Varietă of Circumstance

by Chalcet

Summary

When you’re a Quirkless orphan on the streets, you have to fight twice as hard for just about everything. Survival. Respect. Allies. Most of the time, you’re just barely scraping by. And, for that matter, so is everyone else around you.

So Izuku does what he does best: he helps. Sometimes that means mediating gang disputes; other times, it’s something as simple as grocery shopping. It's not like anyone else will, after all.

With so many hopes riding on him, there's only ever been one option. Quirk or no Quirk, UA or no UA—he's going to become a hero.

Notes

See the end of the work for notes.
People liked to say if you were going to be poor in Akutou, you’d better do it on the south side of
the river, and keep it quiet, too.

That, Izuku supposed, was the key difference between the two cities. The poor had no place in
Musutafu. At the very least, in Akutou, they did.

Nothing would change the fact they were untouchables, though. Those who were more cynical
remarked the only reason they hadn’t been evicted from the park was because they’d pitched their
tents behind a thick copse of trees, so no one from the north bank could see them. Others preferred
to think it was because someone out there recognized those here had nowhere else to call home. It
was calculated idealism—otherwise, how could you live?

The upside, at least, was that no one could see Izuku almost trip over himself hauling a bucket of
water up from the river. He righted himself, shook out his throbbing arm, and stumbled the rest of
the way to the tents.

"Uematsu!"

An elderly woman, eyes pinched from squinting too long against harsh winter winds, hobbled out
from one of the tents.

"Oh, my. Right there's fine—don't strain your arm. You can leave it."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, yes. Thank you, Izuku."

With a huff of relief, he set the bucket down and rolled his sore shoulders. A couple others came
by to check the water, musing what to cook; Takenaka, a hunchbacked man only a year or so
younger than Uematsu, murmured a soft pardon and scooped out a bowlful to water his plants.
Uematsu rummaged in her coat pockets until she found a cellophane-wrapped candy and dropped
it into Izuku's hand with a kind smile.

"Why don’t you stay with us tonight? It's the least we can do."

"I couldn't impose," Izuku demurred. Not to mention it could be dangerous: there was a reason
why he never slept out in plain sight, or in the same place two nights in a row. At least Akutou
had enough net cafes he could hop between them for a couple weeks without repeating. "Is Mr.
Ito around? I wanted to ask—"

His phone rang. Instantly on alert, he flipped it open.

“Hello?”

“I heard there’s a dispute around block nine. Are you close?”

Well, fuck.

Just a dispute, apparently—not a war. Soon enough, though, it’d turn into one. They were rarer
nowadays, but no less dangerous. Which gangs could it be? Block nine, block nine… Nothing
came to mind.
He’d have to go in blind, then. He drew in a breath, and out of habit, checked his pockets. Switchblades accounted for. Stun gun ready. Block nine: six minutes away. Five if he pushed it.

“Yeah. I’ve got it.”

The line cut, and after making a hasty gesture to Uematsu—she knew by now what this all meant—he took off.

"Wait— Izuku, wait!"

At the shout, he faltered and glanced back. Behind him, a middle-aged man with sunken cheeks and disheveled hair stopped to catch his breath.

_Him._

Izuku grit his teeth.

"Mr. Okizaki, I really need to go—"

"Just last week you came in with a knife in your arm," Okizaki said sharply; despite Uematsu's warning, he pressed on. "Now you're going to run off and play cleanup for the pros again?"

"Mr. Okizaki, please, I'm not going to debate—"

"No, listen," he interrupted, taking a step closer; Izuku flinched and took a step back. "I've said this before and I'll say it again: the system's a speeding car, and we're just dirt under its wheels. Be realistic, Izuku. Do you think they'll ever give a damn about us?"

Very pleasantly, Izuku smiled.

“I’m sorry, but I don’t have time for this.”

He turned and ran.

Calculated idealism: because otherwise, cynicism would eat away at your insides, until you crumbled in on yourself.

No one was around block nine. It wasn’t hard to see why.

Shouting, light gunfire, crashing and cursing. The dispute had gone south after all, it seemed. Back flat against the building wall, Izuku inched along, until he was right at the corner, and listened.

Fifteen people. No, around ten. That would make five per gang, assuming this was a two-way fight, even split. He palmed his stun gun and forced himself to breathe. Know your triggers. Avoid dust, dry air. Above all—keep calm.

And yet, no matter how many times he did this, he couldn’t silence the fear rattling in his bones.
Izuku, promise me—

All he could do was ignore it. He tightened his trembling fingers into a fist, inhaled, and before he could lose his nerve, stepped into the open.

“Excuse me!”

All eyes turned to him. A startled bullet clipped his face, drawing a thin line of blood. He didn’t move.

Twelve people. No one familiar. Some injured. One or two on the ground, dead or dying. Could be worse. Izuku dropped his hands to his sides, empty palms outward, and smiled.

“I’m sorry for interrupting, but I’m going to have to ask you all to stop.”

Someone snorted. It was a wiry man, with quills all over his back, like a porcupine.

“No, look,” a woman hissed, exhaling smoke with each word. Potentially a fire-breather, or perhaps just a smokescreen. “It’s Deku. Let’s hear him out.”

Recognition sparked and rippled through both gangs.

Is that really him? He’s just a kid— Who now? You’ve never heard of him? Deku, the mediator—

So he had a title now. Well, he couldn’t really complain. Izuku waited patiently until it was silent, and all attention returned to him.

“Thank you.” His chest started to tighten, but his smile stayed fixed in place. Keeping the fear at bay. “I’m sure you’re all upset with each other, but I’d like to see this resolved peacefully. Can we talk?”

“Talk?” another man echoed derisively. Mutant-type, compound eyes. Potentially other insect qualities. “We didn’t come here to talk.”

“Arthro, wait—”

Too late. Arthro lunged forward.

“Get out of our way, brat!”

There were always a couple of these people, every time. Izuku wasn’t even surprised anymore. He pivoted away from the attack (too wide, telegraphed), caught the man by the arm, and threw him down to the ground. He grabbed his stun gun and jabbed it downwards. Arthro convulsed.

“You little—”

Three seconds, and he was down. Izuku leapt back, and a punch coated in some fluid—acid, perhaps?—swung through the space where his head had just been. A blink; pain flared in his cheek as a clawed hand raked a messy gash across it. An emitter and a second mutant, then. He ducked under the next two swings.

“I’m not here to fight.” He raised his voice, so everyone could hear. His cheek stung, and his breaths were coming in shorter spurts now. He kept smiling. A flash of the stun gun; the claw mutant dropped. “I just want to make sure no one dies today.”
The acid-user growled. “You’re one cheeky kid, saying something like that.”

“Corroder!” a green-skinned man barked out. Could be chlorophyll. “That’s enough!” One of the leaders, then.

“He took out Arthro,” Corroder snapped. Izuku held up his hands placatingly.

“I’m sorry. But he should be able to get up soon.”

True enough, the compound-eyed man was beginning to stir.

“Stand down, Corroder,” the green-skinned man repeated.

“Razor, you too,” the smoke-breathing woman called out. Most likely the other gang leader. The claw mutant pulled back, a sharp frown on his face, but otherwise, didn’t protest. Corroder’s glare lingered on Izuku for a moment longer, until she finally stepped away. Arthro followed, staggering slightly.

“Thank you.” Blood was beginning to drip down the side of his chin, and Izuku absently wiped it off. Practice kept his smile steady. “Before we talk, I’ll tend to anyone who’s injured. Who has the worst wounds?”

Arthro’s lip curled.

“You’d do that for thugs like us?”

“For humans,” Izuku corrected lightly. “I’d do this for humans.”

There wasn’t any debate after that.

None of the wounds turned out to be life-threatening, or needed surgery, something Izuku was thankful for. The tension hadn’t completely left the atmosphere, and he had to fight not to jump at every random sound, but no one bothered him as he cleaned and dressed their injuries. Like usual, he smiled, and tried to make small talk. It paid off—as he went on, he could sense they were opening up to him more.

Partway through, though, his lungs constricted, and a coughing fit seized him. His own fault for forgetting to warm up, before—he’d overextended himself with that short burst of fighting. At the very least, he hoped he wouldn’t start wheezing. That’d make it hard to talk.

“Asthma?”

Izuku stiffened when the smoke-breathing woman, whose broken wrist he was splinting, spoke up, voice low.

“Relax. I’ve had it long enough I can recognize the signs.” She quirked a wry grin. “Mine flares up whenever I overuse my Quirk. Not fun.”
“Oh. I see.”

“You know”—she grimaced when Izuku tied the splint into place—“I didn’t really know what to expect when I first heard about you. You’re pretty much a local celebrity.”

He smiled bashfully. “I’ve been told.”

“Well, if you’d be willing to humor me—” She gestured to the side, where all the people Izuku had finished treating were hovering about, murmuring amongst themselves. “Why are you doing all this?”

His smile strained, only for a split second.

“If I don’t, who else will?”

The woman laughed.

“Fair point.”

The last one to be treated was Razor, who only had some scrapes. He didn’t talk much, but offered a quiet mutter of thanks at the end, then jerked his chin towards the bandaged gash on Izuku’s cheek.

“Sorry ‘bout that,” he said grudgingly.

“It’s fine.” Izuku flashed him a reassuring smile. “Don’t worry about it.”

Now that everyone was patched up, the talks could begin in earnest. The two gangs had been arguing over the border between their territories, and eventually, they agreed on a new border that made their territories about even. Izuku extracted a promise from them not to fight again—or, if they had a serious dispute, to come to him instead.

Miasma, the smoke-breathing woman, approached him after they’d settled everything.

“There’s one last thing I want to ask you,” she began. Her tone made Izuku straighten.

“What is it?”

“Are you planning on becoming a hero?”

He didn’t hesitate.

“Yes.”

Miasma scrutinized him a bit longer. Then, she huffed out a smoky laugh.

“What a kid.” She turned back. “Tell that guy from the League, what’s-his-face—tell him we’re not interested.”

“You sure, boss?”

“Absolutely.”

“The League?” Izuku couldn’t help but repeat. “Do you mean the League of Villains?”

“That’s what they called themselves, yeah. They wanted us to join them.”
He’d heard rumors about them, and it always set him on edge.

“Do you know what they’re after?”

“They don’t tell you the specifics until you’ve agreed to join,” the green-skinned man, Chloroflash, interjected. He nodded curtly at Miasma. “We got the same offer. All they said was that they wanted to dismantle the hero system.”

“That’s pretty generic,” Izuku muttered, although he still felt uneasy. He gave Chloroflash a cautious glance. “Are you going to join?”

“Shigaraki’s a nutcase,” he said flatly. “So no.”

Izuku smiled. “That’s a relief. Thank you.”

Chloroflash shrugged. His interest in conversation apparently gone, he turned away. Miasma lingered for a moment longer.

“Don’t die, Deku.”

*Izuku, promise me you’ll do whatever it takes to survive.*

He touched his fist to his chest.

“I won’t.”

Bar Takodana was bustling as usual when Izuku arrived for work. Technically, it was illegal for him to be employed there, but it catered to those who tended to find themselves on the wrong side of the law, so no one ever made much of a fuss over it. That character was thanks to the bar’s owner: Nakano, a lanky woman who swept her blue bangs low over one side of her face and smiled in a way that always made you think she knew something you didn’t. She’d been a villain, back in the day, but she’d retired for several reasons, one of them being her bad leg.

Still, she hadn’t cut all her ties to the villain world, and had a good ear for intel. Undeniably useful, when it came to Izuku’s quasi-vigilante work. If it hadn’t been for her warning, earlier that day, he might not have found out about the dispute in time.

That the League was recruiting in South Akutou set him on edge. Something about it didn’t sit right with him, so in between orders, he asked her what she knew.

“There’s the ringleader, of course. Shigaraki Tomura, if I remember correctly.” Nakano tapped her nails to her chin thoughtfully. “I’d say he’s a bit on the…deranged side. But he’s powerful, and shouldn’t be underestimated. He has an accomplice, too—a man with a warping Quirk.”

“Warping?” Izuku echoed. “That’s really rare, isn’t it?”

“Quite so.” One of the regulars, a heavyset villain by the name Flare—she had a penchant for robbing banks, though she’d been toning it down lately—entered, and Nakano paused to greet
her.

“The usual,” she grunted out. Nakano had to handle the fancier drinks, but the simpler orders Izuku could do. He fetched a glass and scooped ice into it.

“Now,” Nakano continued, “this is pure speculation on my part, but I suspect he can’t warp anywhere unless he knows the exact location. I’ll spare you my reasoning for now, but perhaps later, if you’d like to hear more, I can explain.”

“Yes, please, that would be great.” Izuku passed Flare her finished drink with a smile. “How’s your niece, Flare?”

Flare swelled with pride. “Smart as hell, that one.” She took a swig. “Top of her class, you know?”

“That’s great to hear.”

A customer further down the counter called for a second round, and Izuku crouched down to pull out the glasses. The door chimed.

A hush fell over the bar. Izuku’s skin prickled.

Something was off.

“Well, well, well.”

Nakano’s drawl was languid. To anyone else, she might’ve sounded faintly amused, like she was enjoying an inside joke. But Izuku had known her long enough to know better.

Subtly, she shifted her weight to her bad leg.

Danger, it meant.

Izuku didn’t dare look up.

“Mr. League of Villains, in my own humble establishment.”

No fucking way.

“To what do I owe the honor?”

“I’m flattered you know about me,” a raspy voice answered. Slowly, Izuku forced himself to straighten.

Hands. Pale and deathly, all over his body. Red eyes gleamed out from between corpselike fingers. Shigaraki Tomura.

This man was dangerous.

“I’ve heard some fascinating things.”

Nakano’s tone had shifted. Mirroring—that was what she was doing. Build rapport. Keep his attention.

Just focus on your job, Izuku chided himself. Mix, mix, mix. Pretend he wasn’t there.

“Is that so?”
“Quite.”

“Do tell.”

Nakano’s smile remained as easily lopsided as ever. “People say you want to bring down heroes, once and for all. I must admit, I’m curious.” She leaned forward, ever so slightly. “You see, I’m sure every one of us has dreamed of that, at some point. But no one’s ever been able to do it. So, if you’d pardon my asking—what’s your plan?”

“Oh, that’s simple.”

Shigaraki’s eyes glittered with dark fervor. No. More than that. Absolute determination and certainty.

“We kill All Might.”

Izuku’s breath shortened.

Kill All Might.

That—that wasn’t possible. Kill All Might? Impossible. All Might and kill couldn’t exist in the same sentence. It was—

No.

It was possible. All Might was only human, after all. Of course he was. You know this, you knew this, you always have.

“Color me impressed. All Might is no easy target.” Nakano glanced coyly at Shigaraki. “I’m sure you’ve thought up some strategy, though.”

It was bait, and Shigaraki took it without hesitation.

“Let’s just say we have a secret weapon… An anti-All Might, if you would. And, of course, we know exactly when and where to strike.” He laughed, high and scratchy, like nails on glass. Izuku trembled. “A perfect boss raid! Doesn’t it just make you giddy?”

“Interesting,” Nakano murmured. Her noncommittal reply didn’t seem to deter Shigaraki, now that he was all worked up.

“You know, you’re pretty cool.” He leaned across the counter. “Ever thought about joining?”

Nakano—

Nakano laughed, like a psychopathic villain hadn’t just made a recruitment pitch to her.

“I don’t think you’ll want a feeble old cripple like me in your ranks. The most I’m good for now is mixing up a fancy drink or two.”

“Hm… That’s a shame.”

Thank god. If she’d tried to turn him down any other way—Izuku didn’t want to think what might’ve happened.

“Actually, I almost forgot.” Shigaraki cocked his head. Almost like a curious child—except for the shroud of bloodlust, wrapped thick and heavy around him. “I came here because of
some...interesting rumors.’’

“Oh?”

“Tell me... Do you happen to know Deku?”

Izuku’s lungs convulsed. A damning cough hovered in limbo in his throat.

No. Did Shigaraki know? Izuku had never really bothered to keep his face secret, figured it’d make people trust him more. He’d never thought anything like this could happen. Stupid, stupid.


“I’d have to be living under a rock to not know him,” she said mildly. “He’s famous around these parts.”

“I don’t mean that.” Shigaraki scratched at his neck. “I just wanted to know if I could meet him somehow. He seems like a pretty cool guy, you know.”

Izuku almost fumbled the drinks as he handed them over. One last order lined up. One last excuse to keep busy. He felt like throwing up as he reached for another glass.

“I’m afraid I can’t help you with that. He likes to keep to himself.”

Scoop, pour, mix.

“That’s too bad.”


“How about you guys? Anyone here know?”

No orders left now. No excuses. Everyone here—the regulars, anyhow—knew who he was. Their lips were already loosened by alcohol. All it would take was one person.

Two seats away, Flare leaned back and met Shigaraki’s eyes.

Don’t.

Her mouth opened.

Please.

“Well…”

Izuku shut his eyes.

That was it. The one person.

Sorry, Mom. I—

“Can’t say I’ve ever met him. Guy’s a real recluse.”

He didn’t breathe.

The silence over the bar broke.
“Never seen him either.”
“I don’t even think he lives around here.”
“Would be cool to meet him. But, y’know…what can you do?”
“Tough luck.”

His knees felt weak, and his lungs tight. Something was wrong.

“Izuku.”

Each breath hurt. Something was crushing him.

No, he couldn’t be having an attack now.

Not now.

Not here.

“Izuku, Shigaraki’s gone.”

Static rushed in his ears and flickered across his vision. He slumped to the floor, and clutched at his chest. His breath came in fast whimpers. He was suffocating. He was suffocating. Oh god, he was going to die.

“Izuku, everything’s fine. You’re safe.”

Tears burned in his eyes. He didn’t want to die. Not yet. He wanted to breathe. Why couldn’t he breathe?

“Listen to me, Izuku. Listen to me. Who am I?”

“N-N-Nakano,” he gasped out.

“That’s right. Now listen to me. Sit upright. Take a deep breath.”

“I-I can’t.”


Piece by piece, the haze over his mind began to lift. It was quiet—most of the customers had probably left. He was sitting on the ground, Nakano next to him, still murmuring instructions. In, hold, out, hold, in, hold.

“Here, drink.” She pressed a cup of hot coffee into his hands. “It’ll clear up your airways.”

“R-right.” His fingers shook as he brought the cup up to his lips, trying not to spill it. One sip sent warmth tingling through his body, and he shivered.

“Don’t force yourself.”
“I’m o-okay.” He paused to cough. A couple more gulps later, his breathing was less constricted. “I th-think it’s, I think it’s over n-now.”

Damn it, he hadn’t stuttered this badly in years. He dragged a sleeve across his eyes.

“S-sorry.”

“Don’t be.” Nakano took his hand. “Here, let’s get you up.” She pulled him to his feet, and steadied him when he swayed. One hand on his back, she guided him to a chair. “Do you want anything?”

“I’m g-g-good.”

Flare, as it turned out, was the only other person left in the bar.

“You okay there, kid?”

“Y-yes.” Izuku gave a wobbly smile. “My asthma started a-acting up. And then I p-panicked. But, um, th-thank you. For, for earlier. You didn’t have to.”

“The League’s all damn psychos.” Flare’s face flashed. Her Quirk tended to activate when she was angry. “Kids like you should stay outta that kind of stuff.”

“I have to wonder what Shigaraki wanted.” Nakano had returned to her usual position behind the counter, and was wiping it down with a dishcloth. “He can’t really think you’d join the League. It’s not exactly a secret that you’re a pacifist.”

“Wouldn’t put it past him,” Flare muttered. “He’s insane. You heard him talk about All Might—like he actually thought he could do it.”

Izuku kneaded the handle of his mug. “I th-think he was, um, was serious. I-I mean. Um. I don’t think we sh-should write him off. We should w-warn someone.”

“Who’s gonna take the word of people like us?”

“I-I don’t know. I’ll—I’ll figure something out.” He glanced back at Nakano. “Um, m-maybe I shouldn’t stay here. He might come b-back. And it won’t be hard for him to find out what my, um, what my face looks like. And—”

Nakano flicked him on the forehead, and he yelped.

“Don’t be silly. You’re not much safer somewhere else, frankly. But you have a point. Try to keep a low profile, but really, the best thing you can do at this point is be on your guard.”

“What she said.”

Izuku broke into another fit of coughs, and Flare thumped him on the back.

“Look—if they ever come hounding you again, give us a call. There’s a bunch of us who’d be happy to give you a hand.”

“Thank you.” Oh no, now he was starting to cry again. “R-really. I…” Izuku ran out of breath, and he had to stop.

“Don’t sweat it.” Flare gave him a thumbs-up. “You take care, kid.”

“I will.”
Nakano came around after Flare had left.

“I closed up for now, so don’t worry about your shift.” She held up a hand to stop Izuku’s protests. “More importantly, we need to talk about the League. Are you absolutely set on warning someone?”

“Yes.”

“You realize you’re positioning yourself to be Shigaraki’s enemy.”

“Yes.” Izuku took a deep breath. “I know it’s dangerous, but I’ll be careful. I promise.”

“I’ll hold you to that.” Nakano took a seat, and steepled her fingers together. “Alright, listen closely. I’ll tell you everything I know about the League.”
Thanks to everyone who left kudos and comments on the first chapter - I was staggered by how much positivity it got! All that feedback was pretty much what got me through the hellish process of revising this chapter.

Speaking of which, a special thanks to @take-it-to-art, my beta and sounding board - what would I ever do without you?

Few other people were around in the library; even so, Izuku picked a computer in the emptiest corner, moved the keyboard out, and pulled up a browser.

He was idealistic, not naive. His lack of a Quirk was, on the whole, a disadvantage. These past years, he’d been scraping along by the skin of his teeth with what tips and tricks he’d been able to pick up here and there. Against unskilled criminals with generally weaker Quirks, it’d sufficed. But against real villains?

If Shigaraki and the League came after him in earnest, he wouldn’t stand a chance. That meant he’d have to take his training to the next level and enter the hero scene proper.

Once, he’d dreamed of being able to go to UA. But there was no chance of that. Besides, classes would take up time better spent patrolling South Akutou.

That left the more unconventional route: apprenticeships. And when it came down to it, there were only two options.

All Might, or whoever had taught him.

Izuku immediately dismissed the first one. All Might wouldn’t have the time: he had to teach at UA, on top of his usual hero work. Even if he agreed, there were only so many hours in a day. It would simply be inefficient.

So All Might’s teacher, then. Whoever that might be. Izuku chewed his lip and began to type.

Two hours later, he had a name and a location.

Gran Torino. The city of Ruusan, half an hour away by train. It’d put a dent in his wallet, but it was the only way forward.
Akutou, which was really saying something. He nudged aside a package of taiyaki (?) and squinted up at the crumbling, graffiti-covered walls.

This couldn’t be where All Might’s teacher lived…right?

He eyed the door. Well… Nothing to do but knock.

“Excuse me, is Gran Torino there?”

When that didn’t work, he gave the door an experimental push. To his surprise, it creaked open.

A bolt of yellow shot towards him. With a yelp, Izuku ducked under the kick and dropped into a battle stance.

Except—the room was empty.

“Not bad reflexes, kid.”

He whipped his head up.

Black mask. Yellow cape and boots. With that belt, it could be no one other than him.

Gran Torino stared down at him, clinging to the wall above the door. The plaster had cracked from the impact. This guy wasn’t a joke.

“Now, who are you?”

Hastily, Izuku held up his hands.

“I’m sorry for barging in, sir. I’m Midoriya Izuku, and—”

Something shifted in Gran Torino’s demeanor.

“Who are you?”

Izuku struggled not to stutter. “I’m Midoriya Izuku—”

Gran Torino dropped clumsily to the floor and cupped a hand to his ear. “Who?”

Izuku grit his teeth. Of all the outcomes he’d been considering, he hadn’t expected Gran Torino to be playing senile. “Sir, my name’s Midoriya Izuku, from Akutou. I—”

Gran Torino flopped down. If this were any other situation, Izuku might’ve laughed.

“I’m hungry.”

Now this was just unreal. Izuku took a deep breath, careful not to wheeze, and smiled.

“I’m Midoriya Izuku, sir, and I want you to take me as your apprentice.”

“No.”

So the real Gran Torino was back. Izuku lifted his chin.

“Why?”

“Surely you can find someone better than a dusty old relic like me.”
“You were All Might’s homeroom teacher at UA.”

“So?”

“All Might is the closest thing we have to a real hero. He’s not perfect, but he’s the only one I acknowledge. If you taught him, that means I have something to learn from you.”

“Is that so.”

The way Gran Torino said those words, Izuku could tell there was a rejection coming. He pressed on.

“Sir, I grew up in South Akutou.”

How could you capture it in words? A place where gangs provided better protection than the police. A place where Uematsu had to collect trash to survive. A place where—

No. He would not think it. He would not say it.

“The point is, for us, a hero isn’t just someone with a license.”

There was something different in how Gran Torino looked at him, now.

“And yet, you still want to be a pro.”

“I do.” Izuku took a cautious breath and suppressed a cough. “I think the best way to reform heroics is from the inside. Plus, I won’t be able to get much done if the law’s working against me.”

Gran Torino folded his arms. “You’re an interesting kid,” he allowed. “But the answer’s still no.”

“Wha—” Izuku sputtered. “Train tickets are expensive! I’m not leaving until you agree to train me!”

“Not happening. Run back home, kid.”

“I don’t have a home,” he snapped back. “I’ll stay here as long as I have to, I don’t care.” If he had any stuff with him, he’d be unpacking right about now, to prove his point. But he didn’t, so he plunked down onto the ground and glared up at Gran Torino. *Try to move me if you dare.*

Already, he was calculating the damage his paychecks were soon to take. But in the long run, this was more important.

Gran Torino was silent for a while. Finally, he spoke up again.

“What’s your Quirk?”

And there it was. Izuku steeled himself.

“I’m Quirkless, sir.”

No reaction. Or at least, that’s what it looked like. A bit of hope bloomed in his chest. Maybe…

“I can’t train a Quirkless kid.”

Quirkless. *Quirkless.* Just a Quirkless kid, that’s all you’ll ever be.
“If you’re still set on heroics, become a consultant or something.”

Izuku balled his fists.

“If that’s what you think, then *fight me!*”

Gran Torino didn’t even bat an eye.

“Not happening either.” He turned and flapped a dismissive hand. “Now shoo.”

That’s all you’ll ever be, a good-for-nothing Quirkless Deku, better get used to it, hey, what a crybaby. Pathetic. Anger boiled in him. Just this once, he let it blow, and lashed out.

“Look at me!” he yelled, not caring his kick hadn’t connected. Across the room, Gran Torino harrumphed.

“Persistent, aren’t you?”

And in a blink, he was gone. Izuku’s hair blew into his face.

Jet: that was the name of his Quirk. Speed and maneuverability, hit and run. Well, good thing that was Izuku’s style too, because he knew just how someone fighting like that would think. In the end, it would all come down to who slipped up first.

Rush of wind behind him; dodge and swing and miss. Like cat and mouse. He didn’t move from his spot—he couldn’t compete with Gran Torino’s speed. Zigzagging, back and forth, coming in again, lower this time. Izuku flipped over him and snapped a kick downwards. He grazed him—*grazed* him, so close!—and landed in a crouch, ready to counter the next attack. He wasn’t going to lose, not until he proved his point. He could do this.

A cough split his lips. Izuku’s eyes widened in horror. No, no, no. He couldn’t blow this chance, not like this. The next kick slammed into his back and he stumbled. Another cough wracked his frame. He hunched over, wheezing. Control it. His lungs were shrinking. Stay calm. He couldn’t breathe. Control, control, control.

“Kid…” A note of incredulity colored Gran Torino’s voice. “Do you have asthma?”

“So what?” Izuku said breathlessly, staggering to his feet. “I can still fight.”

“No, absolutely not.” Gran Torino straightened. “That’s enough. You’ve got spirit, kid, but—”

Izuku lunged forward. He caught a split-second of Gran Torino’s shocked expression before he sent him flying into the far wall.

“*Look at me!*”

He sucked in a rattling breath and smiled, wider than he’d ever before.

“I can still fight!”

Slowly, Gran Torino picked himself up, face inscrutable. Was he angry? Maybe Izuku had hit him a bit harder than he should’ve. He shifted his stance. Any moment now…

A laugh shattered the tension in the air.

“I took you for an egg at first, but looks like you’ve already hatched into a fine chick.”
Grinning, Gran Torino picked up his discarded cane, strolled over to a wide-eyed Izuku, and bopped him on the nose.

“Tell you what, kid. I’ll take you on.”

It couldn’t be that simple. Right?

Weak little Deku, they used to call him. Homeless, Quirkless, worthless, less less less. What are you ever going to amount to? Now Izuku had an answer: more than that. So much more than that.

“I won’t disappoint you,” he choked out, bowing low.

“I don’t doubt it.” Gran Torino began righting an overturned table, and Izuku rushed to help lift the other end. “And don’t worry. I won’t make a peep about that vigilante work you’ve been doing on the side.”

He gaped. “How—”

Gran Torino’s grin turned impish as he tapped his cheek, mirroring where Izuku’s scratch was. “That, and all the scars. I won’t ask for the details, but I’m sure you’re doing good out there, kid.”

He set the table back upright and gestured to it. “Have a seat.”

“Thank you.” Izuku slid into a chair, leaned back, and closed his eyes. Now that the impromptu spar was over, the worst of the attack would be kicking in soon. He focused on his breathing. In, hold, out, hold, in, hold…

“You haven’t had your asthma looked at, have you?”

He shook his head.

“Well, that won’t do. I’ll set you up with a doctor. And you’ll have to get fitted for a costume, too.”

“That’ll be expensive,” he muttered, mostly to himself. The doctor’s visit might cost several thousand yen, and a good costume could be a hundred times that. If he started working some extra hours…

“I’ll cover it all.” Gran Torino stopped his protests with a firm look. “I’m only offering because there’s no reason why money should be what keeps you from realizing your potential. Understand?”

Izuku wavered. Eventually, pragmatism won out.

“I’ll pay you back.”

“Fine by me.” Gran Torino reached over to the phone and punched in a number. “I’m ordering some dinner. Any preference?”

“No, I couldn’t ask—”

That look again.

“As long as you’re here, you’re my guest, kid. I’ve got to feed you, don’t I?”

Izuku pursed his lips. The whole matter still bothered him, but there really wasn’t any way he could argue with that.
“Let me pick it up, at least.”

Gran Torino shrugged. “Suit yourself.”

After the attack had come and gone, Gran Torino sent Izuku off with the directions to the restaurant and a wad of bills. That didn’t stop him from paying out of his own pocket, though.

Gran Torino, to his credit, didn’t look surprised when Izuku handed the unused money back—only vaguely annoyed.

“I should’ve expected this.”

“Probably.”

“Cheeky little kid.”

Thankfully, Gran Torino had the sense not to press the issue of money any further.

“So”—his seriousness was a bit bizarre after seeing him drool over a box of taiyaki just moments ago (Izuku had honestly thought that package was a prank)—“let’s talk training plan.”

Izuku was already decently fit, Gran Torino decided, so they’d skip the physical conditioning. Instead, they’d meet up every Sunday—Izuku’s day off—and borrow UA’s facilities to run simulations.

UA—which meant Musutafu. Barely twenty minutes away from Akutou.

At the thought of returning to his birthplace, the food on Izuku’s plate suddenly looked less appetizing. His chewing slowed. Had people there known his mom? Old classmates, maybe, or other parents. They’d chat and laugh about life, or work, or kids. Or relatives, who’d call in every week, ask how everything was going…

But no. Nobody had helped her out. And so, there were no such people.

“What’re you staring at the thermostat for?”

“Oh—nothing.”

Musutafu. UA. All Might.

Wait.

Gran Torino almost fell over when Izuku bolted upright.

“I can’t believe I forgot!” He fumbled through his pockets until he found the paper where he’d written down everything Nakano had told him. “Gran Torino, does the name ‘League of Villains’ mean anything to you?”
“Doesn’t ring a bell.”

No going back after this point.

“They’re an organization that wants to kill All Might.” Izuku smoothed the paper out onto the table, and Gran Torino peered at it, expression grim. “Everything I know about them is here. Most of it is from…a source. But some of it, I heard straight from the leader.”

“How much do you trust your source?”

Izuku didn’t miss a beat.

“With my life.”

“Good enough. I’ll pass the warning on.” Gran Torino tucked the paper away and glanced at the clock. It was already a good hour past when Izuku normally went to sleep. He hadn’t even realized.

“How about you stay here for the night, kid?”

“If it’s not a burden.”

“By the way…” Gran Torino’s eyes glazed over. “Who are you?”

Izuku really wanted to bang his head against a wall.

“Sir, we’ve been over this.”

“Who are you?”

“I’m Midoriya Izuku—”

“Who are you?”

“Midoriya Izuku, sir, please—”

“That’s not it. Who are you?”

“Um…” Well, it couldn’t hurt. “Deku?”

“There we go.” Gran Torino grinned, a hint of what might be pride in his eyes. “Sweet dreams, Deku.”

“You met a hero? Who was it? Who was it?”

Izuku wriggled out of Michi’s rib-crushing hug. Here he thought he’d be safe inside Uematsu’s tent, but she’d found him anyway and ambushed him like the nine-year-old hellion she was.
“It’s the middle of the day. Shouldn’t you be in school?”

Michi stuck out her tongue. Given how dark her freckles were, and how her braid was coming loose, she must’ve been romping around outdoors for some time. “Not going anymore,” she declared.

“Why not?”

“Cause everyone there’s mean.” Before Izuku had the chance to question her on that, she craned her neck over his shoulder. “What’re you writing?”

He moved the paper away from her view and gave her an apologetic smile. “A letter to my mom.”

“Oh.” She rocked back on her heels. “Sorry.”

“It’s fine.” The pen froze up; he shook it to get the ink flowing again. “Were you being bullied?”

“Mhm. So I’m not gonna go anymore.” Michi swung her arms about. “I can still be a hero even if I don’t go to school, right?”

“You still have to learn, though. Heroes have to know lots of things.”

“So I’ll just have to read a lot.”

Sometimes, it was like looking at a younger version of himself, only more hyperactive. Izuku couldn’t help but smile.

“Then I’m sure you’ll be an awesome hero one day.”

She glowed. Then, abruptly, the beam shifted into a pout.

“You didn’t tell me who it was!”

“Oh—I didn’t.” As some form of atonement, Izuku scooted over to allow Michi to clamber onto the chair. She had the tact not to read the letter, though. “His name’s Gran Torino. Did you know he taught All Might?”

“Woah! Cool!” Michi looked about to vibrate right out of her skin. “So does that mean if he’s teaching you you’re gonna be as cool as All Might?”

“We’ll have to see, but I hope so.”

The tent flap rustled and Uematsu ducked in, a stack of clothes draped over one arm and a slight frown on her face.

“Okizaki was looking for you,” she announced. Izuku stilled, and so did Michi.

Just thinking about Okizaki made Izuku feel sick. Everyone here had been through as much as him, but he was the only one who acted so bitter. There wasn’t any excuse…

“I sent him off on grocery duty, so he’ll be away for some time.” Uematsu’s back was to him as she put the clothes away, but her tone was chiding. “You know you can’t avoid him forever.”

Izuku didn’t respond. Next to him, Michi squirmed.

“What’s going on?” she whispered. He forced himself to loosen up.
“Don’t worry, it’s not a big deal.” More for himself than for Uematsu, he swallowed and said: “I’ll talk to him eventually. But not now.”

Uematsu hummed, but didn’t say anything else. Izuku took that to mean some measure of approval. Eventually might mean a couple days or weeks later, but he just wasn’t ready yet.

The letter was done now. He folded it up, slipped it into his jacket, and turned to Michi.

“I’m going to go visit my mom. Do you want to come along?”

Michi brightened. “Okay! And mine, too.”

“Of course.”

---

Michi came back over after Izuku had finished and taken out his lighter.

“Done?”

“Mm.”

The letter burned, quiet as the grave before them. Smoke mingled with the scent of flowers and incense; outstretched ginkgos protected this cemetery from the city smog. As the paper crumbled into ashes and scattered on the wind, Michi squeezed his hand.

“Do you think they can see us?”

Izuku squeezed back.

“Maybe.”

Wherever his mother was now—he wondered if she would be proud.

---

The next Thursday, Izuku woke up to a call from Nakano.

“Come to the bar, quick. There’s something we need to talk about.”

The briskness of her tone was enough to dispel all his grogginess. Nakano always talked slowly; when she didn’t, something was wrong. Questions churned in his head, but he held his tongue. He’d have his chance to ask them later.
Though the bar was marked closed, the door swung open at his first knock.

“Perfect timing.” Nakano’s face was tight as she ushered him to a table. “You weren’t followed, were you?”

“I—no.” At least, he didn’t think so. “Why?”

In lieu of a reply, she passed a newspaper to him. Izuku glanced at the headline, and his stomach lurched.

**LEAGUE OF VILLAINS ATTACKS USJ—KILL ALL MIGHT?**

Shigaraki hadn’t been kidding. Izuku felt nauseous as he scanned the article. The words barely registered—until he approached the end.

*According to an anonymous source, UA had already been preparing for a potential attack, which allowed them to respond effectively. One theory is that they were tipped off, although this remains unconfirmed.*

Tipped off—which meant they’d listened. They’d actually listened. Thank god…

Too choked up for proper words, he set the paper back down and pressed his sleeve to his eyes.

No reason to cry. Pull yourself together.

“Shigaraki doesn’t have any qualms about targeting children, it seems,” Nakano murmured, lips pressed in a hard line. “That begs the question: how easy would it be for him to find out you tipped off UA?”

“Not very.” Izuku dried his eyes and blinked hard. “Apparently All Might trusts Gran Torino enough he didn’t ask for his source. It’ll be a different story if Shigaraki comes back, though…”

“I’ll hire a bouncer,” Nakano decided, tone lighter now. The tension had begun to drain from her posture. “I doubt we can keep Shigaraki out if he really wants in, but at the very least, you won’t be caught off-guard.”

“What about you?” When she arched her brow, he clarified: “You might get targeted too. If they find out you told me…”

He didn’t finish the sentence. Maybe he’d jinx it, or something. But he didn’t have to.

“Yes,” she said airily, as if they were discussing the weather and not the fact they might be on the League’s hit list. “That’s a distinct possibility.”

That she was taking it so calmly didn’t really make him feel better.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to put you in this position.”

She shrugged and pulled a deck of cards from her pocket, flicking idly through them.

“I made that decision myself, didn’t I? Trust me, I was well aware of the potential consequences.” In one smooth flourish, she spread the cards over the table, faces down. “Let’s call it a gamble. One with high risk, perhaps, but—”

With a cryptic smile, she picked out a card and flipped it over. An ace of hearts.

“The payoff is more than worth it.”
“Payoff?”

She slid the ace over to him.

“For good luck.”

Izuku couldn’t pretend he understood what Nakano was getting at, but he took the card anyway. Shigaraki had a reason to kill him now. Even if he avoided direct confrontation, as long as their goals were opposed, their paths were likely to cross again. He’d need all the luck he could get.

---

Their first stop in Musutafu would be the clinic. It wasn’t far from Akutou, so they walked. Gran Torino, as he often reminded Izuku, was more spry than he looked, and Izuku himself didn’t mind the extra exercise.

The only downside was all the people and cars. It was hard not to feel self-conscious, given how dull and ragged his clothes were—and really, both of them seemed terribly out-of-place. They got plenty of odd looks for that, but Gran Torino went on telling stories about his teaching days without a care in the world.

In the middle of an anecdote about a training disaster, Izuku glanced carelessly to the side, and froze.

There, on the other side of the street, was a boy. Staring straight at Izuku. No—not at him. Past him. Waiting for something.

Izuku knew that face. He turned around, a name he hadn’t used in years forming on his lips.

“Kacc—”

The traffic light blinked green. The cars surged forth. Izuku jerked forward. No, he’d been so close—

Finally, the cars cleared. He was…

Gone.

“You saw someone?”

Just for a moment longer, Izuku stood there. Then, he turned back.

“It wasn’t anything important. Let’s go.”

---
The doctor’s visit and costume fitting only took up the morning; after lunch, they’d gone straight to UA to train. It wasn’t like Izuku had been expecting any less, given UA was All Might’s alma mater, but still—the simulations were intense. Heat and smoke licking at his skin, he dragged another dummy out from under the rubble, laid it gingerly on the ground, and paused to take a couple puffs of his new inhaler.

Gran Torino had probably picked this scenario precisely because of his asthma. Good: the last thing Izuku wanted was to be handled with kid gloves.

The ground rumbled. Instinct kicked in. The robot’s punch smashed a crater into the asphalt; any slower, and he might’ve become putty on the ground. He scrambled to his feet and wiped sweat from his brow.

A three-pointer, by the looks of it. Wonderful. He ducked under the next punch, whipped out his stun gun, and slammed it into an exposed joint. The robot screeched and spasmed; its eyes flickered and went dark. Blinded—a surprise, but not an unwelcome one—it wheeled around erratically, and Izuku took the brief respite to catch his breath.

There was still the dummy. Pretend it’s an injured civilian. He had to get it away from the robot, somehow. Twenty-one minutes down, nine left. Could he make it?

The robot let loose another screech and pulled its arm back. A phantom path traced through the air. A parabola, arcing down, towards…

Towards the dummy.

Izuku dove.

Snaps in his chest, sparks of pain; his vision short-circuited. The next he knew he was slumped over a pile of rubble, earpiece crackling.

“—id? Kid, what the hell was—”

“Loud,” he gasped out. He itched to rip the earpiece out. It shouldn’t be this loud. “Think I got—got concussed—”

“I’m getting Recovery Girl. Don’t budge from that spot.”

The transmission cut. He must’ve slipped out of consciousness after that, because the next clear sensation he had was of wooziness and a distinct lack of pain.

“Ah, here we are. How are you feeling?”

Izuku blinked, and the blurry shape hovering over him resolved into the face of Recovery Girl. Above was a white tiled ceiling. The school infirmary, then.

“Tired,” he mumbled. “Head’s…kinda weird.”

Recovery Girl tutted.

“You had a very nasty little concussion there. It’s all healed up now, but you’ll still be feeling some effects for…oh, I’d say a day or so.”

Izuku swallowed his protests. Frustrating as that might be, there wasn’t anything to be done about
“Thank you.”

“You take care now.” Recovery Girl handed him a couple candies and patted his head. Kind of like Uematsu. Would she and the others be fine if he couldn’t be around? Okizaki was going to throw a fit over this…

“Well, he’s all yours.”

Ah, right. Gran Torino. Which reminded him—

Izuku pushed himself up on unsteady arms, determined to ignore the throbbing in his head, and blurted out the question that’d been bothering him since he woke up.

“Why’d you stop the simulation?”

Gran Torino frowned.

“What, you wanted to keep going?”

“Time doesn’t stop when you’re injured. If that was real—”

“If that was real,” he interrupted sharply, “chances are you’d be dead.”

Dead.

Hearing it so bluntly was jarring. It wasn’t like Izuku had ever asked to be coddled, but still, the fact that had this been real, he could’ve died… It brought bile to his mouth. He’d promised. And yet, in one moment of thoughtlessness, he’d forgotten.

“You know how reckless that was, don’t you?”

Reckless? No, it’d been downright suicidal. Idiot.

“Of course I do.” Tears stung at his eyes. He didn’t try to wipe them away. “If I’m injured, I’m ineffective; if I’m dead, I’m worthless.” Like reciting a mantra. He knew that. He knew that.

Gran Torino heaved a sigh.

“Look, kid— You don’t have to be so hard on yourself. You made a mistake, and you realized that. You can learn. So take it easy once in a while, alright?”

“If I take it easy, people might die.”

“You’re no help to anyone if you burn yourself out,” Gran Torino countered.

Izuku stared out the windows. The sun was setting. If he closed his eyes, the spots of light looked like fire, ruined buildings, robots and dummies.

Their first training session together, no less, and he’d already messed it up. Idiot.

“I’m sorry.”

“What for?”

He almost wished Gran Torino were still mad. It’d at least make him feel more… He didn’t even
“That being said, kid—for your first time you did pretty well.”

Izuku’s gaze snapped away from the windows.

“What?”

“You only missed two dummies. And that’s when you were working with half the time this scenario was designed for.”

“What.”

Gran Torino changed the subject. Of course.

“You’re not making it back to Akutou like this, so I’ll arrange for you to stay with a friend.”

“I can still walk,” Izuku insisted. He swung his feet over the side of the bed and stood up straight for all of two seconds before he overbalanced and had to catch himself on the wall. Fucking fantastic.

“Yeah, that’s not going to work.”

It wasn’t like Gran Torino’s reasoning was wrong. It wasn’t. But Izuku found himself bristling anyway.

“I’ve been taking care of myself just fine for the past five years. What makes you think I can’t do it now?”

Gran Torino’s expression turned…not softer. Gentler. There was a difference, albeit small.

“Kid, put it like this. What’s more important: an injury to your head, or an injury to your pride?”

How did he keep doing this? Knowing exactly what points to hit. God. It was unfair.

“None of the help I offer,” Gran Torino added, after a pause, “is meant to demean you.”

After that, there really wasn’t any way Izuku could stay angry.

“Alright. Fine.”

The sky was dark now. He wobbled back over to the bed, eyelids starting to droop. He didn’t fight it.

Before they shut, he saw Gran Torino dial someone on the phone. Whoever his friend was, Izuku didn’t have the energy to care. All he wanted was just to rest.
It’s finally here! Thanks for putting up with my impromptu hiatus, and to everyone who left comments over the past couple months - I’m sorry I wasn’t able to reply to everyone, but I read (and grinned at) every single one.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Despite what his bony appearance suggested, Yagi pulled out the sofa bed as if it weighed nothing.

“I’ll go get some bedding,” he declared, and patted Izuku warmly on the shoulder. “Why don’t you make yourself at home?”

That was something of a tall order, Izuku thought, though he kept that to himself. Out of curiosity more than anything, he bounced a little on the mattress springs, then gave up on that when his headache started up again and ran his fingers over the woven patterns instead. It was soft: too soft. And he couldn’t imagine sleeping flat on his back. A tall order, indeed.

Not that it was any fault of Yagi’s, or the apartment’s. Though it was on the small side, it was open and breathable, lit in muted yellow hues. He imagined Yagi was comfortable living here: comfortable enough to drape jackets over chairs, leave empty coffee cups on tables, stick post-it notes and pin papers to the walls.

Leaning against the arms of the couch, Izuku tipped his head back and inhaled.

It smelled like someone else’s house. Then again, for a long time, every house had been someone else’s house.

“Here we are~”

Yagi’s words were muffled behind the heap of sheets almost spilling from his arms. He dumped them onto the bed with a grunt and adjusted his rumpled shirt.

“I took several different sets,” he confessed. “Just pick whichever one you like.”

“Oh, um—the blue one’s fine, I guess.”

As Izuku tucked the top corner into the crack between the mattress and the sofa, his hand bumped against something. He pried it out—a pen printed with flashy red stars—and turned to Yagi.

“Is this yours?”

“Ah, I’ve been looking for that.”

Once the sheets were all spread out, Izuku slid under the covers and wiggled around until he found a decent position. Yagi left again, carrying all the unused bedding.

“If you’ll excuse me for asking,” he said once he’d returned, now loading the dinner plates into the dishwasher, “why did you choose Gran Torino as your mentor? Not that he’s a bad choice, of
course, but he’s rather…obscure.”

Now that was a thorny topic. Izuku didn’t mind being frank about his own circumstances, at least in a professional context. But when it came to his beliefs, he knew they could be controversial. How would Yagi—who apparently worked in heroics, though Gran Torino hadn’t divulged the specifics—take them?

Well. Candor had served him well before. He didn’t see why it wouldn’t work here.

“It’s because Gran Torino taught All Might,” he began cautiously, watching Yagi for any reaction. “And—no offense, sir—but All Might is the only person in heroics I really respect.”

A strange mixture of surprise and vague amusement flashed on Yagi’s face. “None taken. But, if I may ask, why is that?”

The question was gentle, genuinely curious. Izuku hesitated.

“I grew up in South Akutou, the eastern part. It’s…not a great place. Heroing there is dirty work, so the pros avoid it.” He tugged at his sleeves, casting about for the right words. “I think the idea of what it means to be a hero has been diluted. By, um, various factors. All of which are understandable. But as things stand, All Might is the most…authentic hero there is. Um. In my opinion. So I want to try and change things.”

Yagi closed the dishwasher, expression troubled. It occurred to Izuku, then, that his shoulders always seemed to be sagging under some invisible burden.

That burden looked like it’d just doubled.

“I’m sorry.”

Izuku almost laughed. What? What could Yagi possibly be apologizing for? The next thing he felt, though, was guilt. He hadn’t meant to bring down the mood so much, especially not when Yagi had already been so kind to him.

“No, it’s alright—really.” He smiled. “That’s just the way things are.”

Yagi’s gaze lingered on him.

Be placid, like water, someone had told him once. Who had it been? Maybe Nakano. It sounded like something she might say.

The dishwasher began to hum. Izuku dropped an arm over his eyes and forced himself to sleep.

---

A lamp was on somewhere when Izuku woke. His head throbbed; mostly on instinct, he rolled to the other side and made a half-hearted attempt at rubbing the sleep out of his eyes. The rest of the apartment was still dark, shaded with soft shadows from the lamplight—in the kitchen? Maybe it was in the kitchen.
Late night, then. Good to know that even with a concussion, his internal clock stayed on track, though for some reason, his face felt a bit odd. He touched his cheek. His fingers came away wet, and he mumbled a curse. Damn it—he thought he’d stopped doing that a while ago. What’d he been dreaming about to make it start up again?

The floorboards creaked, and in a moment of silly panic, Izuku yanked the blankets up to cover his face.

“I’m sorry, young Midoriya,” came Yagi’s voice. “Did I wake you up?”

“Oh, no—” Izuku cleared his throat and dropped the blanket, but only after he’d scrubbed his face dry. “I normally get up around this time. For, um—you know. Segmented sleep.” Specifically, for his midnight patrols, but Yagi didn’t need to know that.

“I see.” Yagi paused, gaze flicking about, and switched the glass of water he was holding to his other hand before he spoke again. “I didn’t mean to intrude, but I noticed… That is to say, er… You were crying in your sleep.” Fuck. “If I might ask…”

“It’s nothing,” Izuku said quickly, already anticipating Yagi’s question. “I don’t remember the dream anyway, so it’s not a big deal.”

Only a minor lie, he consoled himself; he’d find a way to make up for it later. Yagi looked like he believed him, though, which made Izuku feel even worse.

“Has something been on your mind?” And he sounded so concerned, too. “Talking about it could help.”

“You—” Izuku balled his fists and turned away. “You don’t have to treat me like a child, you know,” he bit out.

Yagi’s face fell; Izuku regretted his words before his mouth even closed.

“I’m sorry, I…”

Yagi stopped him with a hand on his shoulder.

“It’s alright, young Midoriya. No need to apologize.” He passed Izuku the glass and pulled a chair over, expression so earnest it was almost painful. “I should explain… I don’t think any less of you for your age. Even still—you are a child. You’ve had to bear burdens no child should have to. I can’t ignore that.”

Air wasn’t supposed to be so heavy. Breathing wasn’t supposed to be so hard. Izuku drew his knees to his chest and inhaled shakily.


The confession came out easily: a weight off his shoulders. The next part stuck in his throat a moment before he forced it out.

“It was about my dad.”

Yagi said nothing. Izuku took another breath to calm himself and continued.

“When we found out I was Quirkless, he…didn’t take it well. I guess he thought I was some kind of a disgrace. He fought with my mom for a long time… Eventually, he just packed up and left.
No point sticking around for a lost cause, you know?"

“And yet, you’ve accomplished so much,” Yagi pointed out kindly. Approvingly, even. “You haven’t let your lack of a Quirk hold you back. I’d hardly call that a lost cause.”

Idly, Izuku traced circles on the side of the glass. “You think so?”

“Of course!”

What he hadn’t mentioned was that sometimes, he found himself wondering where his father was. But, thinking about it, why should he even care? His father certainly hadn’t cared about him.

“Fuck him,” he said, sudden enough he startled even himself. “Fuck him, and fuck his standards.”

Then clapped his hands over his mouth once he realized he’d just swore right in front of Yagi.

Except he didn’t look scandalized; instead, he threw his head back and laughed: deep and booming, like how someone bigger than him might laugh.

“Well! At least you’re feeling better now, aren’t you?”

Izuku hid his embarrassed grin behind the glass. “Yeah. I guess so.” He peered over the rim towards the lit kitchen. On the counter was a pile of thick folders; one laid open, a pen in the crease of its spine. “Were you in the middle of something?”

“Oh, just some late-night grading. I’m a teacher, you see.”

“Let me help somehow,” he insisted. He swung his legs over the side of the bed and stood up with only a slight stagger. “It’s the least I can do.”

After a couple seconds of Izuku standing there, arms crossed in a challenge, and without falling over (though his head still hurt like hell), Yagi relented.

“These may interest you, but don’t push yourself,” he warned as he led Izuku into the kitchen and handed him a stack of marked papers. “The students had to analyze battle scenarios. I’ve already graded these, but I could use a second set of eyes.”

The stack, Izuku noticed, was thicker on one end than the other. “Why are the tops folded back?”

“Those would be the names,” Yagi replied, gesturing for Izuku to sit across from him. “I try to avoid bias, so I like to grade anonymously.”

“Oh, that makes sense.”

They lapsed into a comfortable silence after that, broken only by the shuffling of papers and occasional hum of the fridge. Yagi’s dissection of the analyses was incredibly thorough: there were only a couple holes Izuku could point out here and there. Still, he couldn’t help but notice all the students tended towards combat as their first resort. But then again, that was hardly surprising.

A couple assignments did catch his eye, though. Two were veritable essays (but well-thought out), one was curt but realistic in a way that spoke to some sort of practical experience, and another was rather ingenious, but…explosive. And very, very violent.

The phone back in the living room rang.

“I need to move that into here one of these days,” Yagi sighed, and stood up. “I’ll be right back.”

Suddenly, the folded tops of the worksheet looked tempting. Izuku had to admit, he was curious—
just a tiny, tiny bit. Maybe just a quick peek…

Yagi popped back in through the doorway: phone, cord, and everything tucked under an arm.

“It looks like ‘one of these days’ is today,” he said cheerily. “Did I miss anything?”

“Oh—” Izuku floundered for a response. “No, it’s— No. Nothing. You didn’t miss anything.”

“Ah, that’s good.”

He didn’t try to look at the names again. Soon, he was back to bed: he did the usual check of his surroundings, glanced at the thermostat, and fell asleep without another thought.

This time, Izuku woke before Yagi, and without a headache. Quietly, he gathered up the blankets, folded the bed in, and put the cushions back. Now that the concussion was gone, he had no more reason to stay. Even if that might’ve been nice.

*Thank you for everything you’ve done for me,* he wrote on the cleanest piece of paper he could find. After a pause, he scribbled down his number too—*Call me if you need anything?*

Which might’ve been silly, seeing as how Yagi was a full-grown adult and all, but Izuku liked to repay favors. He left the note on the coffee table and slipped out the door.

Not many places were open this early, but he found a 24/7 convenience store and bought breakfast. He’d only just walked back out when a muted boom sounded.

“What was that?” he asked a three-eyed woman who’d paused to squint in the direction of the sound.

“Probably a villain,” she replied. “They’ve been pretty excited lately, you know, with that League business.”

The League. His stomach turned, and he had to force the last bite down. No, no reason to panic. *All Might* was here, after all, along with dozens of other pros. This wasn’t Akutou.

Still, it’d be good to stay on alert.

“I’m going to take a look,” he said to no one in particular. The woman saluted.

“Godspeed.”

To his surprise, a crowd had already gathered. Inane chatter and the occasional laugh floated around; some were snapping pictures or videotaping; a group off to the side was betting on which pros would show up. The whole scene rubbed Izuku—stiff and tense, stun gun ready—the wrong way. Were villains nothing but spectacles to them?

But, again, this wasn’t Akutou.
Another boom sounded. With muttered apologies, Izuku pushed through the crowd, weaving around shopping bags and strollers until he was a block away. Even that close, though, he couldn’t pick anything out other than people, people, and more people.

“What’s happening?”

“A shoplifter,” said a boy with peppermint-colored hair, who looked vaguely familiar. Probably he could see more, being taller than Izuku. “He has a shockwave Quirk.”

As if to prove his point, several police in riot gear were thrown into a far building.

“The pros are coming,” said someone off to his right. “It’ll be over soon.”

Riot police just for a shoplifter, though? True, he might have a powerful Quirk, but wasn’t that a bit excessive?

The ground shook, and a pro Izuku recognized as Mount Lady appeared.

“Coming through!” she yelled. She caught a couple more people who were flung into the air and set them back onto the ground with a wink and a pose. Cameras flashed. “Mount Lady is on the scene!”

A third wave blasted out—this one strong enough Izuku could feel the wind rushing over his head—but Mount Lady dug her heels into the ground and stood firm. Cheers rose up.

Mount Lady said something after that, but Izuku tuned her out. Bravado didn’t interest him much; what he was interested in was that Quirk. The peppermint-haired boy had called it a shockwave Quirk, but was it really? If it was, then there should’ve been—

“No!”

Wind. Noise. Then, it cut off. Izuku swallowed, once, twice; on the third try, his ears finally popped.

That was when he heard the screams. And with them, the phantom scent of blood. He tried to roll over and retch—only, he couldn’t. Too many people, around him, on top of him—ow fuck! someone ran over him. Space—he needed space, needed a better vantage point. He wrenched himself out of the pile of bodies and thrashing limbs, then stumbled when his ankle gave out. *Fuck.*

Someone grabbed his arm. Izuku whipped his knife out. When he saw it was the peppermint-haired boy, he hastily slipped it back.

“Is your ankle broken?” Peppermint yelled over the clamor. He himself was injured: blood ran down his arm from a gash cut through his sleeve. If he’d seen the knife, he didn’t mention it.

“Sprained,” Izuku corrected, raising his own voice. “Your arm—hold on, I’ve got a first-aid kit—”

“Not here,” Peppermint interrupted. He pulled Izuku through the throng of fleeing civilians, over to a building wall. “Let me see.”

“I’ll look at your arm too.”

“It’s not very deep,” Peppermint protested. The slight clench in his jaw said otherwise, though. Eventually he discarded his jacket and let Izuku cut his sleeve away.
“I’m going to ice it,” he said, after he’d probed the sprain.

“How—”

The rest of Izuku’s question died as frost spread over his ankle. An ice Quirk! And the hair, and the scar— He knew he’d seen Peppermint before somewhere. What was his name? Something like…

“Todoroki Shouto,” he blurted out. “That’s you, right? The UA student?”

“I…” Whatever expression Peppermint (Todoroki?) had been making shifted into a grimace as Izuku tightened the bandage. “Yeah.”

“Oh, that’s good. Now I can stop calling you ‘Peppermint’ in my head.” Todoroki made a choked sound. Izuku tactfully decided to ignore it. No clips or tape; he ended up sacrificing a bobby pin (and a perfectly good lock-pick) to secure the bandage. “I’m Midoriya Izuku, by the way.”

Stoic facade back in place, Todoroki inclined his head. He kept his hand on Izuku’s ankle, probably to maintain the ice.

“Can you walk now?”

“I think so.” At least, he was sure as hell going to try. Izuku bit back a hiss of pain as he pulled himself up using the wall. Most of the other civilians were gone, now; a few were on the ground, being looked after by paramedics. Mount Lady was still there, injured—but what about the shoplifter?

The cement rattled under their feet as Mount Lady pivoted and made a grab towards a pile of rubble. No—towards someone hiding behind it. The pile collapsed. The shoplifter threw himself to the side, out into open view.

Right then and there, Izuku almost cried.

The shoplifter was no burly, battle-hardened criminal. He was just a kid—not much older than Izuku himself! Just a scrawny, pale kid with wide, hunted eyes. Oh god…

“Stay away from me!” the boy screamed, and thrust out a hand.

In a fraction of a second the air compressed and decompressed. Both Izuku and Todoroki stumbled. Mount Lady was blown back; half a building caved in and sprayed dust. Too slow to cover his face, Izuku wheezed until he teared up, but he forced his eyes to stay open. Don’t underestimate how much you can miss in one blink, Nakano always warned him.

Under the cover of dust, the boy disappeared into an alley. No one chased him—or, more likely, no one had seen.

Except Izuku.

“You should get out,” he heard himself say to Todoroki. “I’m going to stick around a bit longer.”

“You’re talking vigilantism,” Todoroki said slowly. “That’s illegal.”

“This,” Izuku returned, voice tight, “should’ve been illegal.”

Todoroki didn’t try to stop him.
Izuku’s heart sank when he found the boy collapsed against a dumpster, so pale and still he would’ve thought him dead if not for the faintest rise and fall of his chest. Still unsteady on his ankle, he hobbled over and dropped to his knees.

“What happened? Where are you hurt?”

The boy twitched. He’d heard him, but was either too fatigued or too out of it to respond. Brain trauma? Fuck, he didn’t have the medical equipment to handle this. Izuku bit his nails.

“I don’t know if you’re listening,” he began tentatively, “but I’m going to check you over for injuries and see what I can do to help, alright?”

Taking the fact that he wasn’t promptly blasted as a yes, Izuku moved to examine the boy’s head. He hadn’t so much as touched him, though, when his eyes snapped open.

“Please, don’t panic—”

“Don’t touch me!”

An invisible blow caught him like a punch in the gut. Izuku’s ankle twisted out from under him and he crashed to the ground, hissing as the asphalt scraped his skin. Fuck fuck fuck that stung and he bit his lip to muffle a cry.

“Oh my god, I’m so sorry—” The boy looked as distraught as Izuku, if not even more, and he took a jerky step forward. “I didn’t mean—”

Then, he stopped, and his expression shuttered. “Wh-who are you?” he demanded, voice quavering. “And why’d you follow me?”

“I’m Midoriya Izuku. Or”—unlikely, but it was worth a shot—“you might know me as Deku?”

“Is that supposed to be a hero name?” His throat (too thin, too bony) bobbed as he swallowed. “Or a villain?”

“What? No, neither! Just—never mind then.” God, those scrapes hurt—but with how tense the boy was, Izuku couldn’t do much more than shift around so the pavement wasn’t digging into the open flesh. “I followed you because I wanted to help. If you’d let me, I’ll treat your wounds.” Somewhat unnecessarily, he added, “I’m not with anyone else.”

“Help,” the boy repeated, with a hysterical sort of disbelief. “I don’t believe that. I don’t—”

A tremor seized him and he gasped as his legs buckled; he caught himself on his hands and knees and hunched over, shivering.

“You’re not making any sense,” he sobbed. “You saw all that! I’m a—a villain now, but you—you—”

“What, you think you’re on the same level as the League now?”
That silenced him. Realizing he’d come off as more caustic than he’d intended, Izuku softened his tone.

“Look—no matter what they’re saying, you’re not a villain, and you know it. Even if you really were one, I’d still try to help you out somehow. So don’t worry so much about it, alright?”

The boy took in a shuddering breath. Out of courtesy, Izuku looked away as he sobbed a little more and blew his nose into his sleeves; he didn’t turn back until the boy had pushed himself back upright, fists pressed to his eyes.

“O-okay. I’ll bite.”

*I’ll bite*—as if he was expecting to be let down some way or another. That kind of distrust always hurt, even if, by all rights, he should’ve gotten used to it at this point. But Izuku smiled anyway.

“Could you tell me your name? Just so I know what to call you.”

“Utsumi Kenta.” Utsumi shot him an oblique glance, almost afraid of looking directly at him.

“Um, y-your scrapes…”

“Oh—they just look worse in the dark, is all.” That wasn’t precisely true, but Izuku didn’t need Utsumi feeling bad or anything on top of all this. “Are there any injuries you want me to look at first?”

“Midoriya?”

No. No, not when they’d finally been getting somewhere. Maybe if he just didn’t look, it wouldn’t…

There, in the mouth of the alleyway, stood Todoroki.

“You said you were alone,” Utsumi whispered.

“I was—”

“Midoriya, what’s going on?”

“Todoroki, *please*, just—” Out of the corner of his eye, Izuku could see Utsumi backing away. “Look—I’ll explain later, right now just please—”

“You lied!”

If the earlier blast had been a punch, this one was being rammed into by a truck. A shout of alarm (Todoroki?) rang out; the temperature dropped. Blood filled Izuku’s mouth and he gagged hard enough tears burned his eyes; he spat it out and struggled to his feet.

“Both of you, stop!”

“He’s hostile,” Todoroki argued. Utsumi had been backed against the dumpster; his wide-eyed gaze was fixed on Todoroki’s frost-covered hand. “You’re too injured. You should—”

“Todoroki, *stand down!*”

The command hung in the air for one, two breathless seconds. And against even Izuku’s own expectations, Todoroki lowered his hand. In a slow, deliberate gesture, he stepped back.
I hope you know what you’re doing, was what his expression seemed to say.

Izuku held his gaze. Trust me.

Maybe that was asking too much, too soon (and he suspected both of them knew that). But all Todoroki did was watch as Izuku turned back to Utsumi.

“Utsumi, if you’d let me explain— Todoroki and I aren’t working together. We only just met, back at the incident, and…”

“I followed him because I was worried,” Todoroki supplied.

Utsumi dug his fingers into his arms, shaking so badly Izuku thought he’d fall over again. “Do you think I’m just going to believe that?” he demanded. “For all I know, y-you’re—you’re just trying to trick me into—I don’t know, into…”

“I’m Quirkless,” Izuku cut in, and you could hear a pin drop in the following silence. “It wouldn’t be hard for you to kill me, if you wanted to.”

The color drained from Utsumi’s face.

“No.” He sounded strangled as he stumbled back. “I’d never—”

“I’m not saying you would. My point is”—Izuku gestured to all his bruises and scrapes, to the blood splattered on the ground—“do you really think I’m in much of a position to be fucking around?”

Harsh as it was, the message sank in. After that, it didn’t take too long to coax Utsumi to talk.

“I wasn’t really born right,” he started, faltering every now and then. “I ended up getting sick a lot, and things like that. No one thought I’d make it past thirteen. So around that time, my parents figured I was pretty much done for and left me on my own.” He laughed weakly. “Joke’s on them. I made it to thirteen after all…”

He trailed off, but Izuku could already figure out the rest. What did it say, that stories like these were so predictable to him? He took a moment to digest everything, to tamp down the first stirrings of anger (that wouldn’t help here; stay calm).

“I don’t mean to be presumptuous,” he said, after he’d taken a couple deep breaths, “but do you want to hear what I think you should do?”

“Go ahead.”

“I think—and please, hear me out first—you should turn yourself in.” Though Utsumi controlled himself and didn’t say anything, Izuku could see the shock and hurt in his expression. Quickly, he elaborated, “Being a fugitive is hard, but I think if you went to the authorities, they’d be able to help you. I’ll go with you, of course, to make sure they’re fair to you.”

Utsumi wavered. In a literal sense, too: sometimes he’d list to one side without warning. The exhaustion must be catching up to him. They’d have to act fast, then, and get him medical attention somehow…

“A-alright. I’ll do it.”

“You—” Part of Izuku had already been prepared to argue the point; the agreement threw him for a loop. “You will?”
“Only because I trust you,” Utsumi stressed.

“That’s all I could ever ask for.”

“The station has a clinic;” added Todoroki—he’d stayed and listened to the whole thing, surprisingly enough. He inclined his head towards Utsumi. “I’ll go too. Endeavor’s my old man, so I might be able to stop them from giving you a hard time.”

That bit about Endeavor being Todoroki’s father was new to Izuku; he filed it away for later reference, just in case.

“What about school? You won’t be late, will you?”

“There’s time.” Todoroki eyed Izuku’s bloodied hands and knees. “You’re not going to go like this, are you?”

“Oh, right.”

Utsumi looked about ready to cry again. Izuku insisted it wasn’t that bad, honestly, but he only calmed down after Izuku gave in and let him help dress the wounds. As they were untangling a squashed wad of bandages, Izuku’s phone pinged.

“Sorry, do you mind if I…?”

Utsumi shook his head, and Todoroki remained as expressionless as ever, which Izuku took as the cue to go on.

The message was from Yagi: a generic *just checking in, is everything fine? stay safe*—plus an open invitation to come visit whenever he was in town again. Yagi really was too kind. Izuku needed to repay him one day…

An idea occurred to him, and he pulled up the reply field.

*This might sound weird, but could I ask you for a referral of sorts?*

*What for?*

Deliberately leaving out some of the finer (and more questionably legal) details, Izuku recapped the incident and the aftermath, and concluded by asking if there were any officers he’d recommend to handle Utsumi’s case. Yagi’s response was prompt.

*Ask for Detective Tsukauchi. Tell them I referred you too.*

After a pause, a second message came in.

*It’s a very heroic thing you’re doing, my boy. You should be proud.*

Heroic, huh?

“Done,” Utsumi announced, drawing Izuku’s attention away from his phone. “I think. Did I do it right?”

“Yeah, that’s good. Thank you.” Careful not to jostle his already-abused ankle, he stood up and offered his hand. “Ready whenever you are.”

Utsumi gripped onto it like a lifeline. And perhaps, for him, it was.
“Okay. Let’s go.”

The usual lightheadedness set in once they were out of the police station. Izuku half-limped, half-tripped over to a low wall, sat down, and pressed his face into his hands. Todoroki, who’d been quiet throughout most of the affair, spoke up.

"Are you alright?"

"Sorry, I just—" His next breath came out as a wheeze, and an embarrassed flush shot to his cheeks. You’ve got an audience, damn it, pull yourself together. "I just need a second," he finished hoarsely.

"If it's your injuries," Todoroki began, but Izuku stopped him there.

"I'm fine, really. Just give me a second. Please."

Todoroki shifted uncertainly. After a pause, he sat next to Izuku: not too close, but close enough his low voice carried over the city noise.

"You're used to having to pick up the pros' slack, aren't you?"

The blunt wording made Izuku wince.

"I wouldn't put it like that." He raised his face to rub at his eyes. "The pros did their best. It's just...sometimes, that's not enough."

Todoroki accepted that with a nod. The pensive look he’d been wearing earlier was back. Something, it seemed, had been weighing on his mind since the incident with Utsumi.

Far be it from Izuku to pry, though. Instead, he turned his gaze forward.

They’d picked an inconvenient spot, he realized. Across the street, TVs in a store display were broadcasting an interview with Mount Lady. No sound reached him, but her self-satisfied expression told him everything he needed to know. *That* type of pro...

Todoroki shot him a sidelong look.

"It's not like I'm surprised or anything," Izuku sighed. "Heroes are only human, after all."

No sooner had he said that than the interview ended, and Endeavor’s scowl filled the screen. Todoroki’s expression darkened.

“Heroes are only human,” he repeated, though with a hard, bitter edge. Abruptly, he stood up and stepped towards the street.

Izuku rose. “What’s wrong?”

“I should get going for school.”
“Oh! I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to keep you…”

A taxi appeared around the bend. Todoroki turned to flag it down, and Izuku was struck by the irrational urge to call for him to stay, just a bit longer. It was so rare, being able to talk with someone around his age… But if there was one thing he knew, it was how to do without.

About to enter the taxi, Todoroki paused.

“Midoriya.”

"Hm?"

"I'll give you my number. Let me know if you're ever in Musutafu again."

"Oh— I'll give you mine too—"

They switched phones; Izuku cringed a bit once he realized how shoddy his cheap burner phone looked in comparison to Todoroki’s. What was that screen made of, glass? Vaguely terrified he might drop it, he passed Todoroki’s (probably very expensive) phone back as soon as he’d put his number in.

"I'll be at UA for training every Sunday, by the way," Izuku told him. "Maybe you could come around sometime?"

Todoroki dipped his head and stepped into the taxi.

"Don't get arrested," he said, in such a perfect deadpan Izuku couldn't tell whether he was serious or not. Then, the taxi peeled away from the curb.

Off in the distance, UA stood, a pinprick of gleaming glass. Izuku cast it one more glance.

Time to go back, then. Back to Akutou.

Chapter End Notes

Although this kind of delay isn’t going to be a trend, the pace of updates is going to be slower from now on. I’ve got other stuff on my plate I have to keep up with, and unfortunately, that doesn’t leave me much free time. That being said, I’ll still do my best to see this fic through to the end.

Any status updates will be posted on my Tumblr!
As soon as he heard footsteps coming around the aisle, Izuku grabbed a random jar from the shelf and inspected it in an attempt to look busy. It didn't work: behind him, Okizaki cleared his throat.

"Izuku."

"Mm?"

Okizaki heaved a sigh. "Izuku, please. I need to ask you about that scar on your face."

When, after a couple beats, he didn't make any move to leave, Izuku shoved the jar back and, with great reluctance, turned to face him. Figures that with his luck, his second day back he'd get saddled with this. If only Michi were here—but Okizaki had probably convinced her to back off for a bit, and knowing her, she'd agreed.

"Just someone with a claw Quirk," he said, forcing a smile. But Okizaki shook his head.

"No, the other one."

A bit confused, Izuku felt around until he came across a rough, linear scar under his eye. It was so small, he'd forgotten: now he recalled the feel of the bullet biting into his skin.

"Tell me the truth: were you shot?"

Reluctant to lie, and knowing he'd be caught anyway, Izuku muttered, "Only a graze. It's no big deal."

"But what if it hadn't been?" Okizaki pressed. "Izuku, you need to think carefully about just what you're doing. What if you'd been shot somewhere else? What if you'd died?"

And then he'd launch into another one of his lectures... Izuku lifted the basket and pointedly turned away. "We still have groceries to get. Did you find any natto for Mr. Takenaka?"

"You're changing the subject, Izuku."

"His birthday's coming up. We should try to get some."

"Izuku."

"Mr. Okizaki, please, I don't want to have this conversation right now."

"Then when?" Okizaki quickened his pace to match Izuku's as he strode down the aisle. "Are you
just going to turn a blind eye forever? You know how well that works out when the pros do it."

"The pros are—ow!" With a hiss, Izuku dropped the basket. Blood smeared across the green handle; he checked his hand and found a slight trickle of blood running down his palm, starting in the crook between his thumb and pointer finger. Perfect: the half-healed scrape there must’ve torn open. He clenched that hand to staunch the blood and searched for a bandage with the other.

"Let me see."

Okizaki reached out, and Izuku pulled away.

"It's just a cut."

"There's no way you got a cut from a grocery basket."

"Maybe it was a bad basket."

"Izuku, I was a doctor. Now let me see."

Unable to argue against that, Izuku uncurled his fist. The skin across his whole palm and up the sides of his hand had been mangled, and had turned discolored as it scarred. Okizaki clicked his tongue, too used to these kinds of sights now to be surprised.

"You got yourself into some trouble in Musutafu, didn't you?"

"It's called 'helping people.'"

"It's called being reckless." As sharp as his words were, though, Okizaki was gentle in dressing the wound. Part of Izuku wished he wasn't. "Look at you, bleeding yourself dry… All for what? The pros—"

"Are doing their best," Izuku interrupted, tugging his hand away and picking up the basket again. "Look, we should really get back to—"

"You know that's not true. Think on it, Izuku."

But he didn't want to think about it. He'd be glad to rip that thought up, stomp on the shreds, sweep them out the window, and never let it cross his mind again. Maybe that shapeless frustration was what tied his tongue, but before either of them could say anything, Michi appeared around the corner, arms loaded with bags.

"Nothing," Izuku lied, at the same time Okizaki said, "Nothing you need to worry about."

Michi squinted at them, then at Izuku's bandaged hand. She looked about to open her mouth and ask an uncomfortable question when Izuku's phone buzzed against his leg.

"Hold on a sec," he said, trying not to sound as relieved as he felt. One message from Nakano.

_You're being tailed by the League. Go to Flare's._

He stared at the screen for a long time.

"What's going on?" Michi shook his arm. "Hey, Izuku, what's going on?"

Very distantly, he sad, "A complication." Then he gave himself a light slap and took her by the shoulders. "Michi, listen to me."
"H-huh?"

"Wait here for at least ten minutes, then go back with Okizaki to the park. Everything's going to be fine—but whatever you do, don't split up."

Michi trembled. "But—but—what about the groceries?"

Izuku let out a strained laugh and passed her the basket. She clutched it to her chest. "No, you don't have to leave them behind or anything. But I have to go, so I'll have to leave it all to you guys."

There was no way Okizaki hadn't deduced what was going on; Izuku braced for the lecture. But it never came. Instead, Okizaki shook his head, like some kind of a disappointed parent, and took Michi by the hand.

"Let's go find some natto, Michi."

They left. Izuku shivered in the cold of the empty aisle, stuck his hands into his pockets, and walked out of the store.

As soon as the apartment door shut behind him, Izuku collapsed.

"The League," he said numbly. "What the fuck."

"A goon, but still trouble." Flare offered him a hand. "Up and at 'em. We're not clear just yet."

It embarrassed Izuku to admit he was shivering enough he could barely stand straight; as more of a gesture than anything, Flare passed him her coat, and he draped it over his shoulders.

"What d-do we do? Wait it out?"

"Bingo." She leaned up against the wall by the window and cast an oblique glance out. "Chumps like these, they'll watch the front for a while, then they'll get antsy and circle around to check out the back." The next part she punctuated with a punch to the palm: "That's our chance to give 'em the slip."

"So we're waiting on Nakano's go-ahead," Izuku surmised.

"Sums it 'bout all up."

Losing interest in the window, or perhaps just looking for something else to do, Flare moved over to the kitchenette and rummaged through the cabinets. Eventually she emerged with an open pack of colorful juice boxes, still half-wrapped in the stiff plastic.

"My niece can't get enough of these," she said, by way of explanation, and offered one to Izuku. "Speaking of Nakano—dunno if she's mentioned it, but I've got a gig as Takodana's bouncer now."
He almost dropped the juice box. "You—you got a job?"

Flare shrugged casually. "Figured it's high time I quit the villain life anyway. Doesn't really suit me."

"That's—oh wow! That's great!" Izuku beamed; for a short moment, he could forget all about the League. "I'm happy for you, Flare, really."

A bit pink, she coughed into a fist. "Still on the shady side, but a step's a step. Didn't want my niece having to live with knowing her aunt's a thug, anyhow." Both of their phones pinged. "That'll be Nakano."

He's coming around from the north, the new message read. Go now. Don't look hurried.

"Might as well keep the juice," Flare remarked, and beckoned to Izuku. He swallowed. "Stick close, kid."

"Right."

They made it out the building without any incident, but walking to Bar Takodana felt like trudging through a swamp, the mud up to his nose and clotting in his throat. It was the corny joke on the back of the juice box that kept him grounded: he turned it over in his head again and again and again until he nearly ran into the bar's door, stopped only by Flare.

"Slow down there, kid."

Izuku muttered a sheepish thanks and opened the door.

"How long was he tailing me for?" he asked as he stepped in.

"I'd say…since an hour ago." Nakano marked something down in a notebook and slid it under the counter. She nodded at Flare, who came in after Izuku. "I'm sorry to drop this on you on such a short notice."

"Always happy to help." Flare gave a salute and went back outside, probably to retake her post.

An hour: what had he been doing, an hour ago? The panic had scrambled his head; he hadn't put any thought to time…

Nakano clicked her tongue and uttered a quiet oath. "I've lost him, unfortunately," she announced, rubbing her fingertips together with a grimace. When Izuku looked confused, she elaborated, "I tagged his cigarette. It must've burned out just now, but I was able to confirm he lost track of you."

"Maybe they'll give it up," he muttered, sliding into the closest chair and dragging his hands down his face. "They couldn't want me that badly, could they?"

"There will always be people who want you dead, Izuku," Nakano reminded him, unbothered as ever as she shuffled about behind the counter, "and there will always be people who don't. Such is the nature of life. In your case, you have quite a lot of people who want you to keep breathing."

"I know, it's just…"

"…you can't help but be scared?"

"I… Yeah."
"That's perfectly understandable."

"No, Nakano. I—" He clenched his fists in his lap. "I'm scared, and not for me—I mean, I knew when I started that I'd be in danger. And I was okay with that. But now, if other people are getting dragged into it too…" The thought he'd been too afraid to conceive, to make real, occurred to him then. "I was with other people—what if he saw them? What if they get targeted because of me? Nakano, what do I do?"

Gently, but firmly, Nakano pushed him back into the chair. Izuku hadn't even realized he'd stood up.

"First," she said, "you calm down."

She held his gaze as he breathed in, breathed out.

"Are you calm now?"

He nodded, and she unfolded a map, drawn in black-and-white on the backside of an invoice and dotted with red X's.

"Second, you memorize this."

"Are these…safe houses?"

"Precisely. Do you know why I set up so many? As a contingency plan. For evacuation, escape—for keeping people safe." She tapped the side of her head. "Think, Izuku: when your loved ones are threatened, what's the logical course of action? Take precautions. Protect them. Focus on that."

"Precautions," Izuku echoed, gripping the map. One X marked a building maybe ten, fifteen minutes from the park: he committed that one to memory first. "I think I can do that."

"That's the spirit."

Usually he could recall things pretty well, but with a network as expansive as this, he'd need some cues to help remember. He patted his pockets for a pen and ended up digging out the ace of hearts Nakano had given him—what, a couple days ago?

"I almost forgot! Your card—I still have it…"

Nakano laughed. "Oh, that? No, don't worry about it. That was my lucky card, back in the day. Maybe it'll serve you as well as it did me. How's that memorizing going? I'll quiz you."

It was just Izuku's luck that the moment Gran Torino threw him halfway across the gym over to the door, Todoroki walked in. Caught between surprise, mortification, and delight, Izuku laid there like a gaping fish until Todoroki, looking somewhat confused, helped him up.

"Hi," he said. It was such a plain greeting that Izuku was thrown for a loop.
"Oh—hi!" Izuku tried to dust himself off, then realized Todoroki had already seen him in a worse condition, so gave up on that. "I didn't think you'd actually come," he admitted with a nervous laugh.

"I thought it'd be interesting," Todoroki replied in his usual cool tone, which made it hard to decipher what he was thinking. He bowed to Gran Torino. "Sorry for interrupting."

Gran Torino shuffled over and peered up at him. "Who's this?"

"Todoroki Shouto—he's a friend of mine. I invited him—is that fine?" The look in Gran Torino's eyes remained blank, holding none of the intensity he'd had just seconds ago. Izuku pinched the bridge of his nose and gave Todoroki an apologetic smile. "Todoroki, this is Gran Torino, my mentor. He's, um…"

"Who are you?" Gran Torino repeated, louder.

"Todoroki Shouto," tried Todoroki this time, frowning. "From UA," he added, when Gran Torino only kept staring at him.

"Who are you?"

Todoroki's frown deepened. Izuku kind of wanted to sink into the floor and die. "With all due respect, sir, if you think this is some kind of a joke—"

He broke off with a wheeze when Gran Torino let out a hearty guffaw and thumped him on the back.

"Lighten up, kid! I was just teasing you a little there"—his expression turned serious—"but I don't pull any punches when it comes to teaching."

"Literally," Izuku muttered, grimacing.

Todoroki made a funny face, like he didn't quite know what to feel, and discreetly rubbed at where Gran Torino had clapped him (Gran Torino clapped pretty hard for an old man, but on second thought, not so hard for a pro). Izuku met his eyes, and with a sheepish shrug, mouthed, You'll get used to him.

"Now, if we're talking teaching"—Gran Torino moved right onto the next topic and beckoned them both towards the center—"change of plans. You two, spar."

"Wh—" Izuku looked back; Todoroki's only reaction was a raised eyebrow. "What? Why?"

"Think about it. What are your specialties?"

"Hand-to-hand, I guess? I mean, I can't really do ranged…"

"I'm best at ranged, but I'm weak at hand-to-hand," Todoroki noted, tentative regard replacing his earlier skepticism as he looked at Gran Torino. "I'm guessing you want us to practice dealing with our weaknesses."

Gran Torino grinned. "Exactly. You in, kid?"

Todoroki considered for a moment, and Izuku tried not to look too hopeful. "Sure," he eventually agreed. He shucked his bag and rolled up his sleeves, moving to stand across from Izuku. "What are the rules?"
"No Quirks or live weapons this round, go until someone yields or I call an incapacitating strike."

Preferring to err on the side of caution, Izuku removed his stun gun and all the other assorted sharp objects he had tucked away. Todoroki arched a brow at the sizable collection, whereas Gran Torino merely eyed it with interest.

"Say, kid, you use your knife less, right?"

"I'm a bit rusty," Izuku admitted.

"So try a knife this round. Got a substitute?"

The best thing he found left in his pockets were two highlighters: one lurid pink and one neon green, both sure to make whoever was on the wrong end of them look ridiculous. He held them out to Todoroki with what was probably an inordinate amount of glee.

"Pick your poison."

Admirably solemn, Todoroki pointed to the green highlighter. "The lesser of two evils," he explained.

"It'll bring out your hair," Izuku couldn't resist quipping.

Todoroki rolled his eyes, but still cracked a smile. "I thought I'd keep up the Christmas theme."

"Oh my god, I can't believe you remembered that."

Gran Torino poked at the highlighter's tip to check its bluntness and came out with a bright green dot on his glove. "Stains well," he chuckled. "Better keep some distance! Now, if you're all set…"

To his credit, Todoroki took to evading the highlighter as if it were an actual knife, even trying to catch it by the body rather than the tip. He wasn't used to fighting bare-handed, though, and it showed: the spar ended with Izuku pointing the highlighter at his throat.

"Yield?"

"Yield," Todoroki grunted, reaching up to a mark on his face. "How much ink do I have on me?"

Now that it was over, Izuku was able to take a good look at what state Todoroki was in. He winced. "A lot, actually. Sorry." And it was a pretty nice face too, all things considered (he did wonder about that scar sometimes, but he wasn't going to pry).

"Does it come off?"

"Maybe?"

After hearing Gran Torino's feedback on what they'd done right, what they'd done wrong, and so on and so forth, Todoroki went to try and wash off the ink and Izuku tagged along. They stood in front of the mirror as Todoroki scrubbed at the ink with soap and Izuku fidgeted, first with his sleeves, then with words.

"I was thinking about your fighting style—is that weird?—about some of the moves you used looked like they were meant for someone with more body weight, and—there, on your neck, you missed a bit—more to the left—okay, it's gone—and that might've thrown you off? But you do hit pretty hard, it's just I got the feeling you relied too much on brute force. Like—you were more focused on hitting me than where you actually hit? If that makes any sense? If you improved that I
Izuku mumbled a faint “oh my god” under his breath and buried his face into his hands (and also contemplated how he could bury himself in the ground, on second thought, that did sound weird. Then, as Izuku began to fiddle with a curl of hair, he said, “This might sound weird,” but—c-could I take notes on you?”

On second thought, that did sound weird. He mumbled a faint *oh my god* under his breath and buried his face into his hands (and also contemplated how he could bury himself in the ground,
"You don't have to ask if something's weird all the time," Todoroki commented, nonplussed. "But sure."

Still a bit embarrassed, Izuku thanked him profusely and rooted around for a blank piece of paper. Unable to find anything, he resorted to writing on his palm (he'd transcribe it later). "I'm operating on a lot of assumptions here, so if I get anything wrong, just let me know. First off, your Quirk—your right side, at least—is it generating ice, or is it freezing the water in the air?"

"Lowering temperatures."

"I'm guessing there's a limit on how much you can use it? Wait, don't tell me yet. Maybe if you overuse it, you'll get something like frostbite—that'd hurt a bit, and it'd probably also slow you down..."

And they went on in that vein all the way to Todoroki's house, a nice traditional-style place that likely cost more than Izuku could save up in a lifetime. Todoroki went up to the door, and with a brief nod, disappeared inside. Still not the friendliest farewell ever, but Izuku supposed it was an upgrade from "don't get arrested."

The night was black by the time Izuku stepped back outside. That day had been a once-in-a-blue-moon request from the north side, though usually they were from people who'd once lived in the south and still remembered that freckled kid who liked to run around doing favors for everyone. The south would always be his base, but he never minded going up to the north: people were people, no matter where they lived.

How bright it was there was startling sometimes, though. The storefronts glowed with harsh fluorescent lights and neon signs strobing this way and that. Outshining everything else were the bright titles of the hero agencies, stylized to match whatever Quirk the leading pro had in a manner reminiscent of amusement part rides.

Izuku never liked looking at them. He walked on past, hood pulled up and head kept low. He was almost at the river when he saw a man in a black hoodie standing by a streetlamp, looking around and muttering to himself.

"Excuse me, sir," Izuku called out. "Is something wrong?"

The man turned and broke into a smile. A smile that creased and folded his mouth in ways a mouth should not crease and fold.

He knew that smile. He knew it from behind a dead hand, and he knew it now when it was bare.

"Look who it is! And here I thought I was going to have to go back empty-handed."

Still smiling that fractured smile, Shigaraki ambled over and slung an arm over Izuku's shoulders.
"Why don't we go for a nice stroll? Just me and you."

A dizzying swarm of explanations for *what the fuck was going on* swept through Izuku's head and tossed him around until he could hardly think or breathe straight. Could it be Shigaraki had found out about USJ? But he wasn't here for any villain business; he didn't have the dead hands, didn't have the look of death draped around him but rather pulled in and kept shifting behind his eyes. What then?

Give things a little push and see how hard they push back. That was the test of friends and hiding foes. Izuku moved to shrug Shigaraki off, the gesture slight enough he could call it accidental if he had to, and Shigaraki dropped his arm and took a step back.

"Hey, hey. What's with the cold shoulder?"

Izuku forced a smile and hoped, in the dim light, Shigaraki wouldn't be able to see it tremble. "I'm sorry, but I don't really like being touched." He rearranged his features to look sufficiently apologetic. "Have we met?"

"Oh, no. You've been awfully annoying to track down." Shigaraki took the lead, heading away from the river (away from the south, away from safety) and—not literally, though he might as well have—dragging along Izuku, only a hair's width of willpower between him and a panic attack. "But it's a nice break from the main quest. Who knows? Maybe I'll like the reward."

At greater ease now under the cloak of *stranger*, Izuku picked up his pace so he was walking side-by-side with Shigaraki.

"I'm a sidequest then, huh?"

That Izuku was playing along with the video game metaphor seemed to please Shigaraki. "They're not all so bad. Sometimes you get new party members out of them."

Izuku smiled up at him, wondered what flags he'd have to trigger to dodge this recruitment pitch, and said, "Is that so?"

"Say, you're kind of scrawnier than I expected."

The first thing that came to Izuku was a retort that Shigaraki wasn't so bulky himself. Then he realized that would probably get him vaporized on the spot, so he shut his mouth and racked his brain for some way out. What would Nakano do?

"I guess that makes us even more similar, me and you."

Izuku blinked. "I'm sorry?"

They stopped in front of an agency emblazoned across the top with *FREEFALL*, some second-tier pro he occasionally saw up and about the north side. Flyers were stuck to the windows; illuminated against the muted bustle of a night shift, they looked shadowed and washed-out. On them, Freefall was captured standing over a generic, knocked-out villain, one triumphant fist in the air, wreathed in the standard slogans and catchphrases.

*Fear no more. Here to save the day. The hero you've always wanted.*

"Look at them," Shigaraki sneered, amiability shunted for a dark, intent hatred. "Doesn't it just make you sick? Acting all high and mighty, talking about saving everyone…" He scratched at his neck. Bloody skin crusted under his nails. "They never saved us."
Us. The sound of it curdled Izuku's stomach. "What do you mean?"

"We're just some leftovers," Shigaraki muttered, voice rising in mounting agitation. "Society's trash. They step all over us, look at us like we're not there..." He slammed a hand against the wall, and the plaster began to crack. "They're the real trash! And most of all, that damn Symbol of Peace, smiling like there's nothing wrong with the world—doesn't it piss you off?"

The plaster began to crumble. Izuku swallowed.

"What do you want to do about that?"

"Wipe the save, of course. Destroy this society"—Shigaraki dug his fingers in and a chunk of plaster disintegrated, dust spilling down—"starting with All Might. After that, we've got the game all for ourselves."

"I..." Dust. Too much dust. Izuku tried to disguise his cough as clearing his throat. "That's a lot to think on."

The sign buzzed and flickered. Shuffling sounded from inside. Shigaraki kicked apart the pile of dust, stuck his hands back into his pockets, and languidly rolled his head about.

"This place is annoying," he declared. "Let's go somewhere else." The childish glee returned to his expression. "I know—why don't you show me around the south?"

"That's—" No, Izuku wouldn't, couldn't let Shigaraki go there—he had to protect them, find some way to divert him—"That's not a good idea. The gangs are really territorial—"

Shigaraki steamrolled right over his protest. "But they listen to you, don't they? I'm sure you could talk us through." He tilted his head, eyes narrowing. "Unless...maybe you don't want me there."

"Listen," Izuku said as firmly as he could, over the television-static panic in his head, "you don't know the gangs around here. Their top priority is protecting their members and their turf. Trust me when I say they're not going to like a supervillain barging in."

The look of Shigaraki's face changed: harder, colder, bloodier, and Izuku knew, without a doubt now, that he was staring down a killer. "Are you trying to tell me what to do?"

"I'm"—Izuku chose and enunciated each syllable with caution—"informing you of the dangers. I would advise you to consider them before doing anything."

The neon lights against the dead night threw sharp shadows over Shigaraki's figure. Idly, he reached up to scratch at his neck, eyes still fixed on Izuku. One sign—24/7—wavered and sputtered out. The most arbitrary observation occurred to Izuku, then: the sign was lying. There was no one in that store.

There would be no witnesses. He almost laughed.

Make up your damn mind already—and as if he'd heard his thought, Shigaraki lowered his hand and turned to face Izuku proper.

"Hm, what to do..."

A purple haze swirled into form before them, blotting out the lights.

"Tomura," came Kurogiri's deep voice, and Izuku had never been more grateful to see a
supervillain in his life.

"What?" Shigaraki snapped. "Can't you see I'm in the middle of something?"

Kurogiri made a placating gesture. "My apologies, but I'm afraid I was asked to fetch you. There is an important matter Sensei wishes to discuss with you."

Whoever this Sensei character was, their mere mention was enough to capture Shigaraki's attention. He mulled over it as he scraped out the flecks of dead skin from under his nails. DNA evidence: another arbitrary observation. What was it he believed so brazenly in—that the authorities wouldn't be able to track him down, or that Izuku wouldn't tell?

"Fine. Let's go."

The mist enveloped him.

"Excuse us," Kurogiri said. With that, the two of them vanished, leaving Izuku alone in the neon-washed street.

DNA evidence.

He drew his flashlight and crouched down by the asphalt, where Shigaraki had been standing. There. Switching the flashlight off, he dialed a number into his phone.

"Hello, Gran Torino? I think there's something you'll want to know."
Chapter Summary

“D-do they…” Words briefly failed him. Just spit it out. No point hiding it. "Do they know that I'm Quirkless?"

Chapter Notes

8k words, surprise! (I was surprised too.)

When Tsukuauchi said he'd send an escort, Izuku had expected an officer and maybe at most one pro, so it was a surprise to see Yagi there.

"I heard what happened from Tsukuauchi," he said, after Izuku had fastened his seatbelt. The officer up front, a ordinary-looking woman who'd introduced herself as Shima, started the engine. "I was…disturbed, to say the least, but…" He sighed, and with an air of melancholy Izuku couldn't quite place, turned towards the tinted windows. "I suppose Gran Torino will want to talk to you about that."

Izuku winced. "Probably."

"I am glad, however, that you're unharmed, my boy," Yagi continued, offering a tired smile. "If you ever need anything, give me a call. I might not look like it, but I have some considerable influence in the hero world."

That was the last thing Izuku remembered before he must've dozed off, because soon Yagi was shaking him by the shoulders—"We're here, my boy"—and Shima was murmuring something like the poor child…

"I'm awake," he mumbled, and muffled a yawn. "S-sorry…"

"No one can blame you for being exhausted," Yagi said kindly. He opened the car door, and after glancing around, and beckoned Izuku over. "Watch the puddles—it rained recently…"

Flanked by Yagi on one side and the officer on the other, Izuku entered the station and shivered. This was the station he'd gone with Utsumi and Todoroki to, but he still felt…out of place. Wrong, somehow.

"Toshinori, Shima—" Tsukuauchi burst out of a door, tie somewhat askew and the beginning of bags under his eyes. "Thank you both so much. I know this was awfully last-minute."

Yagi held up a hand in greeting, while Shima gave a casual salute. "We're both working overtime here—it's even."

"You're a godsend." Tsukuauchi's gaze moved to Izuku, and a flash of surprised recognition crossed his face before he recomposed himself. "Thank you for coming all this way. I can take
that now."

It was with no small amount of relief that Izuku handed over the skin, bagged according to Tsukauchi's over-the-phone instructions. Tsukauchi scribbled something on it with marker and passed it to Shima, who took it down a hallway.

"This might just be the lead we need," he exhaled, running a hand through his hair. "We tried getting a blood sample from USJ, but it was mishandled by one of the officers on the scene and ended up being too contaminated for us to do any proper tests." His expression hardened. "Suffice to say, that won't happen again."

"You're not supposed to be telling us this," Yagi remarked, with a sort of bland humor that suggested he was used to this. Tsukauchi shrugged.

"No, not really. Is there any particular reason you didn't bring this to the Akutou police?"

Izuku jumped. "Oh, um, it's...kind of a personal thing, but. Um. I just trust the Musutafu police more." Tsukauchi and Yagi shared a look; quickly, Izuku continued. "Do you want a statement from me?"

"That would be appreciated, yes. Come with me."

"I'll be in the waiting room." Yagi flashed Izuku a thumbs-up, and he tried not to let his nervousness show in his smile. It wasn't the Akutou police. It'd be fine. It'd be fine.

So, sitting in a hard metal chair, he recounted to Tsukauchi how he'd stumbled into Shigaraki, how they'd talked until Kurogiri had arrived, how he'd mentioned someone called "Sensei," and though Izuku didn't know who that could be, Tsukauchi seemed to, because his eyes tightened and he wrote an extra note down.

"Do you know why Shigaraki was looking for you?"

"I think he was, um..." He shifted, searching for the right way to say it, and finished in an ashamed whisper: "Trying to recruit me. Not—not that I'd ever join! I wouldn't even be useful anyway, and—"

Tsukauchi stopped him with a hand. "It's alright. I believe you. More importantly: do you perhaps know what Shigaraki was recruiting for?"

"I... No. I don't think it was anything specific."

"Hm." Another note. "What did Shigaraki talk about?"

The smile. I guess that makes us even more similar, me and you. The plaster cracking. They never saved us. Crumbling. Doesn't it just make you sick?

And the answer—

"Mostly just about how he hated All Might."

"Hm," said Tsukauchi again, and for a skipped heartbeat Izuku was scared he'd notice something off about his response—too slow, too fast, wrong tone, wrong inflections—but all he did was close his notepad and smile amiably. "Well, thank you for your time. We're going to hold a debriefing on these developments, so I should get going." Here his expression turned apologetic. "I'm sorry to ask more from you, but could you stay a bit longer in case anything comes up?"
"Oh, um…sure."

Though he'd slept through most of the ride, Izuku remembered the sky was a deep ink-blue when he'd left Akutou; now, it was black as coal. He hid a yawn behind his hand and shook his head to keep himself awake as he headed for the waiting room (private, Tsukauchi had assured him; no threat to his anonymity). Would anyone mind if he nodded off again?

"Hey, kid!"

Izuku yelped—how out-of-it was he that he hadn't noticed Gran Torino right there? "Y-yes, sir! Sorry!"

Maybe it was also because, for once, Gran Torino had set aside his costume for civilian clothes. With a grunt, he got up, cane in one hand. "We need to talk. Step out with me."

Already feeling chastised, Izuku hunched his shoulders and followed Gran Torino out the door. For a while, neither of them said a word; in the silence, Izuku only shrunk more. Please, don't regret it…

"I don't know if I should be glad for your quick thinking," Gran Torino finally spoke up, "or be disturbed Shigaraki was able to track you down. Probably both."

"I have safe houses in Akutou, if it comes to that…"

"Kurogiri can warp."

Of course he could. Could just drop in on him, and—what? Slit his throat in the middle of the night. Izuku gripped his arms and blinked away hot tears. "I didn't go into this expecting to be safe."

Gran Torino heaved a tired sigh. "No one ever does, kid."

Unsaid: no one who lasts. And sometimes, it was all to easy to forget that under the taiyaki obsession, under the feigned senility, under the tacky costume, was a pro with decades of experience.

"For what it's worth," Izuku began tentatively, "I've thought about this. I'm already trying to minimize my risks, but there's not much more I can do that won't get in the way of my work. It's…It's not ideal, but I'll be fine. I promise."

Gran Torino kept staring out at the streets. Cars drove past, headlights on and dashboards gleaming; one coming out of a side street waited for a left turn, blinker on. Tick, tock. Tick, tock. Poor guy. Left turns were always tough.

Once more, Gran Torino sighed. "We should get back inside."

So they did, and what happened after was a blur: Gran Torino left for the meeting, Izuku went to the waiting room and fell into a chair. Then he'd dreamed: of hands and ashes and a cold room and last, a small fire.

When he next opened his eyes the light had changed. Morning. There wasn't a window, but he knew it was morning. What had happened with the debriefing?

"Ah, you're awake!"

Izuku screamed and flung himself backwards. Like an idiot he tripped over his feet and landed flat
on his rear because \textit{what the shit! holy shit!} sitting casually just one chair away, legs crossed and holding a newspaper like a perfectly normal person, was All Might. \textit{All. Might.}

"My apologies for startling you, young man, but the meeting is—er, has been over, for some time now. You're free to go!"

"I'll take my leave, sir," said the officer who'd been talking with him, looking mildly amused.

"Please give the chief my regards!"

Still on the floor, Izuku mouthed \textit{oh my god} several times and would've curled up into a ball if All Might hadn't stuck out a hand to pull him up.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, young Midoriya." All Might shook his hand, and in catatonic shock Izuku let his arm be pumped up and down like a limp fish. "I've heard a great deal about you from Gran Torino!"

"Uh," was Izuku's intelligent response, and then he promptly forgot how to talk. After a couple more seconds, All Might awkwardly patted him on the head and bent over to pick up a coat that'd fallen to the ground. That pinstripe pattern looked familiar…

And with no warning at all, his tongue untied itself.

"Um, s-sir—I think that's, um, Mr. Yagi's… If you know him? He was here before…"

"Er…” All Might coughed into a fist. "Yes, I know him. He had to leave, unfortunately, but fear not! I'll make sure this returns safely to him." He draped the coat over an arm, and adjusted his tie. "By the way—Gran Torino had to leave as well. However, we were able to discuss an exciting possibility for you!"

"M-me?"

"Yes! As you know, I teach heroics at UA. We conduct a variety of exercises, most of them team-based—to teach collaboration, naturally! However!" With a wide sweep of his arm, All Might pointed at Izuku, who near fainted on the spot (\textit{Jesus Christ how was this real}). "Being an apprentice rather than a traditional heroics student, you lack the same opportunities for teamwork training. That is why I propose this: a joint training exercise with my class! Think of it as a way to get to know your future coworkers, and”—All Might lowered his voice, his trademark grin easing to a more sympathetic smile—"to take your mind off things. What do you say?"

What else could he say?

"Y-yes! Please!" Izuku hurriedly bowed. "I-I'll do my best!"

Maybe it was his imagination, but for a second All Might looked about to say something else. In the end, he didn't.

Probably just his imagination.
Of course no one told him All Might himself was going to be escorting him to the training grounds. This time Izuku only slightly freaked out, though he couldn't quite stamp out his stuttering—small talk with the Symbol of Peace, as it turned out, was intimidating. At one point All Might asked what his favorite food was, and still working his way through the latter stages of a mini-meltdown Izuku blurted out: "Taiyaki!"

"Katsudon! I-I meant katsudon! Not that taiyaki is bad, Gran Torino would kill me if I said that, to his face at least, but my favorite food is actually katsudon and—" Izuku buried his face into his hands and whispered, "Oh my god."

For the second and probably not last time, All Might patted him on the head.

So, yeah. That happened. Multiple times with varying degrees of mortification, which was why Izuku didn't know whether to be relieved or disappointed when they arrived at the waiting room door.

"Here we are!" All Might gestured to the door with a dramatic flourish. "The students are already gathered inside. I will be saying a quick preface, but after that, you're free to introduce yourself however you like!"

"D-do they…” Words briefly failed him. Just spit it out. No point hiding it. "Do they know that I'm Quirkless?"

Though All Might's smile never wavered, the curves around his eyes and mouth softened: gentler, sadder (strangely familiar). "No, they do not." He placed a hand on Izuku's shoulder. "However, there is no need to fear, my boy. You are a very singular young man, and this class is one of our finest. I cannot promise they will welcome you with open arms, if you choose to disclose that, but they have good hearts and open minds. I have the utmost faith in them, and in you."

The sheer conviction in his voice made Izuku tremble as he stammered out his thanks. It was too much, far too much. And yet, something about the way All Might looked at him… Something…

All Might turned to the door and flashed him a thumbs-up. Everything will be fine, he mouthed. Izuku mustered up a brave smile. And the door opened.

"I am here, with our much-anticipated guest!"

A sea of faces stared back at him and he froze for an absurd second (seriously? you can deal with the stares of villains but not of teenaged hero trainees?), all the questions he'd been pushing aside rushing back and snatching at his breath: what will they think? do I look weak? are they laughing at me? are they thinking, what's someone like this doing here because sometimes I'm not sure either—

His gaze landed upon a familiar face—Todoroki, thank god—and a ten-ton weight tumbled off his chest. One anchor in this sea; that would be enough. Then he met a burning red glare and almost ran back out the door. Those were Kacchan's (no, Bakugou's) eyes—did he remember too?

But Bakugou didn't say anything. Izuku balled his hands, dug his nails into his skin to stop his shaking, and walked up to where All Might stood in the front. Breathe in, breathe out. He turned to face the class proper.
"I'm Midoriya Izuku, from Akutou. I've been doing an apprenticeship under a pro, but only recently, so I'm still a bit new to this." He hesitated, then drew himself up and took a deep breath. "I don't have a Quirk."

And placid in spite of the storm of incredulous whispers, the stares, the outright scorn whose edge had long dulled in red eyes, Izuku smiled, polite as ever, and bowed his head.

"Please take care of me."

Then he stepped away from All Might and, head held high, strode over to Todoroki's table and sat down.

"Thank you, young Midoriya! I hope you will all make him feel welcome here." All Might paused significantly; some people who'd been whispering clammed up, looking contrite. "And now, to explain the exercise!"

At the flick of a remote, the screen on the wall lit up with a colorful diagram of a building, stylized like…a video game? That seemed about right.

"Today, we are simulating a hostage situation! A team of villains have taken the top floor of a department store hostage, and a team of heroes must defeat the villains and free the hostages! To win, all members of the opposing team must be captured by wrapping this"—he held up a strip of white tape—"capture tape around them. Additionally, anything that might endanger the imaginary hostages—extensive damage to the building, for example—should be avoided! As for grouping…"

He pressed another button and the screen changed to a list of names and headshots: twenty, plus Izuku's, though his picture was just a big question mark (if they'd actually had a photo, that would've been concerning).

"You will be working in pairs, with one exception: young Midoriya will join a random pair to make a group of three."

Someone scoffed quietly. Izuku didn't look to see who it was.

"Now, let us determine the matchups!" Another press; the names scrambled and sorted themselves to opposite sides of the screen. All Might began reading them out in order. Todoroki and Ashido versus Jirou and Aoyama; Yaoyorozu, Shouji, Shinsou, Kaminari, three and four…

"And last, but not least… Hero team: Iida, Uraraka, and Midoriya! And villain team: Kirishima and Bakugou!"

Oh, was what Izuku thought then, the hiss of is this a fucking joke? stinging more than he would've liked. Of course. And then, squaring his shoulders and exhaling: Go ahead and underestimate me.

The first match was Todoroki's; Izuku tamped down his anxiety and wished him luck. Anchor gone; now what?

"Hey, Midoriya!"

Uraraka (he checked the screen to make sure) bounced over with a bright grin, followed closely by Iida, who—in contrast—was frowning. "Guess we're a team, huh? Nice to meet you!"

Izuku smiled back; at least she seemed friendly enough. "You too."
"So, I was thinking we—well, me and Iida—introduce ourselves and our Quirks, and we figure out some kinda strategy, y'know? Gotta go in with a plan!"

Before Izuku could respond, Iida cleared his throat. "If I may—there is a matter I wish to address first." He adjusted his glasses and turned to face Izuku with a stern expression. "Midoriya, with all due respect, I would like to express my reservations about this arrangement."

"Iida!" Uraraka exclaimed, appalled.

Although Izuku was touched she was standing up for him, he shook his head. "No, let him finish."

"Thank you." Iida pushed his glasses up again and sent an oblique glance towards the other corner of the room, where Bakugou and Kirishima sat. "I don't know if you're already aware, but Bakugou is one of our class's most skilled and aggressive fighters—perhaps the most, when it comes to aggression. His Quirk is extraordinarily powerful. Kirishima is no pushover either, and the two work together very well. Meanwhile, you lack a Quirk entirely. From an objective perspective, I have to ask: what can you contribute?"

Uraraka looked uncomfortable. "Iida, that's harsh…"

"I've heard worse," Izuku assured her. So Bakugou had really become that strong…though he wasn't surprised. "Maybe it's true I don't stand a chance in straightforward combat, but I've fought against people with Quirks before. I've picked up some workarounds. And actually, I have an idea, if you're willing to trust me."

Iida didn't look terribly convinced, as expected, but he mulled over the matter for a moment.

"Alright, let's hear it."

It was sort of funny, how utterly unnerved Kirishima looked when Izuku strolled right up to him, unarmed.

"Woah, hey, Midoriya." Kirishima held his hands up, smiling that kind of uncomfortable smile people did whenever they didn't know how else to react. "Look, man, I don't want you to get hurt or anything."

"The feeling's mutual," Izuku said pleasantly.

(A mic drop about now might work.)

In the flabbergasted pause that followed, he swiveled his head about and considered the layout of the room. Just like a department store, only the shelves were empty. After one full rotation, he sat down, crossed his legs, and clasped his hands. "So. Let's talk."

"Talk," repeated Kirishima, eyebrows raised.
"Talk," confirmed Izuku. "Why do you want to win this exercise?"

"I, well…" Kirishima knit his brow as he turned the question over. "I mean, why would I want to lose? This is training, anyway—it's supposed to get us ready for real hero work, right? Wouldn't it be kinda useless if you didn't go all out?"

"You said this is supposed to prepare you for 'real hero work.'" Izuku looked to Kirishima for a correction (mostly as a gesture) and continued when none came. "But what are the odds you'll find yourself in this situation as a pro? Slim to none." Kirishima's mouth opened. "Then, you might say: yes, but it's also important to understand how villains think." Mouth closed. "If I were you, and I was really trying to play a villain, I would threaten the hostages to get the pros to back off. I'd put some kind of time pressure on them to meet my demands—maybe, for every minute they delay, I kill one person."

"That's—"

"—villainous? Exactly. But obviously, this is a simulation, and you're training to become a pro. That's a mental attitude that's tough to change. Can you really say this scenario is accurate?"

"Wait wait wait," interrupted Kirishima, whose eyebrows had been successively climbing higher and higher through Izuku's speech. "You're just trying to distract me, aren't you?"

"Partially," Izuku admitted, shrugging. "But I'm serious. The way I see it, the villain team gets a lot less out of this exercise in terms of practical experience than the hero team. So, I have a suggestion."

Kirishima's eyebrows had reached a critical point and were now climbing back down. "Uh, sure. Shoot."

"Instead of being heroes versus villains in a hostage situation, imagine one team is trying to defend this building, and the other is trying to seize it. Winning means all the members of the opposing team are either captured or driven out of the building, with minimal collateral damage. Pros might find themselves in either situation, so it's a lot more realistic for both teams, isn't it?"

Dead silence.

Trying to ignore how he could really use some water about now, Izuku looked up to the camera in the crook of the wall. "This is fine, right?"

"It's fairly… unconventional, to say the least, but yes!"

Kirishima shook himself out of his stupor. "Uh," he cleared his throat, "wow. Man, you really went all-out with that." He scratched his head, thought for a moment, and then tapped on his earpiece. "Hey, man, you catch all that?"

"I didn't rig it," Izuku offered. "At this point, the two sides are basically the same."

"He says he didn't rig it," Kirishima relayed to Bakugou, who probably followed with something like I heard, dipshit! because they went back and forth a couple more times—light banter from the former and indistinct yelling from the latter. Finally, Kirishima turned back to Izuku with a grin. "We're in! Guess that means we've gotta fight, huh?"

As Kirishima's arms hardened and sharpened, fingertips tapering into knives, Izuku rose and readied himself. "Guess so."

"Well… Sorry about this, Midoriya!"
And with that, it began. Izuku darted two aisles deep into the maze of shelves and shoved his shoulder hard against one. The rows wobbled, creaked, and like dominoes, collapsed; a startled yelp told him he’d caught his target. He ran further in, ducked behind a still-standing shelf, and cupped a hand to his mouth.

"Status?"

"We’ve successfully shaken Bakugou off! He’s likely still on the fourth floor. Where do you want to meet?"

Yelling; metal cracked and tore. Hurriedly, Izuku moved to a new hiding place. "Top floor if you can, second from top if you can't."

"Okay! I might be a bit behind, so don't wait for me!"

The hair on his skin shot up and he jumped back just as Kirishima lunged out at him from a cloud of dust.

"Hiding isn't very manly, you know!"

"Why does that matter?" Izuku coughed, covering his nose as he rolled away from another swipe and bolted for the stairs.

"Hey! Running away is even less manly!"

Without looking back, Izuku returned, "Gotta do what you gotta do!"

No sign of Iida or Uraraka; he took the stairs down two at a time. Which direction? The ideal rendezvous spot was right here, the main staircase, but Kirishima was still on his tail…

A *thump-thump-thump* sound. "You're not getting away that easily!"—and Izuku whirled around to see Kirishima only inches away from him (too close! did he slide down the stairs?), tape in hand and closing in around his arm. From deep down a panic roared up and seized him, a panic he'd only ever felt before when there was a knife coming for his throat—damn it, he couldn't lose, not like this! for god's sake, move—

Engines revved and Iida shot like a bullet around the corner, one leg swinging up to fling Kirishima into the far wall.

"My apologies, Midoriya! It seems I'm somewhat late!"

"Thanks for the save," Izuku panted, pausing to catch his breath. "Uraraka?"

"Here!" Quite literally, Uraraka dropped in, canceling her Quirk mid-jump and pinning Kirishima with a hard tap (okay, more like a slap) on the back; flailing limbs three inches off the ground and she whipped out her own tape. "Aaand…capture complete!"

The panic still draining its way out of his system, Izuku sat down hard and took a deep breath. One down, one to go.

"An ambush," Kirishima grumbled, having been let back down by Uraraka. "That's not manly at all…"

"Gotta do what you gotta do," Izuku replied apologetically.

Kirishima still looked somewhat put-out, but he gave a helpless laugh and shook his head. "Man,
Midoriya. I really underestimated you, huh?"

"That'll show 'em! Go, team!" Uraraka skipped over and high-fived Izuku and Iida. "Now, we just have to—"

A side door blew off its hinges.

"Bastard! I'll kill you!"

"—find Bakugou," she finished weakly.

Given the context and the way Bakugou was trying to murder him with his eyes, Izuku figured it was probably safe to assume he was the bastard in question. He got to his feet and grasped his stun gun, but didn't take it out just yet.

"Isn't that pretty unheroic, Ka—Bakugou?"

"Like that two-faced bullshit back there wasn't? Smiling and acting all—"

"Woah, man! Calm down!" Kirishima threw himself between Izuku and Bakugou, arms spread out. "It's cool! They beat me fair and square—okay, maybe not totally fair, but—"

"Think you're so smooth now, huh?" Bakugou went right on, even as Iida and Uraraka—stop it! this behavior is unacceptable—positioned themselves in front of Izuku too. "Think you're so smart, pulling off a cheap-ass stunt like that? Huh?" Explosions crackled in his palms. "I'll fucking kill you!"

The moment wobbled on an edge, still as a freeze-frame. Then, on an unheard cue, it plunged over. Iida and Uraraka charged forward, tape ready; Kirishima's skin hardened; but Bakugou lunged past them, towards Izuku, and he could see them turning around, see Iida's engines fire—but it was all too slow.

"Die!"

Glass shattered under and showered over him in a screaming chorus of cracks overlaid in a fugue of two, three, four screams rising above the rest and Izuku was falling, down, down, down, the brick face of the building rushing past him and the concrete surging up like water and his first thought was—I'm going to drown, I need to breathe, I need air—and reflex kicked in and blindly he lashed an arm out for something to hold onto, anything at all. Metal groaned and the force near tore his arm out of his shoulder, fire licking up his skin and teeth tearing into his tissue, but—

He'd stopped. He wasn't falling anymore. Just hanging on by the twig-thin railing of a fire escape.

“Midoriya!”

“Midoriya—oh my god!”


“Iida, Bakugou's—we've gotta—oh my god, Midoriya—”

“Midoriya, come in—“

"I can't see—"

Hit the ground with a thud rattling up his legs, heart pounding, breathing in gulps, back of his shirt
probably shredded, thank god for the costume. Arm burning.

“Where’d he go?—oh, this is bad—Midoriya, are you okay?”

“Midoriya, come in! Are you unharmed?”

Like breaking the surface for air, he gasped out: "Alive." All he saw above him was the bottom of the fire escape he'd dropped from; he glanced down and tried to estimate his height. "Fourth floor? What happened with K—Bakugou?"

"He took off—I think he's going after you!"

"Don't do anything rash, Midoriya—your safety is more important than our victory! We'll try to meet up!"

"Got it," Izuku murmured, hoping his voice didn't tremble too much. He stood up and almost fell over with the lingering vertigo; he ground his teeth and made it on his second try. "I'll let you know if anything happens."

If his luck was good, he wouldn't have to; he didn't want to bet on how quickly Bakugou could make it through two floors. He pried open the door and staggered inside.

Only a couple steps later, he felt the familiar tightness, the cough forcing its way out of his throat. Hastily, he jammed his mask on and took a puff. Of all the times—couldn't it have waited just a bit longer?

A gloved fist smashed into the wall next to his head; the explosion rattled his eardrums.

"We're not done here, you bastard!" Bakugou roared, close enough Izuku could see the lines of his bared teeth; he swung his other fist around, and Izuku scrambled out of the way. "Figured you couldn't win without some shitty trick, huh? Huh?"

"K—Bakugou—"

Another explosion, and another, and another, spitting noxious smoke into the air. "Should've expected that from a Quirkless good-for-nothing!"

"Wait—"

One blast went off in his face and Izuku stumbled back, coughing and blinking spots from his eyes until he hit cold concrete.

Cornered. And Bakugou knew it. Took his time striding forward, the predator when he knew his prey was done for. He sneered, and Izuku wondered when heroes had started acting like villains.

"You can't even fight me head-on, can you?"

"I can explain—"

"Ha! Like I'll fall for that!"

"Kacchan, if you'd just listen to me for once in your life—"

Bakugou stopped. Didn't slow. Just stopped.

"What did you just call me?"
"I-it—" Izuku backed up against the wall, looking desperately for an escape. "It was a slip, I thought you were someone else—"

"Don't lie." Memory stretched out between them, a taut thread, four years connecting and eleven splitting; Bakugou had a scissor in his hand and Izuku didn't know how to (whether to) knock it away. "I know that name—it's right there—"

Then behind his eyes, the string snapped.

"Deku," Bakugou breathed. "You're Deku. You—" He broke off, staring at Izuku like he'd never seen him before. But even now, it wasn't an at-look. It was a through-look. "You're Quirkless."

All Izuku could think to say to that was: "And?"

Bakugou trembled. Izuku watched him, the eleven heavy in his heart, and then something broke. In one convulsive motion Bakugou lashed out and cratered a smoking dent into the wall beside him.

"I don't give a fuck who you are," he snarled, dropping back into his fighting stance. "I'm going to win. Got it?" And he charged.

Is that how we're doing this? Fine, then. Underestimate me—but you'll have to own the consequences.

That was what he thought in the breathless half-second before stun gun slammed into skin. Switch and hold. Four seconds of coursing electricity for Izuku to pin Bakugou down and yank the capture tape around his ankle. Like a bell marking an hour:

"The hero—er, seizing team wins!"

In the aftermath, Izuku felt tired. Even with the smoke, the fist in his collar, the pounding of feet and the cries—he felt a flat, worn-out kind of tired, the only thing left when you'd drained every other feeling.

"Hey, hey, man—" That was Kirishima, hand on Bakugou's shoulder. "Hey, knock it off, alright? Let's go somewhere else." With an apologetic gesture, he steered Bakugou away.

"That's the first time Bakugou's ever really lost," Uraraka mused, staring off after them. "Guess he's taking it pretty hard, huh?" After a moment, she spun around, beaming. "But! Wow, Midoriya—you took him down just like that! Pow!"—mimed punch and all. "I was kinda scared, but looks like everything turned out fine!"

Her energy was infectious. Izuku smiled back faintly. "Looks like it did."

"Midoriya," Iida spoke up, sounding so grave Izuku was sort of worried, "I would like to offer my sincere apologies. I was terribly rude to you." He clenched his fists and—was he crying? "Indeed, it was an abject failure on my part to properly gauge your abilities and recognize that—"
"It's alright, really!" Izuku interrupted, before Iida could spiral further into self-criticism. "Like I said, you could do a lot worse."

And like that, something clicked. They slipped easily into small talk as they stepped back outside to get check-ups from Recovery Girl. Safe topics like where are you from? what's your favorite kind of food? how's being an apprentice? how's UA?—and so on and so forth.

None of them were injured too badly; Izuku's clothes, on the other hand, were a lost cause. Recovery Girl handed him a spare gym uniform and a drawstring bag, both emblazoned with UA's logo.

"You can keep these, sonny. It'd just be too much of a hassle to return. Would you like a gummy?"

"Oh, um…thank you."

Izuku was still chewing on the gummy as they neared the building (that…was how you ate gummies, right?) where the rest of the class was waiting—being the last match, they would have the dubious pleasure of their undivided attention. As he contemplated how to dodge the inevitable questions, Kirishima, who'd been walking further back, picked up his pace to catch up with him.

"Hey, Midoriya! I, uh…" Kirishima rubbed the back of his neck. "I dunno how to put this, but I feel kinda bad for, you know, the whole thing. So I was thinking, how about we take you out shopping for some new clothes? It's on me!"

Izuku blinked. "I—"

"Oh! Oh!" Uraraka clapped, looking positively delighted with the idea. "I know a really good thrift shop! It'll be fun!"

"A thrift shop? If that's what you wanna go for…"

"Iida, you should come too!"

"If you'd have me, then yes, I will gladly join!"

"I-I couldn't—" Izuku glanced around: everyone was already so set on it. "Kirishima, you really don't have to—"

"I've gotta make it up to you somehow," Kirishima insisted, as if the very notion of not doing this scandalized him. "I mean, if you've got other things to do, that's cool, but I'm serious. How about it?"

There was the part of Izuku that didn't want to burden anyone, and then there was the part that wanted—selfishly—to drag this out just a bit longer. This: standing in the sun, in the warm clear air, surrounded with maybe-possibly friends…

"I'd—I'd like that. A lot."

That was when he heard—not really heard, maybe, but caught a glimpse of, felt the heat on the back of his head—teeth grinding hard enough a tremor passed through Izuku's body. It wasn't that he hadn't felt the eyes until now. He had: following him, boring into him, smoldering and smoldering, rage compounding with each second spent in seething silence.

They were at the door. He inhaled.
"Go ahead without me. I'll be just a second."

And before he could lose his nerve, he marched over to Bakugou and pulled him around the corner. Just the two of them in the building's long shadow.

"The hell—" Bakugou growled and tore himself out of Izuku's grip. "What the hell are you playing at?"

Izuku held up his hands. "Bakugou, please. I don't want us to be enemies"—though friends was a separate question—"believe me. If there's something you want to say, then say it."

Bakugou stared at him for a long time, the anger roiling behind his eyes, struggling to form into words. What finally came out was—

"I don't know, okay? Happy?"

"You... don't know?"

"I don't know what the hell I'm supposed to think about"—Bakugou slashed his hand through the air—"about this! You just show up after—after however the fuck long, and..." He clenched and unclenched his fists. Smoke curled from between his fingers. "Fuck!"

The smoke ribboned out, paled and dissolved into the air. The smell lasted longer; soon, that too petered out.

"Eleven years," Izuku offered, softly. "It's been eleven years. And I think... we've both changed."

Bakugou jerked his head to the side. The shadows covered his face, but Izuku could see his grit teeth, his trembling mouth. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Whichever you make of it, I guess. I..." Izuku paused. "There's one last thing I wanted to say."

Again he felt Bakugou's eyes on him. But in a different sort of way.

"Deku... That name doesn't mean what you think it does anymore."

And without looking back, he turned and walked back into the building.

The dismissal bell rang not long after 1-A had filed back into their classroom for some closing notes. At the sound, Izuku nearly fell out of the spare chair he'd been put in—an alarm? did something happen?—until he remembered it was a school thing.

How long had it been since he'd gone to school? Four... three years, at least.

"Ready?"

"U-um—hold on, I have to put this away first." Izuku made an apologetic gesture towards the chair. "But I'll—"
"We'll take care of it," the homeroom teacher interrupted, a scruffy man far sharper-eyed than his demeanor suggested, before turning. "Bakugou, a word before you go—yes, I mean it. Come up here."

With a surprising speed, Uraraka grabbed Izuku by the wrist and made a beeline for the door. "Gotta dash, let's go! Bye, Tsu!"

"Will—will he get into trouble?"

"Probably, since he really went overboard… But enough about that! Let's think about shopping!" Uraraka spun her lock and Izuku quickly looked away.

In a growing bad habit of his, he found himself comparing UA and the no-name school he'd gone back in Akutou. Tall glass windows versus dirtied box-shaped panes that rattled in their frames; gleaming floor tiles, hard and clean, versus nothing but water-stained stone; and then there was the air. The air had been so stale and foul with bad plumbing and cigarette breath he'd stopped talking altogether just so his lungs wouldn't break down and give them more reasons to push him around, and here…

Maybe, if things had gone differently, he would've had a locker here too: would've worn a uniform and walked down these halls. Knowing with certainty he belonged.

"—so maybe we should find you some UA sneakers," Uraraka was chattering as she shut her locker, the clang jarring Izuku back to awareness. "Then you'd be like…a walking UA ad!"

"A-a walking ad?"

"Yeah! School spirit!" Imitating a cheerleader, Uraraka pumped her fist into the air, complete with a rah-rah!, and Izuku couldn't help but laugh a bit. "Oh, here's Iida! Where's Kirishima?"

"I believe I saw him conversing with Bakugou over there"—Iida made a chopping motion in a direction—"although I'm not certain if—"

"There he is!" Uraraka stood on her toes and waved hard enough Izuku thought her hand might fall off. "Kirishima! Over here!"

"No running in the hallways!"

"Sorry, sorry! Just got excited." Kirishima did a perfunctory head-count. "Looks like we're all set."

Most of the students had already left; now that the crowd was thinner, Izuku noticed Todoroki a couple rows away, closing his locker. Come to think of it, they hadn't spoken or even made eye contact much during the day—he'd seemed more closed-off than normal. Was it something Izuku had done? Or maybe he just wanted to be left alone.

But seeing him there, standing all alone, gaze unfocused… He seemed almost sad.

"Todoroki, do you want to come shopping with us?"

Todoroki startled: a slight jolt that might've gone unnoticed if Nakano hadn't drilled body-language reading into Izuku. The others were surprised too, though Uraraka quickly recovered.

"Yeah, come with us! The more the merrier!"

After looking at her, then at Iida and Kirishima, and back at Izuku, Todoroki considered for a
moment longer before he finally said, "Sure."

The guardedness hadn’t lifted from Todoroki, but the sadness had, and Izuku decided to count that as a success.

So, led by Uraraka, they made their way to the thrift shop and fanned out across the aisles. While the four of them sifted through the racks—"What's your size, Midoriya?" "How about this?" "Just something simple is fine"—Todoroki perused a shelf of pottery and glassware, occasionally drifting back and off again. Too big, too small, too flashy...

"No way!" Grinning, Kirishima pulled out a faded t-shirt printed with some kind of motif Izuku couldn't place. "Crimson Riot merch! Man, I thought they didn't make these anymore!"

"I don't recognize the name," Iida confessed. "Is this an older hero?"

"Try it on, Midoriya!"

As soon as Uraraka held the shirt up against him, a sort of—something visceral, something that made his tongue curl—surged over Izuku and he stepped back.

"S-sorry, but I don't think that's really my style."

"Oh… Are you sure?"

"Well, I like it," laughed Kirishima, taking the shirt back and measuring it against himself. "Not bad. Think we can find more?"

"Let's see!"

And what could Izuku do but play along?

But soon, a faint nausea set in: it felt like his chest might just burst if he saw any more. With a mumbled excuse, he hurried out of the clothing section; and before he realized what he was doing, his feet brought him to the pottery shelf. To Todoroki.

Neither of them said anything, aside from a hi or hm. Maybe that would've made Izuku fidget, if it'd been anyone else. But this quiet was a soft and light one; in it, he could breathe just a little bit easier.

Eventually Kirishima, Iida, and then Uraraka, in order, declared they were done, should we check out now? and so they did. Izuku ducked into the bathroom to change (it occurred to him he couldn't remember the last time he'd bought new clothes) and stuffed the UA uniform into the bag. Not the trendiest look, but at least now he didn't look like a walking UA ad.

"Say," Kirishima started after they'd exited, looking around, "isn't there some kinda big street market nearby? Ke… Ke…"

"Kesseru Market?" Uraraka suggested.

"Yeah, that's it!"

"If I recall correctly, it should only be several blocks down"—Iida pointed to the left—"that way. Have you ever been to a street market before, Midoriya?"

"No… What are they like?"
"Well, we'll just have to go and see! C'mon!"

Just a bit longer would be alright…would it? Izuku cast a look backwards, to where he knew Akutou was. Just a bit more…

"Hey, Midoriya! You coming?"

"Ah—yes! Sorry!"

Kesseru Market, as it turned out, was a double-file line of stalls under a covered arcade, and it was bright. No rhyme or reason to it: just a delightfully cacophonous mess of shiny plastics and colorful fabrics and winking lights, raucously clashing and fusing into one however-many-miles-long eyesore.

A lively eyesore. So full of life Izuku didn't mind being dragged around.

"Is that mochi?"

"Ah! Glasses!"

"Think this looks manly?"

The sheer amount of it all! Izuku's head spun with all the stalls they passed. Baskets brimming with dried herbs, crushed spices; racks overflowing with hats; a miniature grill piled with sizzling sticks of meat…

One was a table laden with keychains, glinting in the sun. Izuku hovered around like usual as the others picked through the selection, gasping if anything caught their fancy, asking: how much? One-fifty yen—they make good gifts!

Though he tried his hardest not to look, not to be tempted, a keychain off to the side caught his eye: a tag engraved with SMILE!, with a simple All Might charm attached. He lifted it up, testing its weight. Maybe…

No. No, this was just plain indulgent. Put it back.

Yet, even after he did, his fingers lingered on it for a second longer. With effort, he pulled away to rejoin the others and tried not to feel too disappointed. Best not to yearn for those things.

They must've stopped at a dozen more stalls. Uraraka haggled for a phone charm of sparkly planets and Iida picked up several pieces of Ingenium merchandise (his brother, he proudly informed them), while Kirishima snatched up some new wristbands. At one point Todoroki wandered off and reappeared—probably he'd seen something interesting.

Izuku bought nothing.

As the sky began to take on its first shades of gold, they—by unspoken consensus—wandered over to a fountain and sat down.

"Man, I can't believe I've never been here before. That yakitori was killer."

"Iida—" A yawn engulfed Uraraka's words as she leaned back to stretch out her legs, almost touching the fountain's spray. "Iida, d'you know when this place closes?"

"In fourteen minutes," Iida reported, after cleaning his fogged-up glasses and checking his phone.
"Shall we hail a taxi to the station?"

"Mm, sounds good."

An erratic spurt of water shot out of the fountain and Uraraka hastily straightened to avoid getting drenched. She glanced over at Izuku. "Hm? Midoriya, you didn't buy anything! Did—did you not like it?"

Kirishima, too, looked shame-faced. "You should've said something, man! We wouldn't have minded—"

"No, that's not it! I just…"

And then Iida, so gentle and concerned that each and every lie Izuku had told burned on his tongue: "Is something wrong, Midoriya?"

Walls around him, closing in. He shrank in on himself (maybe if he tried hard enough, he could disappear, or at least shrivel into a speck). Finally, in a small voice, he said: "I just can't afford anything here."

The water burbled.

"Oh," said Uraraka, very softly. Iida and Kirishima said nothing—or rather, they couldn't find the right words, parting and closing their lips, looks of frustration passing over them.

It was Todoroki who broke the silence. "I already guessed," he admitted.

"Y-you did?"

For the first time that day, Todoroki looked him in the eyes, and said with a firmness that took Izuku aback: "It doesn't make me think any less of you."

Uraraka nodded vigorously and scooted over. "Exactly! My parents have a construction company, y'know, but it's been hard for them to find work…" Briefly, she clenched her hands in her pants before straightening and smiling again. "I, um, don't know how it is for you, but I think I can kinda understand. So, no worries! It's cool!"

Izu sniffl ed and pressed a hand to his eyes. "Th-thank you, really…"

"Hey, you know what? Forget the cab—let's race to the station! First one there gets bragging rights!"

"That is an excellent idea! Aerobic exercise is crucial to one's fitness! However, running in city streets is dangerous, so speed walk instead!"

"Speed walk?"

"Speed walk to the station! Go, go!"

It was so silly, so completely inane Izuku would never have done anything like it back in Akutou. But he couldn't bring himself to care.
Iida left on the six-fifty train and Kirishima on the seven. Uraraka's was the seven-thirty, and when the boarding call came in she pulled Izuku into a quick hug.

"I'll text you some places you can—y'know, get help from," she whispered. "Me and my family, they helped us out a lot when things got rough. And, um, if there's ever anything I can do, just… give me a shout. Okay?"

Not having the heart to tell her that without a permanent address, he'd never be eligible for any of those programs, all Izuku could do was smile and thank her.

That left him and Todoroki, who'd be leaving on the seven-forty. Not that he'd said it outright, or said much at all; Izuku had half-expected him to just up and leave, but in the end he'd stuck around—like a loose thread on a shirt, attached only by a fraction-millimeter of string. Right now he was leaning against a pillar, hands in his pockets, watching a woman rocking a crying child across the platform. *Shhh, it's alright…*

Izuku only hesitated for a moment before approaching him. "Are you leaving soon, Todoroki?"

"Seven-forty," Todoroki replied. "Are you walking back?"

"Jogging."

"You should speed walk."

Izuku let out a startled laugh, and the ice between them seemed to thaw somewhat. The baby quieted, finally soothed by a murmured song; after a pause, Todoroki turned towards Izuku.

"There was a betting pool for your match."

"Really?"

"Most people thought you'd get captured first."

"Oh… That's natural."

Todoroki paused again, then tilted his head away to the side. "I guess this doesn't mean anything now, but I would've bet on you winning."

After that, Izuku remembered laughing and saying something about insider trading, how it wouldn't be fair, not with what Todoroki already knew about him. But what he remembered most distinctly was feeling warm: in a way that had nothing to do with the damp heat of commuters flowing through the station, the steam rolling up from the tracks down below, or even the flush in his face.

"Now boarding on track two is the seven-forty train to Hamamatsu…"

And there it was.

"I," Todoroki started, then stopped. He glanced down, running a thumb over the strap of his bag. The boarding call repeated; he opened his bag and pulled out a palm-sized bundle of cloth. "Take this."

"Um…" Quizzically, Izuku took the bundle, and at an expectant look from Todoroki, tugged it
open. "What's this f—oh. Oh..."

Sitting in his hand was the All Might keychain. And before he could protest, Todoroki said: "The vendor said they make good gifts."

Izuku smiled, and meant every inch of it.
Chapter Summary

Izuku stepped back.

“You don’t get it.”

Not a question. A statement.

Chapter Notes

Happy birthday, Izuku! I’m sorry for what I’m planning on doing to you.

A bit of news, though. Originally this was meant to be the sixth chapter of a planned ten - the key word being “originally,” because I decided to (drumroll) rewrite the plot! I’m very happy with how it turned out, but it’s also longer than the original. This means the pacing might seem off-kilter at points as I transition into this new storyline.

But, I’ll do my best to continue making this a story you can enjoy! As always, thanks for all your support!

The text came as Izuku was slicing garnish. It was a good thing he'd set everything down before checking, because otherwise he might've just bolted outside with a lemon in hand.

_In South Akutou. Can we meet?_

Or, more precisely, once he saw the sender. That _idiot_! He knew better than to curse out loud, but he must've twitched or something, because Nakano tapped a foot twice against the floor.

_What's wrong?_

_Friend_—Izuku rushed through the signals; tap, lean, click—_danger. Low._

Barely pausing in her conversation with a patron at the counter, Nakano snagged Izuku's order slip and re-pinned it to her station. They didn't need a special code for that; the message was clear. _I'll take care of it. Go._

"Sorry, something came up," Izuku announced, for the benefit of whoever might be watching—loud enough it could be heard, but not so loud it sounded contrived. Everyone here knew what he did already. "Can I make up my hours tomorrow?"

Nakano feigned surprise. "Of course, but no working later than ten. Agreed?" Without waiting for an answer, she shooed him towards the break room.

A natural exit. Such subterfuge sat uneasily on Izuku's shoulders, but with the League poking about, he had to be cautious. In between tearing off his uniform and throwing his street clothes
back on, he dashed out a reply:

WHERE ARE YOU

Only seconds later, another message came through:

Unsure, not enough map data

ASK DIRECTIONS TO CEMETERY

STAY THERE

Why?

Izuku shoved his phone away and yanked his jacket on with a bit more force than strictly necessary. Why, indeed?

And because the universe hated him, there Todoroki was, standing up against the rusting iron fence instead of being back in Musutafu like any other sane person would’ve been—and he had the gall to wrinkle his brow in concern when Izuku stormed into view, huffing for breath and starting to wheeze.

"Are you okay?" he asked, at the same time Izuku hissed, "Are you out of your mind?"

Todoroki looked genuinely confused. "What?"

"Akutou has the nineteenth highest crime rate in Japan," Izuku seethed, stomping two paces closer until they were practically nose-to-nose, "but everyone knows if you split it up and actually recorded properly the South would be top five. Why the hell are you here?"

"The crime rate has more than halved in the past two years," Todoroki pointed out. "Thanks to you, I'm guessing."

Izuku scowled. "Are you trying to flatter me?"

"I..." For a rare moment, Todoroki seemed nonplussed. "No?"

It was silent as Izuku fought to get his breathing back under control, as the anger slowly drained out of his system, as Todoroki's here in Akutou truncated to just Todoroki's here. Finally, he heaved a sigh, stepped back, and kneaded at his eyes.

"Sorry, I'm overreacting. Did you want to talk, or—?"

"Train," Todoroki corrected. For context, he added: "The Sports Festival is coming up."

Right, the UA Sports Festival. The biggest sporting event in the nation—and every bit as flashy as that title implied. Izuku wasn't much for such showy things, but as an aspiring hero, he couldn't exactly not pay attention to it. Besides, every year Michi would drag him down to the library and insist they watch it together. Obstacle course, team challenge, tournament; in sum: lots of fighting.

"I don't know if I'll be much help, but if you're sure..."

"I'm sure," Todoroki paused. "I"—almost awkwardly, he cleared his throat—"should apologize. For earlier. I wasn't thinking." His expression, previously earnest—if not a bit uncertain—darkened. "I had a spat with my old man, so I wanted to clear my head."

That expression—it was the same as the one he'd worn back in Musutafu, sitting across from a
storefront full of TVs. Should Izuku say something?

*Information is money,* Nakano would say, back when he'd been a frightened boy hardly four months fresh off his mother's death and still learning the ins and outs of the streets. *And privacy?*

*Mercy,* was his dutiful answer.

"Don't worry about it. I know a place that's pretty empty, and no one really goes there—just stick close and try not to look around too much, okay?"

---

Izuku took Todoroki down to a flat plain on the riverbank, where the dirt was dry and firmly packed and only coarse grasses grew. Afternoon bugs buzzed about; after batting several swarms away, Izuku turned to Todoroki.

"What's the plan?"

"I came here on short notice," Todoroki admitted.

"So did I," Izuku pointed out, torn between being miffed or amused (Todoroki had the grace to look contrite), and rifled through his pockets for the right notes. "But let's see. I'm assuming since you came here without permission from your guardians, we only have until the evening, which means the best I can do is spar with you a couple times and/or run through some exercises and point you in the right direction. You're already well-versed with your right side, not much to be done there—hand-to-hand could use some work, we'll look at that..." It was as he was reading through his analysis of Todoroki that he realized he knew almost nothing about the other half of his Quirk. "What about your left side?"

The easy slant of Todoroki's shoulders, the relaxed openness in his face—all of it vanished.

"I won't be using it."

"What? Why?"

Only after he'd spoken—blurted out on reflex—did Izuku remember: *privacy is a mercy.* But before he could backtrack, Todoroki took a deep breath and locked eyes with him.

"Have you heard of Quirk marriages?"

And so Todoroki told a story that if made public would've rattled society all the way down to its bones and that brought bile to Izuku's mouth. To think the number two hero—the man second only to the Symbol of Peace—would do that to his own family, his own flesh and blood... But you shouldn't be so surprised, should you?

"That's why I'll become number one without using his power," Todoroki finished darkly, lowering his hand from his face and curling it into a fist. "Then I'll have denied him everything."

The only sound was the Sasu River gurgling. Its gray waters flowed westward in a course Izuku
knew by heart, washing along the trash and refuse of North Akutou and Musutafu. Paper wrappers. Plastic bags and bottles. Sometimes, glass that broke on the shores and cut into bare, dirtied feet—and in four, five more days—another unclaimed body. Another illegal grave.

Very softly, Izuku said: “Why do you even want to be a hero?”

Todoroki looked thrown. “That has nothing to do with—“

“It has everything to do with this!” Izuku yelled, grabbing Todoroki by the shoulders. “Listen to yourself—I'll become number one.' 'I'll deny him.' Is that really all being a hero is to you?” He inhaled. “I know you're not going to like this, Todoroki, but—who do you sound like?”

The temperature plunged as Todoroki tore away from Izuku's grasp. “Don't you dare,” he snarled.

A retort rose to Izuku’s tongue, but equally sharp was the guilt—seeing how upset, how hurt Todoroki looked—and he lowered his head.

“I'm sorry, Todoroki—I really am. But I just can’t”—as Todoroki’s expression frosted over and he turned to leave, panic replaced the guilt—“no, wait—let me explain—"

“Don't waste your breath.”

In one explosive exhale, Izuku snapped: “I decide how I use my breath, so shut up and listen!”

Startled, Todoroki froze. But for Izuku, it was too late to stop.

"You, everybody! You're given things, but do we look like we are? If we want something, we have to take it, bleed for it! Did I bleed? Don't you turn away!" He yanked back a ratty clump of hair to show the hole in his earlobe. "What do you think this is? A piercing?" The scars on his face, his neck; he wrenched his sleeves up to bare his battered arms. "How much blood did these cost? We bleed before we beg, we die before we beg!"

Michi, with her split lip and blackened eyes and high head whenever she came back from the school she didn't go to anymore, only she still snuck back in to steal looks at lesson notes and textbooks. Uematsu, old and ill and laboring away as if she were a healthy young man in a factory. Maeda, who vowed not to look at another needle for a day, and then two, and three, all the way up until she died—clean at last. The first tears prickled in his eyes.

"You are"—his voice cracked—"blessed."

He'd always been an ugly crier. Now his voice was failing him, he was squeaking—he wasn't supposed to squeak, damn it, he wasn't supposed to be fifteen with a breaking voice when he hadn't acted his age since he was ten.

"You're blessed, I tell you—you're blessed!"

After his sobs had quieted to hiccups and then to sniffling, after his tears had run their course and his anger had shriveled up and withered, Izuku raised his head once more and looked Todoroki in the eyes.

"Can you just imagine?" he whispered. "For one second. Please." Inhaled; pressed his hands to his eyes. "What I feel when I see you throw your gifts away—for what? A grudge?"

One. That'd been the first. Then: thirteen. Sixteen. Eight. Five. Two so far, this year. In total—

"I've buried forty-five people, Todoroki. This is why."
They stared at each other: one hard-faced and cold, the other red-eyed and red-haunted and searching, searching, for something—anything—in that mask. The slightest, faintest flicker...

Izuku stepped back.

“You don’t get it.”

Not a question. A statement.

“Neither do you,” Todoroki returned, frigid. “I thought”—a flash of vulnerability—“of all people, I thought you would understand.” His voice was even colder than before. “Evidently, I was wrong.”

*You’re not wrong, I understand, I just don’t agree,* Izuku wanted to shout, but he saw Todoroki turning—like a door closing—and in a moment of desperation, a wild hysteria that swallowed up all reason and planning, Izuku lashed out and punched him square in the jaw. Todoroki reeled, throwing his arms up before him.

“What the hell, Midoriya!”

“This is your language, isn’t it?” Izuku gripped his stun gun and squared his shoulders. *I trade words, you trade blows.* “So talk to me. *Make* me understand.“

And before Todoroki could protest, Izuku charged. Ice swept over the ground—but in the afternoon heat it began to melt, phase change, molecules breaking free of their crystalline structure, insulator to conductor—and Izuku slammed the stun gun downwards. Electricity crackled over the spreading sheen of water and snapped up to Todoroki’s hand, hovering above the ice to prepare another blast, and he recoiled. That’d only work once, use this opening now; Izuku lunged forward and he knew what Todoroki must’ve seen in that moment: a knife heading for his left arm, four arteries five tendons—

Fire gushed forth, as bright and golden as the sun at its midday zenith, and Izuku sprang back—but the blaze swept over his arm and he cried out. Instantly the fire disappeared and Todoroki rushed over, kicking up dust as he slid to a clumsy halt.

“Midoriya—shit—” He grabbed Izuku’s burned arm roughly and rolled back the bodysuit sleeve, but touched his right hand to the pink, flaking skin with a stricken sort of reverence. “I—I would never— I…”

Todoroki stopped when he saw Izuku’s grin. A tinge of suspicion entered his voice.

“What are you smiling for?”

Still grinning in spite of the pain, Izuku opened his hand. Todoroki stared down at it like he’d been personally insulted.

"You bastard."

It was, in fact, a knife. Only, it was dulled at the edges and tip.

"You did that on purpose," Todoroki accused, rapidly shifting from consternated to indignant. “To get me to use my left side.”

Izuku held his hands up in sheepish surrender. "You got me, you got me." Not that he was sorry. He slipped the "knife" back into his pocket. “Tell me: why did you stop fighting and run over to me?”
“I...” Realization dawned over Todoroki’s face. “I wanted to help.” He paused as he took in Izuku’s widening grin. “You're crazy.”

“That's putting it mildly,” Izuku chuckled. He flopped down onto the ground, sprawling spread-eagle over the dirt, and Todoroki followed, an exasperated smile tugging at his lips.

“Do people usually say something else?”

“Oh, you know…” Izuku mimicked a series of voices. “Batshit crazy. Really fucking stupid. How the hell are you still alive? Etcetera.” As an afterthought, he added, "Well, that's the least vulgar of it.”

Todoroki laughed. Not a snort, or a short *ha*—but a full, proper laugh that shook his shoulders and crinkled the corners of his eyes.

(Izuku rather liked it.)

"I can see how you did it now," said Todoroki, gazing up at the sky. The sun was descending past the clouds. "Fifty-four percent drop in crime rate in two years."

"Inaccurate statistic, actually—"

"Just take the compliment."

"Thanks."

A breeze gusted over the melting remnants of the ice, bringing with it a pleasant coolness and some leaves. One landed in Izuku's hair; he brushed it off, rolled onto his side, and propped himself up on his elbow.

"Todoroki”—he considered his words—"if there's one thing I want you to take away from this, it's that you're not your circumstances. Sure, you might've been born to a flaming trashcan—"

A wheezing laugh. Izuku grinned briefly before becoming serious again.

"—but you don’t have to let that define your life. Instead of saying 'because this,' 'because that'—try saying 'despite.'" He dropped back down, arms folded beneath his head, and glanced at Todoroki. "I don't know—does that make any sense?"

"Despite being Quirkless," Todoroki mused.

"And homeless”—Izuku held up a finger for each one—"asthmatic, orphaned..."

"You're talking about this very casually."

His flippant smile faded. He let his hand fall back to his side. "It helps me deal with it, I guess.”

Not facts of life; just parameters, some more changeable than others. Though there wasn't much he could do about the last one...

And before Todoroki could say anything else, before Izuku's thoughts could get too morbid, he got up.

"Come on. There's another place I want to show you.”
It was a twenty-minute walk down the river to the park. Everyone there greeted Todoroki kindly, or at the very least politely. Uematsu, though, looked delighted to see Izuku with company: she insisted Todoroki just call her by her surname, something it'd taken Izuku a full month to get to when he'd first met her on the streets.

"It won't be much, but we'll prepare a little soup for you two," she promised, already gathering up bowls. "Higashide, would you—"

"—fetch some firewood, yeah." Higashide, a sharp-nosed man in his fifties, rose with a grunt from where he'd been flattening cans and packing them in a bag. "Easy on that back, alright?"

"Yes, yes."

"Can I light the fire?" Michi piped up.

"Only if you're careful," Izuku stressed; she whooped. "But you'll have to wait for Mr. Higashide."

"Awww. Guess I'll go see Mr. Ito then."

As everyone dispersed, Izuku led Todoroki towards the outskirts of the tent city (or so Michi liked to call it), pointing out the small vegetable farm—"Mr. Takenaka started it, but everyone pitches in"—and the dinged-up solar panels half-attached to a tangled mess of circuitry—"That's Ms. Kisugi's project. If it works, we might be able to get electricity"—along the way.

All this Todoroki took in with an interested gaze; Izuku might've even said he looked impressed.

"How long has this been around for?"

"Over a year, I think. It used to be too dangerous to set up such a big camp, but like you said, the crime rate's gone down a lot." Izuku clambered over a fallen log, one just loose enough it wobbled precariously when you put weight onto it, and held a hand out to Todoroki. "Here—careful."

"Thanks."

"Not much further."

"So you've been doing the pros' work all this time."

Izuku almost tripped. "You always make things sound worse than they are," he huffed. "It's really all very simple. The poorer the area, the less tax revenue; tax revenue funds local governments which provide a portion of the funding for pros; the rest comes from the federal government based on hero rankings, which are based on the scale of the incidents they resolve—big, flashy showdowns being weighted the most; therefore, less incentive for pros to service poorer areas which typically see more discreet types of crime than elsewhere, which is because villains know all this and purposely keep things under the radar so it's easier for the pros to pretend not to notice." He paused to catch his breath. "See? Simple. Oh, here it is."

In front of them was the tallest tree in the park. The lowest branch was just high enough Izuku had
to jump to reach it, and he hoisted himself onto it with a grunt.

"Some areas are fragile. I'll show you where it's safe to go, so follow me exactly."

Looking rather dumbfounded, Todoroki mechanically complied. It was only fair: Izuku had dumped quite a lot on him, so he opted not to say anything more as they climbed upwards. By the time they reached the top, the glazed look had cleared somewhat—but still, Izuku waited for Todoroki to break the silence first.

"I used to think," Todoroki finally said, "it didn't matter why you did something, as long as it was the right thing."

Why did you want to be a hero? the reporters always loved to ask; I wanted to save people, the pros loved to answer. And while rarely was that a lie, Izuku knew it was never the only reason—and, oftentimes, not even the main reason. Except for All Might.

But all Izuku could do was sigh, "I wish," and, with one steadying hand on the trunk, stand up.

A sea of buildings rolled out before them, block after shambling block. Their peeling facades caught the fading sun. Izuku pointed towards the west.

"That's Miasma's territory," he started, voice low as bugs hummed around them. "That's the best restaurant around. That used to be a police station, and that building, I'm told, was rather historic."

A graffiti giraffe stared at them from its broad wall. "That's a disputed zone, but we're trying to work out a compromise..."

And as Izuku went on the sun's corona grew and the clouds stacked high and solid into the sky. Soon he was rambling about nothing at all, and in a pause, Todoroki spoke up.

"What about you?"

"I'm not that interesting," Izuku laughed faintly, but he pointed anyway to a nondescript apartment building on the east end. "That's where I used to live, and"—it took him some searching before he was able to point out the right building—"that's where I went to school, up until my mother died."

They couldn't see it from here, but he knew papers were taped in each window, spelling out LITTLE FRIENDS. It'd changed its name twice, each time a bit more saccharine—as if that would help.

Feeling heavy now, he dropped his arm and leaned back against the tree. From somewhere in the woods came the cooing exchange of two pigeons. He fancied they were having a conversation: something splendidly inane, something they'd forget all about in a couple hours. How nice.

"I was born in Musutafu, you know."

At Todoroki's look of shock, Izuku's smile turned wry.

"Surprise, right? Going from one of the most affluent cities in the world to"—he made a sweeping gesture—"this." He lowered himself back down onto the branch and tucked his knees into his chest. "We weren't rich, but we didn't have to worry about anything—until I was four and officially Quirkless. My mom cried all the way to the registry. The next week my dad walked out."

"And took half your income with him," Todoroki surmised.

"All of it," Izuku corrected. "My mom was a housewife. And being a single mother—that made it
even harder for her to find work. Whatever she did find just wasn't enough."

Waiting in the playground to be picked up until the only light came from the street lamps. Waking up at five and going over to a classmate's place until school started, because there wouldn't be anyone home to look after him. When that job went, he remembered a month of never seeing his mother after dark: only a note and dinner cold in the fridge. That job went, too.

"So, we moved here."

"How did she die?"

"Guess."

"Street violence."

In a brief bout of dry humor, Izuku laughed. "No, nothing as glamorous as that." But then it evaporated. His shoulders slumped as he ran his fingers over the bark.

"Sorry," Todoroki murmured. "That was insensitive."

A bug crawled up Izuku's leg. He barely noticed.

"There are some things," he began, faltering, "you think no one could ever really die from. It's just so ridiculous, or simple, or so easily fixed—you think it only happens in books, or movies, or to stupid people. Like how you think it's impossible to slip on a banana peel. But it—"

The wind blew. A twig scraped at his face. The bug was gone.

"But it isn't. I always thought Mom would die of heart disease or cancer or at least get caught up in a gang war, but I never—ever—thought she'd die from"—his breath hitched on a sob—"a cold! The only thing she ever did wrong was not make enough to pay for the heating, but that wasn't her fault, and I thought if we just bundled up, we'd—we'd be fine. That was what she told me."

And the thermostat. The one with the flimsy plastic pane that rattled when you tapped it. The thermostat reading...what was it? Too low. Their breaths frosting in the air. The metal pans, they'd been so cold. That one night they'd huddled together against the chill, listening to the radio phasing in and out of static. Be prepared for tomorrow's blizzard, expecting seventy centimeters of snow... They'd joked through their flu masks and she'd laughed, the corners of her eyes crinkling, and he'd felt safe. Warm.

The next morning, only he woke up.

"Midoriya."

A hand on his arm. Whose voice? Todoroki's—Todoroki was here.

"It's fine."

This wasn't the apartment, this was the park. He was fifteen, not ten.

"You don't have to talk about it anymore."

Fifteen not ten. Fifteen not ten. Izuku shook his head, as if that would chase the fog away. "Sorry, I don't"—tears choked his voice—"I just—"

"Midoriya."
"I'm fine," he gasped, lurching forward. "I'm fine." He moved to climb back down, but Todoroki seized his arm.

"You're not going anywhere like this."

"I said I'm fine."

Todoroki tightened his grip. "Midoriya. *Sit. Down.*"

Izuku did: ungracefully, his legs collapsing underneath him. He slumped against the trunk, shut his eyes, and tried to control his breathing.

"Go down without me. Tell them I just—wanted some air—"

"We're not going anywhere with you like this," Todoroki amended.

"Oh."

They sat there until a crow cawed from a nearby tree and Uematsu called them back. This time, it was Todoroki who held out a hand, and Izuku took it.

Fifteen. He was fifteen.

Back in the center of the tents, Uematsu and Higashide were tending to the pot while Michi watched the fire. Ito and Kisugi were off to the side, talking heatedly about some bit of news or another. After an emphatic gesture by Ito, Kisugi pinched the bridge of her nose, sighed heavily, and proclaimed: "I need a smoke."

"No you don't," called Higashide, as matter-of-fact as ever. "Ain't got the money anyhow."

"I suppose so," she acquiesced with dignity, rising as Izuku and Todoroki approached. "Hello, Izuku, Shouto. I'll be with the plants."

"Just as we were getting to the juicy part," Ito grumbled, scratching at his white stubble—though he was only complaining for the sake of complaining. After a while with him, you learned how to tell. "That's what I liked about being a teacher: the kids all listened to you."

"Me and Izuku listen to you," Michi offered, wide-eyed. Izuku grinned as he lowered himself onto the grass.

"That we do. Though, I'm not sure Ms. Kisugi qualifies as a 'kid' anymore."

"Forty-nine? Bah. *Young.*"

Higashide chortled. "I've gotta tell her you said that. She'll hate it." He deftly spooned soup into two bowls, but no sooner had he handed them off to Izuku and Todoroki did Michi let out a wail.

"The fire went out!"

"Oh, dear." Uematsu knelt down and prodded the firewood. "It must've been too weak before..."

"Think we've still got matches?"

"Nah, not since ages ago. Just our damn luck it rained—won't be a dry thing for miles."

"Maybe paper..."
"Could I?"

Todoroki's voice, his posture, were perfectly steady. There was nothing to suggest the vulnerability Izuku had seen hardly an hour earlier. But as he bent down by the pot and reached his right hand out, the facade cracked; he drew his hand back like he'd been stung (burned).

"What happened?" Michi demanded. "Is it still hot? You've gotta watch out if it's still hot 'cause —"

"No. Just"—Todoroki grit his teeth—"give me a second."

Neither Uematsu, nor Ito, nor Higashide said anything; and neither did Michi, who shuffled back and forth, looking between them uncertainly.

Then, so quickly Izuku almost missed it, the fire was blazing once more and Todoroki was backed up a couple steps, right hand clenched into a white-knuckled fist. Of course it wouldn't be so easy. Just as Izuku touched him on the arm, searching for some encouraging words, Michi blurted out:

"Woah! Is that your Quirk?"

"It's n—"

Todoroki stopped. Slowly, he drew in a breath and unclenched his fist. The hard edges melted from his expression, leaving it lighter—younger.

"Yes. It's my Quirk."

Izuku smiled. Step by step.

---

At eight on a Sunday morning, the UA Sports Festival opened its gates. Still exploring the outdoor stalls, Izuku and Michi weren't close enough to see, but they could hear the cheers that went up.

"D'you think we can get a look inside?" she asked, with a cautious, wistful sort of hope. In her "special clothes"—a white dress printed with strawberries, slightly yellow from age and old stains —she looked just like any other bright-eyed little kid hanging off their parents.

Izuku squeezed her hand.

"Anything for the birthday girl."

"Early birthday," she giggled, though a pleased flush still spread over her face. "C'mon! We've gotta beat the crowd!"

"Yes, yes," he surrendered, letting her drag him through to the front. The security looked askance at them when they skirted around the queues before the front gate, but relented after he offered a sheepish smile.

Michi had no such concerns, however; she unabashedly craned her neck to peer inside. "It's so
"It is the largest stadium in the country."

"Mhm."

She stared inside for a long time, and upwards too, her gaze roving about in broad sweeps—like she wanted to absorb every single detail of it. Finally, she stepped back and grabbed Izuku's hand again.

"Okay. We can go now."

“No, wait a second,” Izuku said, grinning, and—unable to resist—with a touch of theatrics. “Did I mention I’ve got another surprise for you?”

"You—" The very idea seemed foreign to her. "You do?"

Instead of answering, Izuku knelt down so they were eye-to-eye, and from his pockets, pulled out two tickets. One he pressed gently into her hand, smiling.

"Happy birthday, Michi."

Tears shone in her eyes. "Early birthday," she sniffled, voice wobbling almost as badly as her lip. Softly, Izuku laughed.

"Happy early birthday, Michi."

She threw her arms around him. As Izuku returned the embrace, he brushed a stray lock of hair back from her forehead.

"Come on, now. Come on. No need to cry."

"100,000 yen," she sobbed into the crook of his neck. "I'll pay you back, I promise—"

"No, Michi, no. Everyone chipped in."

"Even Mr. Higashide?"

"Especially Mr. Higashide. Come on—now, now. Come on." He patted her on the back and she let go, ticket clenched in one hand and still sniffling. "The other one I actually bought for myself, but—"

"No. I want you here too."

Izuku smiled: a helpless smile that spread across his face on its own. He ruffled her hair and rose; and once more, he took her hand.

"Well, I'm here. Let's get inside now, okay?"

"Okay."

They found a seat squarely in the middle of the stands: a decent view, and reasonably safe, with the crowd providing camouflage. As Michi bounced in her seat, all evidence that she’d been crying earlier gone, Izuku messaged the group Uraraka had created not long after their trip to Kesseru Market:

Hey guys, I was able to make it to the festival today! I'll be cheering for you all!!
After hitting send, he dialed Gran Torino and put one earbud in.

“Alright, kid. Do you know what you’re looking for?”

“Most of the participants will be my future colleagues, so I should familiarize myself with their Quirks and fighting styles,” Izuku recited. “I should also take note of how they work with others.”

“Good. Which way are you facing?”

“Um…east.”

“I’ll find a broadcast facing west. Anything you miss, I’ll let you know.”

“Right.”

“And, kid?”

“Sir?”

“Take it easy today, you hear? Everyone needs a little downtime.”

Izuku flushed. “Yes, sir. I’ll try.”

Michi grabbing at his sleeve brought his attention back to the festival. “It’s starting!” she shouted, eyes bright with rapt delight, and no sooner had she finished her sentence than Present Mic’s voice exploded across the stadium:

“EVERYBODY SAY HEY!”

The crowd’s chatter swelled into a deafening roar; Michi whooped and yelled right along with them, while Izuku clapped politely. He clapped louder, though, when his friends emerged, and cheered in earnest when Todoroki took first in the obstacle race, leaving swaths of ice and charred ground in his wake.

But against the next round, the race appeared little more than disorderly—so much so that not a minute into the cavalry battle, Michi was standing on her seat.

“No, no, no!” she screamed down at the arena, stomping her feet and pulling at her pigtails. “What are they doing? Get the yellow guy, the yellow guy! They—ugh!” She whirled around to Izuku. “I can’t see. Lift me up!”

“As you wish,” Izuku laughed, and hoisted her onto his shoulders. “There’s actually a reason they’re not going after the ‘yellow guy,’ though. Do you see the team in the bottom right corner…”?

In the end, Todoroki snatched first place again, while Izuku’s other friends placed in the top five. As Present Mic announced a recess for lunch, Izuku texted them an enthusiastic congratulations—though Gran Torino was less than impressed.

“They’re being reckless with their Quirks because Recovery Girl’s there,” he groused, after a ten-minute long diatribe dissecting each and every mistake made in that round. “Especially those 1-A kids!”

“Could I buy a hot dog?”

“Of course.”
“What is that buffoon teaching them?”

Half-listening and half-watching Michi haggle (read: make puppy-eyes at) the hot-dog vendor into cutting her a discount, Izuku repeated without thinking, “Buffoon?”

“Yes, All Might,” Gran Torino replied impatiently. “Who else?”

Izuku choked on his water. “Sorry,” he wheezed out, “but did you—Michi, I think that’s enough ketchup—did you just call All Might a buffoon?”

“Sure I did. He might be a top hero—”

“The top hero—”

“—but he’s a novice when it comes to teaching.” A certain weight, a heavy sort of significance entered Gran Torino’s words. “Even a pillar like him has its cracks.”

The hot dog finished, Michi licked the oil off her fingers and, absently, adjusted the hem of her dress to cover the scrapes on her knees. They’d appeared the day before she decided to stop going to school, already plastered over with band-aids and cotton swabs, and without a single explanation.

But Izuku had never needed one. He curled his fingers into fists.

“You think I don’t know that?”

“I’m sure you do.” There was a pause; then a deep sigh, and shuffling, as Gran Torino got up. “Listen, kid”—an uncharacteristic uncertainty entered his tone—“about T—All Might… It’s possible he’ll want to talk to you about something. You probably won’t like it—I didn’t either, when he asked me about it, but…”

“What are you talking about?” Izuku asked slowly, hoping he didn’t sound as alarmed as he felt. “You’re never this vague.”

“Just…remember he cares about you. A lot more than you think. And that sometimes, he’s an idiot.”

Present Mic’s voice erupted through the air again and Izuku, unprepared for the volume, flinched and clapped a hand over his empty ear.

“Can’t you just tell me what—”

“Forget it,” Gran Torino interrupted, back to his normal gruff self. “Focus on the tournament for now. Understood?”

Though Izuku wanted to protest, he bit his tongue. "Yes, sir," he mumbled, willing the conversation to the back of his mind, and by the finals he’d forgotten about everything but the fight. Todoroki versus Bakugo's wasn't just a clash of Quirks but of personalities, of the two juggernauts of 1-A, and with every wave of frost or heat or plume of smoke Izuku dug his fingers deeper into the edge of his seat. As Bakugo proclaimed his final move, a paralysis seized Todoroki and he stood frozen, right in Bakugo's path.

Later on, Izuku would realize it was incredibly reckless of him—but in the heat of that moment he’d cupped his hands to his mouth and yelled at the top of his lungs: "Don't give up, Todoroki!"

It wasn't as if he was expecting to be heard. But somehow—call it a coincidence, a miracle—
hardly had he closed his mouth when Todoroki's left side burst into fire, as brilliant as they'd been on the riverbed. The flames gathered around his arm—

But in the next breath they were gone. Bakugou's attack met ice and the match ended with Todoroki unconscious and Bakugou asleep, and Michi gripping Izuku's sleeve.

"Why didn't he use his fire?"—and that she'd whispered rather than yelled and raged over the stupidity of it told Izuku she'd caught a glimpse of something just before that collision, something to strike that chord of sorrow in her voice. "What's wrong?"

"It's complicated," Izuku murmured.

"Complicated complicated?"

"Yeah."

"Oh. Okay."

Michi didn't speak again, even through the awards ceremony—only gasping when All Might arrived—until they'd filed out of the stadium and Izuku was checking his messages.

Yagi Toshinori

Hello, young Midoriya! I was asked to forward a message from All Might. Would you be able to meet him in the second floor UA faculty room? He'd like to discuss something with you. (It's nothing to be worried about, however.)

speedwalk squad (class mom, manly spirit!!, + 2 others)

manly spirit!!: GUYS. WE DID GRET TODAY

Uravity: congRATS EVERyOne!!! hands are still shaking lmao

Uravity: saw @Broccoli in the stands! thx again for coming!!!

manly spirit!!: yeah like a broccoli in a field of grass, except its not grass it cauliflower

Uravity: i believe a celebration is in order! any objections, opinions or whatever?

Todoroki Shouto

Can you call me?

"I'll go somewhere else so you can talk," she decided, after reading over Izuku's shoulder. "Like...up in that tree?"

That...might actually be the safest option. "As long as you don't fall," he acquiesced, relieved she was perceptive enough to know they'd want some space.

"I never fall," she declared, and in a couple beats she'd shoved herself in the crook of a branch and pointedly turned away.

Izuku hit dial.

The phone rang once, twice. On the third ring, Todoroki picked up.
"I lost," was all he said. Stated like a flat fact—only, his unsteady breathing gave him away. That was as damn close as Izuku had ever seen him to crying and for someone that reticent, it might as well be the same thing.

It tore at his heart.

"Maybe," he returned, "but you won against yourself. I think that's what counts."

"But I didn't. In that last match..." An audible swallow. "In that last match, I wanted to use my fire. I thought that I could handle it now. That I'd figured everything out. But—"

"Todoroki, no one expects you to flip a switch and suddenly be okay. It's been five years for me, and"—Izuku faltered—"well. You saw what happened."

No reply. But that was fine. Izuku stayed on the line until Todoroki's breathing evened out (worry about the phone bill later, this was more important), and once it did, cleared his throat slightly—if only so he wouldn't startle Todoroki.

"If you ever want to talk, or, you know, if you just need someone..."

"I have your number."

"And you know where to find me now."

Todoroki huffed out a laugh. "Yeah." He paused. "Thank you, Midoriya."

"Anytime."

After leaving Michi with Aizawa (who'd given Izuku the most flat, unimpressed look he'd ever seen when he asked him to look after her, but caved surprisingly quickly), Izuku headed to the upstairs faculty room. There, All Might greeted him with his usual liveliness and beckoned him over to the coffee table.

"Before I start"—All Might pulled a small booklet out of his pocket—"why don’t you look through this? I'm terribly sorry about the stain, by the way—there was a minor incident during lunch..."

"I've seen worse," Izuku assured him. A lot worse—but enough about that.

The cover, it turned out, was illegible underneath said stain (salsa?), though Izuku could make out a stock photo of beaming kids, their arms thrown around one another. Something about school? Or welfare, maybe? He opened it to the title page.

Foster Care in Yamanashi Prefecture.

"Who—" One door. Equidistant. Windows: shatterproof; too high anyway. "Who is this for?"

All Might paused—the only indication of his surprise—before his jovial demeanor swiftly
returned. “Naturally, it’s for you, my boy! I realize this is quite sudden, but Gran Torino mentioned in passing you lacked a permanent residence. Is that correct?”

One door. One exit. One escape. Izuku hid his trembling fists in his lap.

“I appreciate the thought, sir”—the lie tasted sour in his mouth—“but I’m fine. Really.”

Though All Might was still smiling, there was a frown in his voice. “I strongly recommend you consider this option, young Midoriya. The streets are no place for children—”

Izuku slammed his hands on the table. “They’re no place for anyone!” he yelled, in a fit of ferocity that startled even himself—control yourself, damn it—but the words burst out like water breaking through a dam. “What makes me so special?”

“I didn’t mean to imply that,” All Might backtracked, looking slightly discomposed. “But please, my boy, let me finish. If you entered a foster home, we would be able to keep an eye on—”

"No," said Izuku, with a numb calm.

All Might blinked. “No?”

“I haven’t been to school in five years, All Might,” Izuku hissed, the calm rapidly dissolving. “Same thing for a hospital—and even with the apprenticeship, that’s an obscure system hardly anyone pays attention to. As far as the government’s concerned, I stopped existing after age ten—”

“Which is bad—”

“Which is good!” he argued, voice rising. “A lot of what I do is illegal—not to mention I work with criminals! Maybe if I’m lucky, I’ll get sent to someone who’ll turn a blind eye, but I’d never be able to hide it from the authorities long enough.” He halted to gulp in a breath, to steady himself. “Everyone’s already risking so much by trusting me. I can’t endanger them.”

All Might’s smile had faltered. Izuku hated that he was the cause. And like a damned coward, he lowered his gaze to the tabletop, to his own balled hands.

“Please. I’m begging you.”

He did not flinch when footsteps crossed the floor. He did not flinch when clothes rustled, when he felt the heat of another person close enough to grab to shoot to kill. He did not flinch. He looked up.

All Might was kneeling before him: the way a parent does to lock eyes with their child.

“You never have to beg me, my boy.” He laid a hand on Izuku’s shoulder. “I…will make no mention of this conversation to anyone else. You have my word.”

“How does that hold up against the law?”

“It will hold.”

“And the security cameras?” Izuku pressed.

“I will have the footage erased.”

His shoulders slumped: part relief, and part an exhaustion that weighed his entire body down. He smiled weakly.
"Thank you. I'll...I'll leave now."

At the door, All Might called out to Izuku once more. His voice was carefully gentle, modulated to be unthreatening.

"What about the young girl with you? Maeda Michi?"

Izuku's hand stilled on the doorknob.

"In the records," he said quietly, "she's Hara Michiko and living happily with her parents." He turned the knob. "They never officially gave her up."

The door closed on a silent room.

When Michi caught sight of him—at some point Present Mic had joined Aizawa—and launched herself into his arms, gushing about how awesome and cool and funny and did I say they're awesome? the two pros were, and look, they even signed my flyer, Izuku, look!—he dredged up a strained smile.

"Thank you for looking after her," he said, and excused himself before they could ask any questions.

Michi didn't seem to notice anything wrong, at least at first. She swung her arms and hummed to herself as they left the building, but after some time she stopped and took to casting Izuku probing looks when she thought he couldn't see.

"Aren't you gonna go see your friends now?" she asked, after they'd passed through the front gate.

"I'm not feeling so well," Izuku answered. A half-truth. "I already told them. But I'm sure they'll have fun even without me."

"Did your talk go badly?"

"It could've gone better."

"Oh."

Another one of those things they wouldn't talk about.

On the train ride back, Michi recounted the stories Aizawa and Present Mic had told her, getting an occasional chuckle out of Izuku. But after she ran out, she pressed her cheek up against the window and stared outside. Four more stops passed in silence.

"Hey, Izuku?"

"Hm?"

"How come all the bad heroes come to Akutou?"

Izuku jolted to attention. Michi was staring down at the autographed flyer in her lap now, a rare distance to her gaze—like the look she wore whenever they visited the graveyard.

It scared him.

“What do you mean?”
"'Cause they don't do anything!" she burst out in a harsh whisper, shooting upright and clutching the flyer so tightly it began to crumple. "If, like, Eraserhead or Ryukyu or—or—or All Might were there they'd—"

The train jerked to a stop. Michi cried out, nearly tumbling into the back of a seat if Izuku hadn’t grabbed her arm.

"Careful!"

"Wh-what's happening?"

No sooner had she said that than the intercom crackled to life.

"Attention passengers," the conductor began, cool and unbothered by the grumbling of the passengers. "We are currently experiencing a minor brake malfunction. This will cause an estimated delay of no longer than ten minutes. Please be patient as we work to resolve this issue. Thank you."

"Brake malfunction," someone scoffed, incredulous. "Could've killed us all!"

"Oh, don't be morbid," their companion scolded. "At least they're fixing it now..."

The rest of their conversation was lost in the buzz of disgruntled chatter. Back in her seat, Michi shifted, her eyes darting about.

"Um...about my question..."

"It's not that Akutou's pros are worse," Izuku replied wearily, rubbing at his temples. "They're doing their best. It's just..."

"Just what?"

The train shuddered. Its movement was slow at first: barely a labored crawl. But soon it'd groaned back to life and was pulling itself forward along the tracks once more. Sighs of relief went up about the car.

"You'll understand eventually, Michi."

How was he supposed to tell her that it wasn't just Akutou—that it was everywhere?
Most of Shouto’s thoughts revolved, as of late, around Midoriya Izuku.

That wasn’t bad, per se. There were much worse things to be preoccupied with (fire, boiling water, the hate that still simmered deep in his gut) and so, really, Midoriya was the least of many evils.

But then All Might came onto the TV. Now, that also wasn’t bad, per se, because Shouto and Fuyumi were already well-versed in how to tune out the frequency of Endeavor’s grumbling. But there were complications; namely that a) Endeavor was already in a foul mood after an argument with his hiring manager, and b) All Might was taking about ethics.

You wouldn’t think the second would be a complication. Shouto hadn’t, either. That was until Endeavor made one particularly derisive comment and Shouto nearly blurted out, actually, Midoriya said—at which point he decided he probably needed to get out of the house for a bit, for both his and Midoriya’s sakes.

Thankfully this part of town was quiet as always (save for some kids roughhousing in a playground). That gave Shouto time to sort out his thoughts.

First of all: no, despite what the books and movies all suggested, he was not infatuated with Midoriya, and no, he was not in denial, either. Did he find Midoriya interesting? Yes. Admirable? Yes. Attractive? Well…

“SHUT UP!”

Shouto stopped. That shout was a child’s, and suddenly what he’d taken as some kids horsing about seemed more sinister. No need to think; he backtracked to the playground, just in time to...
hear the ringing smack of knuckles against teeth.

“—dare say that about my mom!”

One grade-school boy, pale hair and bangs, scuffed and bruised and bleeding knuckles (the one who shouted and threw the punch just now, the victim) faced off against three others (bullies). The one in front (ringleader) sneered despite his split lip.

“Aw, was that supposed to hurt?” he mocked. “You punch like—”

“Excuse me,” Shouto interrupted, going for his most imposing look. It worked: the boys froze in place. “What’s going on here?”

“Uh,” Split Lip stammered, his earlier bravado nowhere to be seen. “Nothing!” The other two nodded vigorously. “Actually it’s, uh, super late we’ve got to go home bye!”

“Hey, get back here!” The last boy tried to charge after the fleeing bullies, but Shouto caught him by the arm.

“Don’t—”

“Lemme go!” the boy howled, thrashing against Shouto’s grip. “I’m—I’m—I’m gonna knock their teeth out—”

“They’re not worth your time,” Shouto said firmly. “Calm. Down.”

He was prepared for the boy to quiet, to go limp. He was also prepared for the boy to struggle even harder.

But then he burst into tears, and Shouto completely blanked. Shit shit shit he was not equipped to deal with this, crying children had most definitely not been an item in Endeavor’s crisis response training, then add that to the fact he had next to no social skills (yes, he was aware of that, thank you very much)—what should he do?

What would Midoriya do?

Pushing aside the little voice that said he would’ve avoided this mess in the first place, duh, because that was utterly unhelpful, Shouto knelt down so he was on eye level with the boy.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to yell. But it’s alright now.” Was that awkward? Probably. He held out his right hand. “Do you want me to ice your bruises?”

The boy nodded, sniffling. At first, Shouto had thought him the aggressive type, but more likely he’d caught him in a moment of wild anger. That was what the way he braced himself each time Shouto touched him said: he was afraid.

“What’s your name?”

“Um—T-Touya. Akatani Touya.”

Huh. What a coincidence.

“I’m Todoroki Shouto.”

“I know,” said Touya (what), before hastily adding, “You were on TV.” He twirled a finger in his bangs, cheeks faintly pink. “I thought you were, um. Really cool. Just so you know.”
“Oh.” That… was unexpected. “Thanks.” Shouto iced the last bruise and moved back to give Touya some space. “Does it feel better now?”

“Yeah. A lot better.”

With a grunt, Shouto pushed himself back upright and brushed the dirt from his knees. “I’ll walk you home, if you want,” he offered.

Instantly, Touya stiffened. For a second Shouto was thrown—what did he do wrong?

Then, it hit him. In retrospect, it was so obvious—especially in the wake of what’d happened just last week—he could’ve slapped himself.

“I’ll walk you to where you need to be,” he corrected. “Sorry.”

But Touya didn’t seem comforted at all. “Could—” He swallowed, eyes darting about. “C-could I see your phone?”

Shouto blinked at the non-sequitur, but passed his phone over anyway. Touya didn’t even turn it on; instead, he gripped it with both hands, took a deep breath—

And his eyes were glowing blue. On trained reflex Shouto tensed (Quirk activation, why?), but in a flash the glow had blinked out and Touya was staring at him, a mix of shock and relief on his face.

“You— You know someone like me?”

Someone like you? was the first thing on Shouto’s tongue. But then he thought—Midoriya—and it clicked. Worn clothes, thin frame, bullied, possibly an absent father, evasive about his home—

“He’s my friend,” Shouto confirmed (first friend, best friend, but he didn’t say that), and the last bit of tension drained from Touya’s shoulders.

“Oh. That’s—that’s good.” It was then that Touya remembered he was still holding Shouto’s phone and, turning scarlet, quickly handed it back. “I, um… Techno-Psychometry. That’s my Quirk. If I touch electronics, they tell me things.” He shot Shouto a nervous glance. “I just… I was just scared and I wanted to know if…”

“It’s fine,” Shouto cut in, sensing an incoming apology. “No harm done. Where are you headed?”

“N-Nishinari House.”

A quick search showed it was a ten-minute walk away. Shouto fired off a text to Fuyumi before pocketing his phone.

“Alright, lead the way.”

Nishinari House was a standard shelter on the outskirts of town, with several rows of mattresses in
the center, a table of food against the wall manned by two workers, and a curtained doorway leading to what was likely a kitchen. And if the water-stained walls and patched-up bedsheets were any indication, it’d seen better days.

As Shouto wedged the door open, careful not to jostle Touya—who’d fallen asleep on his back—a bell rang, and one of the workers hurried over to meet him.

“Dear, dear,” she tutted, deftly lifting Touya into her arms. Her name-tag read Kawabe in brisk handwriting, and she spoke with a slight Kansai accent. “The little one’s all tuckered out, isn’t he?”

“I think he’s tired from using his Quirk.”

“Well, thanks for bringing him here safely, sugar. I’ll get him checked in and all, don’t you worry.”

A sudden impulse hit him, and before he could stop to think about it, Shouto said, “Actually—”

Kawabe, on her way to an unoccupied mattress, stopped and glanced back questioningly.

“Something the matter?”

“Is there something I could help with?”

The words didn’t fit quite right in his mouth; they came out stilted, a little off-sounding. He wasn’t used to saying such things. But still, Kawabe looked pleasantly surprised.

“Why, of course! How about you pop into the kitchen, see if Ibara needs a hand?” She gave a light laugh, mindful of the still-sleeping Touya. “With your Quirk we’d sure shave some off the energy bill, at least.”

That name rang a bell, but he couldn’t quite put his finger on it, so he just nodded and made his way to the kitchen. At the rustling of the curtain, a girl with vines for hair looked up from cleaning the stove. Hold on—vines?

"Ah!" she gasped. “You're—”

"—from 1-B," he realized.

"—from 1-A," she said simultaneously. Her smile was cautious. "Todoroki, yes?"

Fourth place in the obstacle race—what was her name again? Shio... Shiosaki...

"Shiosaki," he finally recalled, with some relief. He probably needed to make more of an effort to remember his classmates’ names. “I was asked to see if you wanted help.”

Shiosaki’s eyes widened. “You’re volunteering as well?”

“I guess I am,” Shouto replied, though it was more like a question. “But if I’d just get in the way—”

“No, no, not at all. It’s just...” Awkwardly, she cleared her throat and recomposed herself. “I confess I never took you for that sort of person. That is to say—you always seemed rather...”

“Cold.”

“Well. Yes."
Shouto wasn’t quite sure how to put yeah, I was kind of a selfish asshole up until last week when my friend deconstructed my entire worldview and also punched me in the face in socially-appropriate terms, so instead he said, “I’ve been rethinking some things.”

Which was a pretty terrible explanation in hindsight, but Shiozaki still looked like he’d just told her she’d won the lottery.

“Well, then! We’d be happy to have you! Let’s see…” She flitted about the kitchen, muttering to herself, before stopping at the fridge and pulling a bag of frozen dumplings out. “Perhaps you could start with these? It’s quite simple—there are instructions on the back. And—ah!”—after fairly shoving the bag into his arms, she brought out a slightly-dented kettle—“if you could boil some water as well—“

Shouto’s scar itched.

*Stop being so weak,* scolded a voice in his head, one that sounded like Endeavor. *It’s been years.* *Get over it.* And, as if in response, a second voice:

*No one expects you to flip a switch and suddenly be okay.*

“I apologize,” Shiozaki abruptly said, sounding bashful. “I’m rather—excited, you could say, to see a fellow hero-in-training volunteering. In some ways it’s also—relieving.”

“Relieving?” he echoed, absently thawing the dumplings.

A blush rose to her cheeks; she quickly turned to the sink and busied herself with filling the kettle. “You’ll think me—old-fashioned,” she murmured.

“I live in a *machiya,*” Shouto deadpanned.

“Ah,” said Shiozaki, her blush deepening. “I see.”

There was a pause as she collected her thoughts. When she spoke again, it was with such solemnity it was hard to believe she’d been so flustered just a moment earlier.

“I believe true heroes are those who not only save people from harm, but from anguish as well. Our guests—“ As she searched for the right words, she—maybe without realizing it—touched a hand to her heart. “They are not hurt, not physically, but they are still—asking to be saved. We do our best, but sometimes it is not...” Her voice wavered. “Enough.”

Somehow Shouto couldn’t shake the feeling she had something specific in mind.

“That kind of hero,” she continued, steadier but softer now, “is what I strive to be. But I—I fear they are becoming rarer and rarer, and that, one day...“

She trailed off. But before she could finish, the third worker poked his head past the curtain.

“Sorry to be a bother, Ibara, but we need some help out here. It’s Mr. Matsuoka. He’s—” He made a vague gesture. “You know. We tried, but he likes you best, so...”

“Oh! Oh, yes, of course.” Shiozaki glanced between the worker and Shouto, who realized somewhat belatedly that he was still holding the (now-dripping) bag. “Could you—”

“—cook the dumplings and boil the water, right.”

"Yes, that would be wonderful—thank you."
After Shiozaki had ducked out, Shouto poured the dumplings into a pan and heated it up (200 degrees Fahrenheit should suffice), taking a pause to shut the faucet off once the kettle was full. Pro heroes, if he remembered correctly, weren’t compensated for volunteer work—i.e. giving back to the community in nonviolent ways unrelated to immediate crises such as attacks or natural disasters. The reasoning was that a) it didn’t require any particular skill and b) it was non-paid by definition anyway.

So, what were the consequences? Analyze; think about this like Midoriya. Three things jumped out at him:

1. Top pros like All Might didn’t need to worry about money and therefore were perfectly free to volunteer. Even at the top, though, time spent volunteering was still time spent not resolving incidents or cultivating public approval, and so their ranking might suffer.
2. Lower-ranking pros, on the other hand, did have to worry about money and therefore might also shunt volunteer work to the side, regardless of their personal feelings.
3. And then there was the growing faction of pros who actually believed resolving incidents was all there was to being a hero; volunteering was someone else’s job. Like…who was a good example? Oh, right. Endeavor.

No matter which way you sliced it, Shouto concluded, pros were thoroughly incentivized against volunteer work. Ostensibly civilians were there to pick up the slack—but wouldn’t that create an unnecessary disconnect between the pros and the people they were meant to serve?

He chewed on that thought for a long time.

When Shouto emerged from the kitchen with the dumplings, there was a woman with bobbed dark hair—one he didn’t remember seeing when he’d arrived—hovering uncertainly about the table, a plate in hand.

“Hello,” he greeted as he set the pan down, figuring that was the polite thing to do. She glanced up at him, looking momentarily puzzled, and he added, “I’m new here.”

Recognition flashed in her eyes.

“Yes, Ms. Kawabe told me—you’re the one who brought my little Touya here, aren’t you?” She spoke in a rushed, breathless manner, like she was so worried about getting everything out that she forgot to inhale. But, mindful of those who were sleeping, she kept her voice to a whisper. “I can’t say how grateful I am. I always worry about him walking here all alone, and—well, let’s just leave it at that.” She bowed her head. “Thank you very much.”

“It wasn’t any trouble,” Shouto replied, a little taken-aback, and bowed as well. “I just happened to be in the area.”

“That’s fortunate, now, isn’t it?” Her eyes brightened when she saw the dumplings. “Oh! Touya’s favorite. Could I—?”

“Help yourself.”
Mrs. Akatani filled her plate, but after a pause, put several back, before carefully maneuvering around the mattresses to reach Touya. He stirred and mumbled something when she gently shook him by the shoulder; after a couple more tries, though, he realized who it was and snapped awake. The two embraced, murmuring something indistinct, and Mrs. Akatani pressed a kiss to Touya’s forehead.

It was…nice to see. The two obviously cared for each other—which was natural, but coming from…

Shouto gave himself a slight shake. Enough of that. Any more watching and that’d be considered intrusive by most people, wouldn’t it?

A sharp inhale.

“You’ve been drinking again.”

He jerked his head back up. That was Touya asking—accusing. Mrs. Akatani’s smile froze in place; most of the other guests swiftly averted their eyes, while others cast the two indiscreet glances. Shiozaki, who’d been sitting with an old man, stood up with a look of growing alarm.

“Only a little bit,” Mrs. Akatani said weakly, with a laugh that was a touch too high. “It’s for my nerves, you know—for tomorrow…”

Touya furrowed his brow, mouthing tomorrow to himself, like he was trying to remember what was so special about it. Then, realization—swiftly followed by horror—dawned over his face.

“No,” he said: a whisper at first, then gradually rising. “You can’t do it.”

“Shhh, Touya, please—”

“He doesn’t—he doesn’t even love you!” Touya was yelling now, tears welling up in his eyes; Shiozaki was trying to soothe him, but he went on. “He just—”

“Touya, please—”

“He just wants your Quirk!”

“I know!” Mrs. Akatani yelled back, the end of her sentence choked in a sob. “I know, Touya, so please—”

In his pocket Shouto’s phone turned hot, the screen spasming with static when he yanked it out; the lights flickered; the landline on the wall spit sparks. Long-range Quirk affecting controlling technology dangerous powerful desirable—

“—just stop it!”

His scar burned.

The next moments passed in a fog; he dimly registered Shiozaki coaxing Touya aside, Kawabe and the other worker speaking gently to Mrs. Akatani; and it was in that same fog that Shouto found himself saying, “I can do it,” and walking her outside.

It was chillier, now that the sun had started to set. He considered making a fire, but Mrs. Akatani hardly seemed to notice the temperature; a fire would probably only startle her. So he hovered awkwardly as she pressed her eyes shut and took shaky breaths in, then out, and in again, until she’d recollected herself. But now there was a weathered look to her he hadn't noticed before: the
look of someone wrung dry by the world, and yet, still straggling on.

“I’m sorry to cause you trouble,” she sighed, drying her tears with a sleeve. “Touya… He means well, but sometimes his temper…”

“It’s fine,” Shouto assured her. “I don’t think anyone minds.”

A faint, wry smile crossed her face. “He gets it from me, you know. His father? Couldn’t hurt a fly if he wanted to.” The smile vanished. “I wish… I wish he was still…”

Dead, then. Otherwise she wouldn’t be speaking so fondly of him.

“He’s just”—she cradled her face in her hands—“so young,” she lamented. Not about the father anymore; she was talking about Touya now. “He doesn’t understand the way the world works—that sometimes, you have to do… things you don’t like…”

"Like a Quirk marriage," said Shouto.

The words were acid on his tongue. Mrs. Akatani smiled wanly.

"A billionaire comes up to me and asks me to marry him. Some fake-dating, some sex, some public appearances here and there to keep up the pretense. In exchange, more money than Touya and I would ever know what to do with." The smile took on a bitter tinge. "Look me in the eyes and tell me how I could ever refuse."

“Could…” Shouto grasped for the right words. Everything he thought up sounded wrong. “Would it be possible for you to get a job?”

Like a grim, tired joke, she laughed: “Single mothers don’t get jobs.”

*Being a single mother—that made it even harder for her to find work. Whatever she did find just wasn't enough.*

Ah.

Shouto… didn’t know what to feel.

Realistically—*realistically* speaking, most Quirk marriages were perfectly civil. Both parties knew it was only about genes. Knew what to expect. It wasn't rare for one of them, or even both, to carry on an affair on the side. No one cared.

Most Quirk marriages were not his mother and father.

And yet, he thought he understood a bit better, now, just what had driven his mother to tie herself to the man who would destroy her life.

What could Shouto do?

The answer came instantly. It was obvious. After all, barely a few hours earlier, he’d heard Endeavor on the phone with his hiring manager, about a long-time secretary who’d retired. The manager had drawn up a list of candidates, but Endeavor hadn't liked any of them. Maybe—

You’re going to ask him for help?

*Him?*

The thought repulsed him. A knee-jerk reaction cultivated over years and years of simmering
resentment. But when he swallowed the bile, stepped back and assessed the situation logically, it was the best decision. Endeavor treated his employees well—not out of any great kindness, but because it was practical. A disgruntled worker could very easily leak sensitive information to a villain, after all. That was why jobs at hero agencies were so sought-after. In turn, that was why it was near-impossible to get one without someone vouching for you now.

In other words, Shouto was perfectly positioned to help the Akatanis (if not in a slightly underhanded way). And yet, still, there was that hesitation, that recoil—

Forty-five people. Selfishness was not an option.

“My father, Endeavor,” he started, fumbling slightly; it was like he was learning how to speak all over again—“his agency is looking for a secretary.” Mrs. Akatani gasped, her hands coming up to cover her mouth. “It’s a tech-heavy job, so I think you’d be a strong candidate. They’ll get a work license for you and everything. If you’re interested, I’ll vouch for you.”

“I—oh…” Overwhelmed, she briefly pressed her face into her hands again. Inhaled and exhaled. “You’re—you’re sure about this?”

In response, Shouto said: “I was born to a Quirk marriage.” He smiled faintly. “I’ve never been surer of anything else.“

The bad taste in his mouth hadn’t totally gone away. In fact, he doubted there would ever come a time when his tongue didn’t curl at the thought of Endeavor, at least slightly. But in face of the blooming hope in Mrs. Akatani’s eyes that made her look so much younger and healthier, the brilliance of Touya’s smile and how fiercely he hugged Shouto, the two words that carried the weight of a thousand more behind them—

None of it mattered.

It was well into the evening when Shouto left, exhaustion starting to set in and feeling rather…what was the word for it? On one hand, he was glad he’d been able to help the Akatanis. And yet, to see them in that sort of situation in the first place…

So maybe that was how Midoriya felt.

Shouto ran through the numbers in his head. As long as he kept up with his training and grades, Endeavor didn’t care what he did with his free time. So, if he visited his mother every afternoon, one to two hours, that’d leave weekend mornings for Nishinari House. Six, seven hours a week, maybe more if he—

Someone collided roughly into him, jarring Shouto from his thoughts.

“Sorry,” he said automatically. “I was—“

He faltered when he saw the man he’d bumped into. It was a lanky twenty-something, dark-haired and looking just as startled as Shouto was. But were those…burn scars?
“Watch it,” the man grumbled. And before Shouto could say anything else, he was already walking off in the other direction.

Something about him had seemed…familiar, almost. Or was it just Shouto’s imagination?

Chapter End Notes

Next up, the Stain arc! But first...I’m excited to announce @take-it-to-art and I are working on a **BNHA fantasy RPG**!

We’ve got the tech part down pat, but we’re looking for writers, artists, beta testers, and…well, really, anyone who’d like to get involved, or just stay updated on how it’s going. Follow our blog @plusadventure and join our Discord!

Let’s all have fun - ultra++!

End Notes

Thanks to @take-it-to-art, my wonderful beta & sister - check her out!

And while you're there, feel free to drop by my Tumblr. I'm always happy to chat!

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!