-kun feels too… formal.”

“I think it’s just very difficult for most of us to imagine him not being formal,” Tsuyu provided with a thoughtful kero, pressing her finger into the corner of her mouth. “Even seeing you two together during that IAE was strange.”

“Speaking of whichhhhh,” Uraraka whined the last part. “Don’t think you’re going to get out of telling me about your date, Deku! I want to know everything.”

The few amongst them who hadn’t been entirely focused on Izuku after his arrival were certainly attuned now, curious ears and eyes pretending not to look or listen too closely. He had an amazing time, honestly, could not have pictured his first date going any better… but he also sort of wanted to maintain at least some semblance of privacy when it came to their relationship—especially considering how little privacy they had to begin with. What would Shōto be comfortable with his classmates knowing?

“Uh-Uhh…”

Yaoyorozu must have sensed his discomfort, because with a graceful smile, she changed the subject under the guise of gathering all of their fellow first years’ attention.

“Alright everyone! Do you all have the lists Aizawa-sensei gave us? Do you know what you’re going to need?”

Mineta dropped a fist into his open palm. “I want to get some tools. A drill, maybe a lockpicking kit…”

Nodding to himself, Izuku was already reaching around to produce his journal, words spoken under his breath. “That’s clever! Having experience in lockpicking could definitely be useful skill for a stealth mission! I wonder if any of the underground Pro’s are adept in that… maybe I could ask Aizawa-sensei…”

“Oh, sweet, sweet Deku-kun,” sighed Uraraka, letting out a exhale from her nose while more of their peers listed off various supplies then intended to buy for their camping trip. She patted the top of his head like one might a toddler. “Never let anyone corrupt your pure heart.”
The boy blinked, tilting his head. “What do you mean?”

Instead of an answer, the girl just shook her head and smiled, looking back to Yaoyorozu as the group answered her query.

“I need shoes for outdoor stuff, none of my current ones are really built for that,” explained Kaminari, and the floating t-shirt beside him that was Hagakure bounced in place.

“Oh, me too! We can go together!”

Kaminari pumped a fist. “Woo, awesome! Wanna come with us, Shinsō?”

“For gods sake, n—”

“Ohhh and there’s a pet store near that big shoe place at the other end of the outdoor part,” Hagakure pointed to her hand-held map, and Shinsō’s brows raised. “They usually have adoption drives on the weekend. Let’s stop there too, okay, Kami?”

Burying his hands in his pockets, Shinsō glared the other way, but conceded. “...Maybe some new shoes wouldn’t hurt.”

“Oh, but they would,” Iida replied, arms moving at break-neck speed. “The guide clearly stated to bring shoes that were comfortable and broken in!”

“But what if they’re too broken in?” asked Ojiro, hand on his chin. “What if they’re so broken in, they’re not useful?”

Iida’s brow furrowed, like a computer in need of a few seconds to process.

“Well in that case—well, but then again—actually...” His eyes scanned their blue guide book intently; were he any more visibly distraught, Izuku would have imagined steam coming from his ears. “THERE’S NO INSTRUCTIONS ON WHAT TO DO IN THAT SCENARIO! WE MUST USE OUR LOGIC TO MAKE THE MOST APPROPRIATE DECISION!”

Undisturbed by Iida’s outburst, Kirishima tapped his chin with a smile. “Well, since so many of us need different things, let’s split up as we need to. Then let’s all meet up here in say... two hours?”

Izuku and Shinsō both jumped when the 1-A students answered with an abrupt, simultaneous chirp of “okay!”

Not for the first time, Izuku found himself marveling at their class dynamic, admiration sullied by just the slightest prickle of envy. He and Shinsō had each other, and for that Izuku was eternally glad, but they didn’t really connect well with other students from the General Department, and it was certainly nothing like 1-A’s resounding, borderline intimidating, synchronization.

“Alright, well, I need luggage.”

“I can go with you, I need some apothecaries.”

“Bug spray for me!”

“Same here, and sunscreen—I burn really easily, kero...”

One by one, Izuku watched them split off into smaller groups, a mild expression on his face while he went through his own mental checklist of things he would need for both his trip to I-Island. Mostly, he expected to be indoors learning hands-on experience (from Professor David Shield!!),
so his list didn’t overlap much with the 1-A students who were going camping in the woods for a week.

It didn’t really occur to him that he was alone until they were all already gone.

Blinking repeatedly, Izuku did a quick sweep around him just to make sure, but he was indeed alone. Well.

That was… disappointing.

It probably didn’t mean anything. They wouldn’t have invited him out in the first place if they didn’t want to be around him, right? If anything, it was his own fault for not speaking up when they were splitting up, so there’s not really any reason to feel bad. Right?

No, no. Of course not. Izuku shook his head; he was just being paranoid.

“Ooohh!” A voice hummed near his ear, and he nearly leapt out of his skin when an arm draped over his shoulder. “You’re from Yūei, aren’t you? The writer! I saw your picture with the son of Endeavor that blew up online!”

Discomforted by the sudden and rather close contact, Izuku tried to glance at the stranger who had recognized him. “U-Uh, yeah, that’s me!”

They were taller than him, dressed in black hood and dark jeans, but the way he had pulled Izuku in made it difficult to turn and glance over his shoulder.

“And you said all of those amazing things after Ingenium was injured… really inspired a lot of heroes, you know.”

Nervously, Izuku scratched his cheek, giving up on catching the other person’s eye and instead focused on regaining his personal space.

“Ah, haha, you really know your stuff, huh!”

“Oh, sure. Listen, can I get your autograph? I’d really appreciate it.”

To Izuku, the idea that he had earned some fans from his writing didn’t bother him; in fact, he was humbled to know people enjoyed his work as much as they did, but there was something just—distinctly uncomfortable about this moment that rivaled any encounter Izuku had previously experienced. Even those girls who had started to cause a scene in the toy store in their enthusiasm to see Shōto had maintained a respectable distance.

At the same time, the discomforting proximity reminded him of almost-encounter he’d had with the villain from last Friday, and it made him feel especially tense. Detective Naomasa said the guy had all sorts of information on him and Nejire, and articles printed out and posted around his apartment—Izuku had imagined the guy’s flat as some kind of conspiracy theorist’s bunker, strung up with red string and the ramblings of a crazy person—and the teen very quickly decided that he didn’t want to stand so close to this stranger anymore.

“It’s such a coincidence, to think I’ve been wanting to meet you all this time, and to run into you here of all places…” As he spoke, Izuku finally managed to get a proper look at the stranger, and he unconsciously licked his lips when he noticed the dry and cracked skin surrounding the man’s own mouth and eyes.

It was a face he instantly recognized, because it was one he saw often amongst the large mess of
All Might’s papers that were always seemingly occupying the teacher’s lounge. Izuku had never particularly asked about it since it was All Might’s business, but he knew enough.

Tomura Shigaraki tightened his hold over Izuku’s shoulder to the point of pain, and his fingers just barely started to close around the column of his exposed throat.

“Almost feels like destiny, doesn’t it, Izuku Midoriya?”
Gratitude

Chapter Summary

Izuku recovers from a rather literal brush with death, but he doesn't have to go through it all alone.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Act natural and take a deep breath,” hissed the voice by his ear. “If you try anything, not only will I kill you, I’ll start on these sheep next. Do you know what my quirk does? Do you have it written down in that little journal of yours? *Do you want to find out?*

Izuku did not know. He never thought it was his business to ask All Might about it, but from the general reports he’d heard about on the news about the USJ, Izuku very much did not want a live demonstration.

Standing as still as his thundering heart and shaking legs would allow, Izuku let out a tiny, “N-No, b-but you’ll get caught f-for sure if you—”

“Oh, definitely. But even so, I could kill twenty… no, *thirty* people before anyone catches me. Leave them as nothing but dust. Do you want to be responsible for that? Or, I could leave them alone, all I want to do is have a little chat with you.”

Panic seized his heart with an immediacy that Izuku found alarming, like he’d been shot through the chest and his body almost buckled. Was Shigaraki bluffing? It wasn’t worth the risk. Even if he was—the fact that people *could* die or get hurt if Izuku didn’t comply was enough.

He had to calm down. There were always options; conveniently, a passage from his heroics textbook came to mind: *The first thing to do in any dangerous situation, especially one concerning hostages, is to assess the level of threat, determined by the number of civilians proportional to the localized size of the incident…* and Izuku could do that! Assessment was literally the one thing he *could* do—except, well, the result of such an assessment was the opposite of reassuring.

To put it simply, the situation was really, *objectively*, bad.

There was such a large likelihood of collateral in a place like this: none of the civilians were alert like they might be during a regular villain incident, and he watched helplessly as families, children, and couples milled about the shopping ward, oblivious to the imminent threat to their lives. What was worse, with the noise and the size of the crowds, not only would Shigaraki have an easy time reaching people, there was a high probability of confusion and people getting trampled from the epicenter of the crisis.

So many people, and they were all in danger, and Izuku couldn’t do a single thing about it.
To demonstrate his compliance, Izuku tried to take a deep, steady breath, though the inhale was shaky and definitely revealed how nervous he felt.

“W-What—what do you wanna talk about?”

Shigaraki loosened his grip just a hair, pleased by the show of deference. “That’s better. Now, why don’t you come have a seat with me?”

Sitting unassumingly on a ledge in the middle of the shopping district, Izuku’s throat had dried up, his voice evaporating with whatever small amount of courage he’d had left.

*I could kill twenty… no, thirty people. Leave them as nothing but dust by the time someone catches me.*

“Look at these people… Any one of them could activate their quirk at any given moment. And yet they don’t, walking around, carefree and stupid… Laws and rules all assume that individuals have *morals*, that there’s something to uphold. That they’re all little cogs working together to make the whole machine of society work together, not realizing they’re just compliant, ignorant pieces in a much bigger game. They’re all so convinced that they’re safe and secure, would never *dream* that someone would just kill them without regard!”

Shigaraki paused, and the mocking quality of his words turned disparaging.

“I hate everything.”

For some silly reason, Izuku was reminded of his father’s quirk, unable to help but wonder if this was something close to how it felt for him. The aftermath of fire breathing, it was as if all the oxygen he’d had in his lungs was spent, but instead of flames, only ragged, broken exhales managed to pass through the quirkless teen’s lips. To even raise his chest beyond that of the tiniest of inhales was too much, too close to dying—although he was barely living by how little breath he had left.

“But you. You are really something else. You and that *Hero Killer*—you both piss me off so badly I can barely *think*!”

His voice switched back and forth from borderline insanity to unequivocal loathing, and Izuku wasn’t sure which was more terrifying. It was taking everything in him not to twitch or move, but keeping the civilians around them from harm’s way was Izuku’s top priority, and Shigaraki was only holding up that end of the bargain so long as Izuku would listen and talk, so he tried to keep his wits about.

“You hate… t-the Hero Killer? He doesn’t… work for you…?”

*Please, please, no one intervene, no one notice—I need to relax, I have to relax, someone will see me panicking. No one can come over here, no one can notice.*

Shigaraki scoffed. “The news loves to make assumptions, doesn’t it, *Voice of a Generation*? Between you and him, the news can’t shut up. Why do you think that is? Why do people love you
both so much? He just destroyed what he didn’t like, and you—you’re even worse. You’re just a vulture that comes after it’s over, tearing away any of the spotlight with your pandering bullshit.”

Some of the villain’s barely-concealed violence began to surface, four of his fingers squeezing around Izuku’s windpipe. The fifth was not quite touching, but the sensation of it hovering less than a centimeter away was as real as any direct contact would have been.

“First the attack on Yūei, my Nomus in Hosu City… you upstaged me both times. You picked apart what I had done and used them as platforms to gain all this popularity, to do what? Tell everyone how great of a job they’re doing? Give every useless dredge a pat on the back and tell them to try again tomorrow? Look at all these people, mindlessly milling about their days because they have people like you telling them how safe and bright and great this world is. Wouldn’t it be a shame if I ruined that illusion? Maybe I should kill them all right now anyway, just to remind them.”

Izuku’s throat constricted sharply, his eyes watering with the urge to stop from coughing, but he had to keep Shigaraki from escalating the situation.

“S-Stop, please, d-do-don’t hurt—a-anyone…”

“What if I did?” Shigaraki practically purred, sounding more manic by the second. “It feels like everything is so slow moving. Waiting, waiting, waiting. I’m so sick of waiting. Think about how much attention it would get if I killed someone here. Wouldn’t that dash out that little light you’re always keen on talking about?”

“Or I could just kill you.” Tone melting into something deeper, like a predator readying to strike, Shigaraki’s bloodlust was so evident Izuku could practically feel it radiating out in waves. “These people wouldn’t save you. They’d panic and run and let you die right before their very eyes. The disbelief that anyone would just kill a stupid, quirkless kid, just because… they don’t understand how helpless they really are. But killing you would be effective—it’s almost poetic! Silencing the Voice of a Generation!”

Shigaraki barked a laugh, using his vice-like grip to wretch Izuku back, dragging him a bit closer. His voice dropped in pitch and in volume, an angry, spiteful hiss.

“What do you think of that?”

Shigaraki let up the pressure on Izuku’s throat marginally, enough that he took a bracing inhale between his grit teeth. Izuku focused his attention to a precision-point, zeroing in on an unremarkable spot on the ground so as to keep himself still.

“IT… it would never work.” He began slowly, measuring his words and his own movements with rapt attention.

Calm down. Calm down.

“You could… you could kill me, but people will never stop believing in the good in this world, and people will just see you as another villain.”

Shigaraki was quiet for several seconds, and Izuku used the opportunity to sweep the vicinity as best he could for any sign of his friends, a security officer—for something that could get him out of this. It couldn’t be too obvious; only someone who was trained to handle a hostage scenario...
(because, loathe though he was to admit it, that’s what this essentially boiled down to) would know not to approach them directly.

“Just another villain…? The Hero Killer cut down people he disagreed with, but he’s somehow memorialized like he’s somehow… special. Why? What’s the difference? At first I thought it was because of you and that stupid story about that kid with the explosions… coming in and stealing all the glory. But the Hero Killer and you are all the world is interested in these days. Nothing about my Nomus, nothing about what I did.”

The clear anger in the villain’s voice put Izuku even more on edge; his pulse pounded, adrenaline-heavy and wild as a storm at sea, underneath the four-fingers that had him in their grasp. The fifth one was completely still, hovering dangerously over Izuku’s adam’s apple.

_Breathe. Calm down._

_Breathe. Calm down._

“The d-difference… the difference is that the Hero Killer had a… reason. Beliefs. People… people admire him b-because they saw him as… an a-agent of change, I think. I don’t think he was in the right, but he had something relatable that… that drove him forward. He didn’t just destroy things and people because he could… it was because he wanted the world to be different. That’s why… that’s why even if you killed me, p-people wouldn’t see you any differently… so long as All Might is around… no one will be afraid of people like you.”

After a moment of consideration, Shigaraki repeated, “All Might.”

There was an uncertainty to his tone that Izuku didn’t find particularly reassuring, like he’d somehow never heard the name before and was testing it out for the first time, trying to determine if it sounded nice on his tongue. His mild curiosity quickly divulged into something much more sinister.

“Oh. Oh, oh. All Might. All Might. That’s… thank you, Midoriya!” he almost sounded gleeful, and it made Izuku’s skin crawl. “I feel like there’s been a weight lifted from my chest, like all the dots are connected. It’s all because of All Might.”

In his excitement, Shigaraki’s grip became even tighter, his fingers almost completely closing. He rather did not notice or simply did not care that he was essentially suffocating Izuku, and what little room the teen had to breathe vanished.

_If I inhale right now, his quirk will definitely kill me…_  
The air became impossibly thin, his head heavy, all of his senses following soon after. Grey spots blurred his periphery, swirling in an onrush of dizziness.  
He was dry drowning. Breathe and die, or hold his breath and go unconscious?

_No! No, you’re fine, don’t pass out! You can’t! People might die!_  
_Nose—try through your nose—control it, slow—_  

“These people are able to smile without worry,” Shigaraki rambled, too caught in the throes of whatever epiphany their conversation had granted him. “Because All Might smiles just as thoughtlessly. You’re not the cause, you’re just a byproduct… it’s the heroes who fool them into thinking they’re safe that allows them to do this! It’s as if nothing could hurt them!”
It was painful, breathing in just enough to keep himself from losing consciousness when his lungs thrashed, begging to be relieved.

“Ahh, I’m so glad we could talk! Thank you, Midoriya!”

As if remembering he was there, Shigaraki paused, blinked, and turned to Izuku. He slackened his grip just as his watering eyes spilled over, hot tears staining his cheeks as air returned again.

“Oh, what’s this? You’re not going to struggle, now, are you? You don’t mind letting all of these people die because of you?”

Not trusting his own voice, Izuku said nothing, fighting every flash of impulse in his limbs that was demanding him to move, to fight, to struggle, to run, to do something. He had to push down both flight and fight instincts, not wanting to risk Shigaraki’s bluff, but what would he—

“Hey, Deku!”

Never had he been so simultaneously relieved and terrified to hear the voice of someone he knew.

“I thought you were going to follow Tsuyu and I, but I...”

His eyes, while not truly crying, were still supplying a steady stream of moisture that tracked down his cheeks; his skin was pale, and he was covered with a sheen of sweat from head to toe. He couldn’t even fathom what sort of expression he might have been making, but judging by the abrupt and uncomfortable look Uraraka gave him when she pushed through the crowd, it couldn’t have been very good.

“Is this a friend of yours...?” She slowed to a stop about a dozen paces shy of them. “No... no, wait —”

No, no, no—Izuku felt his entire body tense when Shigaraki shifted, as if he was considering getting up.

“I-I’m fine! Everything’s normal!” he pleaded, voice hoarse, but just as soon as he did the hand on his throat was gone.

In a fluid movement, Shigaraki stood up and detangled himself from Izuku’s side, almost apologetic as he said, “Oh, I thought you were alone! Excuse me.”

Wheezing and coughing, Izuku barely heard him mutter a few final words before disappearing into the crowds.

“Follow me and I’ll kill as many people as I can reach.”

[PRESENT]

Nothing was really processing.
Shōto was taking in visual and auditory stimuli without any sort of meaning or weight. No quality or depth, single-minded in his movements, crossing from point A to B to C as quickly and effectively as he could.

It was something close to worry, he supposed. But worry felt sadder than this. He’d slipped into something more familiar, more hollow. Closed off.

Disconnected. Unbothered.

It had been so long since he had felt nothing at all. Shōto found it comforting, even liberating once, not to let anything nettle under his skin. It was what he did when he didn’t know how to feel—some people’s hearts would beat out of their chests, but his had always stopped altogether.

He’d hung up the phone and let his arm fall slack to his side almost a minute ago, head so compounded with a million different thoughts he literally could not move.

Until, at last, a touch gentle as snowfall brushed his sleeve, but Shōto’s well-honed instincts reared defensively at the graze of pressure and he smacked away the source before it could become a threat.

Except—he turned and—his *Mom*—

An intravenous injection of ice zipped through his veins, lightning-quick. It was the only time in his entire life his quirk had activated so fast and so forcefully that he could feel his body temperature drop, drop, drop—like his heart into his stomach, his voice into his throat. He could feel everything again, all at once.

His Mom was holding her hand to her chest, eyes widened in surprise, and Shōto heard just the faintest of exhales as she let out the breath she’d been holding. Shōto, for his part, felt like he could barely stay standing, the betrayal to his own body for reacting in such a way; it wasn’t the first time he had accidentally hurt someone on account of his lack of control, but to have hit his own mother’s hand because he was overly emotional was unforgivable.

“I—I didn’t mean to—I’m sorry—”

Like molten silver, he was struck with just the faintest relief when the reservation in her gaze softened, taking on an imperceptible smoothness around the edges as her lips turned up into a slight smile.

“I know, sweetheart. I’m just fine.” Quietly, calmly, she took a step closer to him. “What’s happened?”

“I just—I have to go. Izuku is… something happened. I have to go.”

The woman bit her lip, watching her son gather his belongings in a rush. “Are you going to be okay?”

“Yes,” Shōto said steadily, determined not to lash out again. It probably wasn’t the right thing to do, but Shōto leaned into his old habits, reestablishing the temperance he’d worked so hard to achieve through a decade of repression. Forcing calm into his voice. Avoidance of feelings altogether.

It was cold and empty, but decisive, and right now he needed to be that—to be whatever version of himself would get him to the police station in downtown Musutafu as fast as possible.
“I’ll call you when I can,” Shōto said on his way out the door, hesitating only for the briefest of moments. “Goodbye, Mother.”

And with a quick *snap* of the door, he was gone.

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Shōto drummed his fingers over his knee as the train blew by stop after stop, tempted to text Yaoyorozu or Iida, but he knew it would be in vain. What he was really craving was an outlet for his anger, and berating either of the class reps for letting Izuku end up totally alone wasn’t right.

Indeed, Izuku had just told him when they were out for *tanabata*, he didn’t want everyone to be worrying over him all the time. How ironic; Shōto was probably going to develop a stomach ulcer before he even reached the police station.

He couldn’t decide how to feel, so he kept trying to force it away. To feel nothing at all, at least for now, but little burrowing roots of rage and worry continued to slip through his stubborn resistance, usually in the form of questions.

What did the League want with Izuku? Why *him*? There had been a number of other Yūei students at the mall—was it really just because he was conveniently alone at the time? Or had it been planned? Why *didn’t* they make an attempt to hurt him? The has-been villain from last Friday had intended to *kill* him, and this villain let Izuku walk away without a scratch? What gives? Had it been another botched attempt to get to All Might, seeing as the two were so close?

*No. Stop. Worry about that later.*

Izuku had to be his primary focus right now.

By the time his stop finally came around, Shōto jumped from the platform and practically vaulted down the stairs of the station. He’d requested a rideshare to be waiting for him the moment he arrived, and they were mercifully on time.

No longer did he restlessly tap his fingers, fists sitting balled in his lap while the city crawled by from the window. Half-moon imprints were wearing into his palms from the force of his nails, and he could feel the heat of anger gathering in his chest, constantly tempering himself against the burning sensation.

*Get ahold of yourself. You’re not a child anymore, you should have better control of your quirk. You’re not a slave to your emotions.*

God, what Shōto would have given to tell the voice of his father in his head to shut the fuck up. Instead, he said a quiet wish to the stars, God, or whoever might hear him.

*I’ll be there soon. Just please be okay.*

Shōto’s eventual exit from the car was as mannerless a display as they came. Barely waiting for the driver to park, he jumped out immediately and ran without a word towards the front of the building. It was nearing nightfall, the sunset starting to dip over the horizon and model the world after a copper glow, but he cared for none of that.

He knew it was irrational. Emotions were always irrational. But he would not know calm again
until he could see Izuku with his own two eyes, hear his voice, make sure he wasn’t hurt.

Stupid, stupid, stupid, you should have been there—Shoto chastised himself with each step, wretching open the door to the lobby and walking to the officer stationed behind the desk, separated from the lobby by some kind of plexiglass.

The middle-aged man behind the desk had round glasses, scaley skin and disconcertingly thin pupils. Errantly, Shōto wondered if his quirk manifested with some kind of reptilian characteristics, but he knew better than to ask.

“Excuse me, are you able to tell me if Izuku Midoriya is still here?”

The guy gave Shōto a careful look. “You’re Endeavor’s kid, right?”

“Yes,” he grit teeth, hoping beyond hopes this wasn’t about to become some kind of fan-encounter. Please, just not right now.

“You can wait for him, he’s still giving his witness statement.”

Forgoing the temptation to freeze and shatter the wall to force his way through, Shōto forced himself to take a deep breath. Just as he started to turn away from the desk, the sight of a familiar green head of hair pulled his attention like a magnetic, but…?

Ah.

Seated far off into the room, tucked in the corner next to some dusty magazines, was an older woman who Shōto immediately took to be Izuku’s mother. If the hair hadn’t given her away, than the unmistakable emerald eyes and round, expressive features would have certainly given her away. The striking similarity would have been almost fascinating, were the circumstances different.

Carefully, he crossed the room and tried to keep his voice calm so as not to startle her. “Excuse me.”

Mrs. Midoriya’s head shot up, her expression crestfallen and vulnerable—and much too similar to Izuku’s for Shōto to find comforting. It was like seeing that same heartbreak replicated in the face of his boyfriend, and sadness was not an expression he saw Izuku wear often.

“Oh—oh, are you—you’re Shōto Todoroki.” The woman began to get up, lips turning up into a glowing smile as she bowed slightly. “I’ve heard so much about you from Izuku, I’m surprised to see you here—didn’t all of Izuku’s friends give their witness statements at the mall?”

Of all the things Shōto had imagined for the day, he hadn’t expected to meet Izuku’s mother. It made sense that she was here, but actually meeting her—what was he supposed to say?

 Unsure, Shōto began, “Izuku and I are not friends.”

“Oh-Oh, is that so?”

She seemed confused, so Shōto elaborated.

“We’re dating.”

“You don’t say?” The woman let out a small, exasperated laugh. “Here, why don’t you take a seat? You look like you ran all the way here. I’m very glad to meet you, my Izuku talks about you all the
Shōto felt a tiny swell of pride that he immediately tried to extinguish.

Clearing his throat, he said, “Is that so?”

“Oh, yes. Actually—don’t tell him I said that. Izuku gets embarrassed easily, I wouldn’t want him to be upset with me.”

It took everything in him not to laugh. This was the absolute worst case scenario under which he could be meeting Izuku’s mother; it wasn’t an appropriate time or place to laugh.

“Consider it forgotten,” he managed, weakly. Shōto was no expert at offering sympathy, but he still felt compelled to try. “I—I am sorry that we’re meeting under these circumstances.”

The warmth of her responding smile was disarming; it was immediately evident that this was the woman who had raised Izuku. Not only was the way she smiled uncannily close to her son’s, there was something subtle and inviting in the gentleness of her entire being that caused Shōto’s nerves to unfurl around the edges.

“That’s okay, I don’t think anyone wants to be in this situation… But at least now we’ll be waiting with company.”

Shōto felt his resolve starting to slip away. For how high-strung he’d been all afternoon, he couldn’t help but let his guard down in Mrs. Midoriya’s company. Her entire presence was soothing, even in her distress over what had happened.

Which, he recognized, was fucked up on multiple counts.

Shōto wanted to apologize. He wasn’t even sure what he was sorry about, but he wanted to anyway—wanted to do something to put her and her son first during this, because this was not about him, but he could think of nothing to say.

This was her son, she should be the one seeking comfort, not the other way around. She should be entitled to feel any rage, sadness, guilt—anything that came to her. But instead, she was making Shōto feel calm even beneath the film of regretful acceptance. She had already come to terms with the way of things, and was visibly unhappy about it, but there was such a purity of heart beneath the surface that even the clouds could not obscure completely.

“I’m sorry if you rushed to get here just to sit and wait. Why don’t we use this time to talk?” suggested Izuku’s mother, voice apologetic, tired, and somehow cheerful all at once. “I’ve been telling Izuku to invite you over for dinner already. You’re in the Hero Course, right?”

He chewed on the words for a moment before answering. “Yes. I’m in 1-A.”

“Do you like it?”

What a strange question. No one had ever asked him anything like that before.

Shōto had been taught never to let his guard down, especially not during the aftermath of disaster. That was when some of the worst hands of fate were played, but…

“More than I ever expected to.”

He was only human, and despite his years of training, he had no defense strong enough that it
would not crumble in the face of the Midoriyas. Their kindness was the undisputed embodiment of every weakness Shōto had ever known, blinding and vibrant as sunlight.

In the end, Tomura Shigaraki could not be found.

Sitting across from Detective Naomasa in the police station’s interrogation room, Izuku felt uncomfortable. Not with the fact that he was being interrogated, because, really, it wasn’t like that. The room just provided a convenient place for them to talk privately, and the table supplied optimal spatial real estate for the man to splay out all manner of folder, photos, newspaper clippings and the like.

No, he felt discomfort for much more selfish reasons.

Being here, talking through this—it was important, and Izuku knew it was important, but…

I want to go home.

Izuku was tired. Hungry. The detective had offered him food, but Izuku’s stomach tightened uncomfortably every time he thought about eating, so he was stuck. The police station was cold, and quiet, and he hadn’t gotten to see his Mom or talk to his friends since being taken to the police station, didn’t get to tell Shōto what happened, didn’t get to actually shop for the things he wanted, didn’t get to spend time with his friends like he envisioned.

It wasn’t that he was angry, or even upset. But the day had reached some peak level of awfulness that very much made Izuku just want to crawl into bed and try again tomorrow.

It took hearing his own name to rouse him from his thoughts, blinking up at Detective Naomasa.

“Taking down All Might does remain a constant… anyway, thank you, Midoriya. You’ve been a great help today."

“Help?” Eyes unfocused, Izuku tightened his fists in his lap and stared down at them. “I didn’t do anything. Shigaraki got away, and I—”

“Hey, now.” The detective levied him a reassuring look. “You’re not supposed to detain people, you kept yourself safe and everyone else around you safe, too. You did the right thing. The fact that you maintained your head and didn’t panic is impressive by itself.”

Izuku thought that sounded nice. He probably would have believed it if he wasn’t so tired, but his frazzled brain was neither convinced nor willing to argue the point.

“That’s enough for tonight, thank you for all the information. Between you and the kids in 1-A, you all sure give me a lot of work,” joked the detective, and Izuku smiled a little at the attempt. He appreciated that Detective Naomasa must feel this sort of emotional and mental exhaustion all the time, working such a frustrating job of chasing leads and trying to investigate villains, yet the man still had such a strong and admirable spirit.

Tired, Izuku returned the man’s smile with a weaker version of his own. He couldn’t let fear slow him down to break his resolve… he had always wanted to be like All Might, someone who would smile no matter how impossible or difficult the circumstances.
Izuku pulled himself to his feet and followed Naomasa from the police station. Instead of exiting through the front, he was led through a hallway that went by the detective’s office and he gathered his bookbag before heading out a side door. It released him almost into an alley of sorts, and Izuku was surprised to see the day had switched over to night. A few resilient stars struggled against the city’s light pollution, half-forgotten dustings sprinkled over the skies.

Izuku began to ask Detective Naomasa if his Mom was around the building anywhere when a flicker of movement down the alley caught his eye.

“All Might?” Half-choking on his surprise, Izuku coughed as the Symbol of Peace’s skeletal form jogged to a stop in front of him.

“Thank goodness you’re alright,” the man heaved a sigh of relief, and Izuku jolted when he felt a bony hand rest atop his head. All Might didn’t even appear to realize he was doing it, patting Izuku’s hair out of instinct, and the action made Izuku’s throat seize-up, remembering once again that he really was only fifteen. A very childish part of him wanted to ask All Might not to stop; Izuku could never recall being on the receiving end of that kind of gesture before… it was the quintessential feeling of comfort, reassurance, and safety, all conveyed in such a simple, natural action.

Once he did return his hand, however, Izuku peeked up through his messy fringe. “All Might?”

The hero, who looked like he was about to start speaking to the detective, blinked at Izuku.

“Do you ever have moments when you feel… powerless?”

Soft and solemn, All Might said, “Of course. All the time.”

“Really…?”

Exhaling deeply, All Might looked to the blur of the night sky, darkness warped by the yellow street lamps.

“Someone out there could be in danger—probably is in danger—as we speak. They could even be calling out to me, but I can’t hear them. I can only do the best I can to save people that I can reach… one person can do extraordinary things, but I am only human, too. No matter how powerful we think we are, we all have weaknesses, and we can only do so much. When I hear stories on the news about the people I couldn’t reach… it feels like I failed them. When I think of all I didn’t do, it feels like any power I have slips away.”

The gentle and deliberate truth that underpinned All Might’s words felt like the sight of a new moon; Izuku knew there was a reality beyond what he could see, if he could look hard enough he’d be able to trace the faint light blue outline that eclipsed it from view. A beautiful reflection of light that was always there even when he couldn’t quite see it, the words settled somewhere between thoughtful acceptance and insightful humility.

Maybe it was just the exhaustion catching up to him, but Izuku could feel the corners of his eyes prick with tears. All Might tilted his head down again and offered a smile, lacking none of its usual warmth.

“But I remind myself… I’m not acting alone. We are greater than the sum of our parts. People call me the Symbol of Peace, but that’s not really true. I’m just one pillar of hundreds, thousands, that work together to keep society upright. You’re an important part of that, too. You have powers that I
don’t—I can’t reach everyone with the same spirit you have, can’t deliver comfort right into the minds of the people who need it most. Your power can heal a different kind of wound, the kind that can’t be seen after a fight, and there’s no one else quite like you, my boy. Do you understand?”

Quiet, Izuku could only nod. It felt like his heart was going to cave in. His ribs were restrictive, too small to contain the rush of gratitude and appreciation he felt for All Might in that moment.

“Now,” Naomasa said. “It’s late, and there’s some people who have been waiting to see you.”

“Izuku?”

His breath caught. “Mom?”

It was a visible thing, watching the relief and once-removed grief break over her face as they met halfway across the alley. “Izuku, I can’t take this anymore... I-I don’t know think my heart can stand it. I thought—”

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry.” The apologies were immediate, physically pained at the image of his Mom in tears. “I’m okay. Please don’t cry. I’m sorry.”

She held a tissue in her right hand and all the worry of the mother who could have lost her only child in the other, gripping her heart. If Izuku had been exhausted, his Mom was worn paper-thin, and it took him standing there with her to realize that he didn’t really want to go home, because it was her that brought home to their little apartment. He could smell his childhood soaked into her clothes, a byproduct of the detergent they’ve used for years. Lavender.

One of those human intuitions, like the feeling of being watched or that someone was behind you, Izuku looked up from his Mom and saw a police officer with feline-like features standing with—

Oh.

It was Shōto, but it wasn’t Shōto like Izuku had ever seen before.

He was looking at Izuku as if he wasn’t fully convinced he was real, like if he moved too quickly it might make him disappear, abrupt as smoke tendrils swept away in a summer breeze. Indeed, no sooner did the thought occur to him did a light gust billow through Musutafu, causing his mismatched hair to wisp around his ridiculously pretty face.

“Oh—oh, right—” His Mom squared her shoulders suddenly and stepped away from Izuku, and no sooner did she step away was Shōto in front of him. Actually, not just in front of him—because he was kissing Izuku so suddenly it took his breath away, shamelessly ignoring their present company. A kiss that could drown out everything, like the way clouds dissolve on a sunset, it was so brief but mended parts of him that were otherwise unreachable. Warmed him with fire in his pulse, but brought him back down by the cold brush of his lips on Izuku’s own.

Izuku didn’t drag the moment on as much as he would have liked, very aware that his Mom and All Might were right there, but he could not help but smile as their lips pulled apart. After the day he’d had, something finally felt right. The sheer magnetism of Shōto’s gravity was enough to have returned Izuku to himself, like the absence of someone reliably affectionate had made staying on his own orbital path impossible.

Shōto didn’t say anything at first, hands brushing through Izuku’s hair. He didn’t realize until just then, how much he needed to feel hands that promised only to be sensitive and thoughtful and wouldn’t feel like a noose around his neck.

Izuku felt so much, and not enough, for the breadth of love he had to give. Being with All Might,
his Mom, and Shōto—it was like seeing red. Not in rage, but if *red* itself was an emotion, touching upon a depth of something that couldn’t be expressed in sensical words and reasoning. Red, in the way of being so angry with himself that he could have died and lost all of this that it made his heart ache; frustration that set his blood to a boil with the villain who would have been responsible. It wasn’t fury, and he sought no violence. It was something beyond words, but necessitated them anyway. Like breaking a bone out of place so it could be properly set, his whole body felt something that had to hurt so that it could heal. Red, in the biting sting left behind by a slap of disappointment for his own inaction, but it lingered with a strange sort of pride for the fact that he had survived anyways, even against the better odds of fate. His whole body felt vulnerable, his hands shaking, his heart clenched tight in his chest. Red, like the way his heart felt when Shōto kissed his freckles. Red, like he would never let these people worry for him again. Red, like a promise.

It took All Might awkwardly clearing his throat for them to back away from each other, and Shōto finally found his words, whispering them in time with their hands threading together.

“I am so glad you are okay.” He sighed. “If the Detective would kindly turn over any leads he has, I will be glad to arrange a few homicides.”

“I didn’t just hear you say that,” snorted Naomasa, shaking his head.

Izuku and his Mom laughed, but All Might was a little taken aback by the whole thing and ended up, sputtering a laugh that was a half-cough.

Hearing that familiar, painful wheeze, Izuku remembered that the Symbol of Peace had not yet made his real appearance public knowledge, and as much as he would have liked to stay there and enjoy their company all night, it was probably time for him to go.

“Good bye, um.” Izuku bowed. “Detective, Sir.”

Naomasa nodded to the cat-like officer. “Sansa, make sure they all get home okay.”

A few more pleasantries were exchanged, polite goodbyes and a few relieved laughs. Izuku was more than a little horrified to learn that Shōto and his Mom had been talking for almost an hour—*oh god, please Mom, please tell me you didn’t embarrass me*—but it was all with a lightness guiding their way as they were escorted to a police cruiser to be taken home.

At the gates of the station, All Might and Detective Naomasa waved to the car as it took off into the night.

“So?”

Deflating with a sigh, the detective looked to his friend.

“Based off what we can tell, it appears to have been a coincidental meeting. But between the attempt last week, and the USJ attack, it seems fairly likely that he and other students are actively being considered target at this point.”

Solemn, All Might said nothing.

“The school will have to take extra precautions at a time like this… you know what they say, the brighter the light, the greater the shadow… These kids are really changing the world and I don’t
think they even realize it. But some people really hate change.”

The Symbol of Peace remained silent, thoughtful as he stared at the place where the car had vanished around the corner.

“Um, Toshi, one more thing.” Naomasa buried his hands in his pockets and turned to his old friend. “I trust your judgement, and you know the situation better than I do. I just want to ask: are you sure it’s… responsible to keep on like this? The kid, he is… he might be better off—”

“I’m sure, Tsukauchi.” The hero paused, meeting the dark gaze of the detective. “This is his dream. He was given the choice from Nezu. I won’t take that away from him.”

The two men were silent for a while after that, but eventually, Naomasa cracked a smile.

"He reminds me of someone, you know."

"He does." All Might sighed, his own smile reluctant and twinged by nostalgia. "Too much, sometimes."

Naomasa seemed to pick up on something left unsaid, and he buried his hands in his pockets with a steady exhale.

"That's why he can never know about All for One, isn't it?"

Nothing else was said, but, really, sometimes silence speaks louder than words.

Chapter End Notes

UPDATE FEB 28 2020:
after letting this fic rest for a month, I've finally decided how I want to continue!! so please stay tuned for the SEQUEL! it will pick up where this chapters (old) version left off... hatsume and nejirie are coming up, along with summer shenanigans!! thanks for your on-going support and love, please take good care and see you next time!!!!

woowowoowoowo thank you all so much for reading and your amazing support ■...■
ive been dealing with a lot of stressful things lately in my personal life so it's been really nice to log in and see such an outpouring of love for this story, writing these two dorks falling in love has been an amazing journey.

either way, thank you for reading and supporting me! ive been writing a bit of kimetsu no yaiba/demon slayer to keep from getting burn out, feel free to take a peak at that if you're a fan of that show/manga as well.

.*・°` PLUUUUUUUUUS ULTRA!! .*・°
Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!